

HOW ARE VULNERABILITY  
AND VIOLENCE GOVERNED?

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Poulami ROYCHOWDHURY, *Capable Women, Incapable States.  
Negotiating Violence and Rights in India*  
(Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 252 p.)

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It is no longer new to pursue a sociology of human rights in line with a sociology of other phenomena associated with sacred values, such as religion, art, or science, but in the context of interdisciplinary debates, it is still or again precarious. In this context, Poulami Roychowdhury's book "Capable Women, Incapable States" exemplifies some foundational sociological virtues; it also reaches beyond the established repertoire of the discipline to raise open-ended questions about vulnerability and violence, which seem crucial to understanding contemporary transformations of the political order but could also be used to re-examine what we thought we knew about the past.

I begin with the foundational virtues. "Capable Women, Incapable States" focuses on observing rights claims among women affected by domestic violence in the Indian state of West Bengal. This focus on rights claims is not itself unusual: interdisciplinary discussions of human rights can focus on rights claims in some detail, but the underlying goal is often to determine which ones can be considered true and valid and which ones should be dismissed as false or ideological. This basic motivation can be a shared element across some rather legalistic and some very critical approaches. Given the extra-worldly authority of human rights, there is often not much room for ambivalence. Advancing the right kind of claims and denouncing the wrong kind is a matter of urgency, and it can be difficult to find the time to investigate other questions that might arise about these claims.

By contrast, "Capable Women, Incapable States" pauses to observe carefully how claims are articulated and to track their effects in the world. Roychowdhury describes rights claims as the result of a shift in the way these women interpret their situation. She highlights that the women in her study do not start from thinking of themselves as having experienced a violation of their "rights" or "human rights". They are trying to "run a family" and when they encounter violence and non-cooperation from their husbands, they initially enlist outside help in this project of "running a family". Only when these efforts fail, and when they are encouraged by

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emerging networks of support, do some women try to pursue rights claims through the state.

Roychowdhury records the effects of these claims on the women with a rare and valuable inconclusiveness: women only very rarely receive redress via the state. However, they do sometimes receive something else: a form of agency, which Roychowdhury calls capability, and which she describes as both positive and deeply ambivalent. It is one strength of the book that it pauses to observe and that it pauses to record that ambivalence.

There is another way in which the book stands out in the context of broader discussions of human rights. Discussions about human rights in the social sciences have historically focused on actors who are pure and whose side we are supposed to be on. When NGOs were revealed to be motivated by a range of factors other than “values” or “principles”, “the grassroots” became the focus of scholarly and para-scholarly attention. Roychowdhury’s fieldwork takes her very close to these imagined “grassroots” of international human rights, or at least to one of its instantiations, but her work focuses on the complex processes of mediation that are involved even at those grassroots. It is worth noting that the book includes an entire chapter, entitled “mediation”, which is devoted to taking stock of the range of actors and organizations involved in intervening in domestic disputes. There is not an agent—or a subject, or a victim—in Roychowdhury’s account who is outside of social relations and whose own account of themselves is not constituted by social relations.

When Roychowdhury makes these moves towards observation, and when she pays attention to mediation, she is in some way “only” exemplifying existing sociological virtues. But, in doing so, she also forges a path towards an agenda that is highly distinctive also within sociology. The work points beyond established (and still valuable) methods in sociology more generally, in a way that might be said to also point beyond what the book itself actually delivers, it being just one manuscript among hopefully many more to come.

The sort of thinking about politics that the book enables can be highlighted by two further contrasts, this time to work within sociology and the social sciences that is not framed around issues of human rights. In some ways Roychowdhury’s book could be read as part of the sociology of social movements, and it has been and will be read that way. But something is very different in this account, at least when compared to the imagery that comes to mind when I hear myself saying the term “social movement.” The sociology of social movements can tend to study social movements in terms of their aims, strategies and successes, in a way

that strangely abstracts social movements as actors from the life worlds of the people involved. The state, in this context, can be portrayed as an empty container and as a target of movement action that is relatively separate from the movement itself.

In Roychowdhury's book, the actors are not separate from their own problems, and the state and the claims-making are more interdependent. Both are evolving together. Of course, the author is led to an analysis that enmeshes the "public" and the "private" partly by her analysis of women's issues, and she is well aware of the feminist traditions that she also builds on. But there is no reason this type of analysis could not be applied to any other set of issues. In my view, Roychowdhury is right when she suggests that her term "rights negotiations" opens up a comparative research agenda based on a distinctive analytical lens – a lens that brings together the sociology of law and human rights with the sociology of social movements and politics, and is distinctive partly by what it is refusing to assume prior to interpretative investigation.

The book also departs from a Foucault-inspired sociology of the state or of "governance," which relies on a functional holism, whereby the state's actions are completed by the analysis, their success is overstated, and all types of effects are ascribed to the state as an intention in retrospect. This book, by contrast, takes state incapacity seriously and focuses on the more open-ended and ambivalent negotiations between states and local political forces. Roychowdhury explicitly makes the case that her analysis of India is relevant to what she labels "postwelfare states" in the West. In the few years since she finished writing the book, her observations have come to resonate even more strongly given political developments elsewhere.

The book shows Roychowdhury to be a nuanced and wise thinker, and an extraordinary writer. But the text does not always fully follow through on its own move towards avoiding Foucauldian and functionalist narratives. It would be interesting to lean further into what I referred to earlier as Roychowdhury's "valuable inconclusiveness". It would be interesting to explore how much further we could go in trying to resist the kind of analysis that is always a form of completing what we observe, including the state, and ask in an open way how vulnerability and violence are managed in different historical, geographical and institutional settings. How are forms of authority construed? How does vulnerability emerge, how is it ignored, responded to, managed or exploited? How does violence emerge, is it accompanied by acts of justification, which ones, how is it used and how is it responded to? This type of inquiry is relevant for political sociology anywhere but also at any time.

Perhaps this kind of exploration does not have to rule out a conversation that addresses how the material presented in the book fits into grander narratives, about modernity for example, or, even grander ones, about human emancipation in history. Roychowdhury describes the consequences for the individual women she follows, and the very incomplete redress they receive in terms of rights. She describes, on an institutional level, a state-response to domestic violence that is incomplete in ways that are to a certain degree (sadly) quite predictable.

But this raises and leaves open some broader questions about social change. Roychowdhury is not just describing a series of biographical trajectories; she is describing some kind of historical shift. What is this shift? It seems that beyond the results for the individual women, the book describes a change whereby spaces are opening up, in which the options for women to live outside of marriage are increasing in albeit limited ways. Roychowdhury does not make too much of this but we know that this kind of change induces important changes for women in general in the long term and, with that, for societies as a whole.

This account could be read as a somewhat familiar story of liberation-within-history, with the almost equally familiar element that it is easier to open up spaces against direct domination than to organise substantive collective support for the livelihoods of the people freed from established dependencies. In this way, the material in the book is very relevant to classic conversations between liberalism and its critics.

Yet in the context of the contemporary Indian state, this increase in options for women, this enlarged space, does not occur within a liberal framework and does not seem to lead to a liberal framework. Roychowdhury's book ends with what I offer as a final evidence of the valuable inconclusiveness of this analysis: the author offers an evocative account of an incident from before she started her fieldwork, in which a group of about 200 poor women violently took justice into their own hands. They stormed a courtroom to abduct a mob boss, who allegedly raped and tortured slum residents over a period of over 10 years. They stabbed and castrated him in public, an act of vigilantism for which the women, some of whom went on to have successful careers in NGOs, were never punished.

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