

Monisha Das Gupta.

Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States.

Duke University Press, 2006, 336 pp.

\$US 22.95 paper (0-8223-3898-X), \$US 79.95 hardcover (0-8223-3858-0)

Unruly Immigrants gives us an ethnographic account of the challenge posed by organized radical recent immigrants to the neo-liberal political order in North America and beyond. Monisha Das Gupta argues that these new political subjects, who have been created through the forces of globalization, necessarily demand transnational migrant rights. They claim these rights not from their desire to take their place as citizens in an alien culture, but from their location and lived experience as migrants demanding a recognition of a basic right to safety, “good work”, and freedom of movement across borders. One of the groups she looks at, for instance, draws on the U.N. Convention on Migrant Workers that came into effect in 2002.

The author bases her argument on the growing shared political awareness of the large sections of South Asian immigrants to metropolitan New York and the North East United States who for various reasons have not been permitted full citizenship rights. She is explicit about the wide implications of her argument. In her words,

A South Asian identity makes available those kinds of political possibilities that are not contingent on nation-based citizenship ...the activists in this study offer a new lexicon and, beyond that, a paradigm that frees rights from the conceptual prison of citizenship ... Over the last three decades, we have been able to denaturalize gender, race and sexuality so that we can see them as principles that organize power relations in society. I ask that we start to think about citizenship and its correlate – national borders – as similar structures of power (256-7).

To document that a broad migrant bill of rights is indeed the thrust of the immigrants’ needs and not wishful thinking on her part, the author takes us into seven organizations formed by post-1965 South Asian immigrants to the U.S.A. These are three women’s groups that worked on domestic violence (Sakhi, Manavi, and South Asian Women for Action), two queer groups (Masala and South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), and a male and a female labour group (New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance and Andolan). Despite different clientele, missions, ambitions, activities, and sets of laws and policies that stymied their work, the author argues that the groups have more in common than not. As they respond to the isolation, privations, and struggles of the non-professional immigrants, the non-citizens – who labour as wives, domestics, taxi drivers, or who are rejected as queer offspring – have in common the need for protection from the neo-liberal immigration, labour and familial regimes which control them across nation-spaces.

The “transnationally sensitive locally acting” activist groups confront these regimes through i) supporting immigrant women against intra-community domestic violence and thereby denaturalizing the projected image of the traditional and patriarchal South Asian family, ii) building new cultural and safe spaces for queer youth, some of whom go on to political organizational work, and iii) organizing domestic workers and taxi drivers, which comprise two of the largest sections of South Asian workers in the metropolitan New York area, against punitive regulation and low wages. South Asian queer culture draws on transnational sources of popular culture but also creates it, and the

women victims of domestic violence as well as domestic workers necessarily challenge immigration statutes on their rights and choices. Thereby, the groups are necessarily distinct from mainstream queer, women's and labour groups, supporting the "identity base" of her argument.

The author also brings to light intra-community class relations as a key source of conflict faced by her populations. The employer, the husband or relative, and the homophobic parent are for many of the members of groups she studies members of the immigrant South Asian community itself. The conservative, citizenship-oriented politics of the South Asian professional class is thus not just a foil for her argument about the disenfranchised but has a significant impact on her subjects. Since their arrival in the USA in the 1960s, members of this class have strived to be model minorities and to gain from affirmative action legislation. It is centrally concerned with its image and ambitions, and is ambivalently satisfied to occupy the racial space between White and Black in the U.S. racial order. This argument leads, in my view, to the most original part of the book, as the author gives us fascinating details of the professional class's engagement with U.S. Census and Affirmative Action bureaucracies in the 1970s as, along with other Asian groups, they muddled through in attempting to find a place for themselves within the beehive of U.S. citizenship practices. This section includes a useful account of the origin of the census category "Asian Indian", first used in 1980.

Having established themselves, a decade later members of this class disparage and attempt to silence the activist groups the author studied. Not merely class regulation and suppression this is also a gendered politics, she argues, as the mainstream organizations stigmatize women, queer and labour groups, and deny the violence within and between South Asian families and classes, in the pursuit of their image. By not tackling the external construction of this image, they reproduce the dominant ethic of assimilation – where ethnic culture is privately managed and thereby comes to serve as an acceptable explanation of domestic violence, for instance. The public stage on which this drama plays out annually is the India Day Parade in New York City. Taxi drivers, on the other hand, are subject to the cross-racial middle class 'bill of consumer rights'.

Drawing on the work of Evelyn Nakano-Glenn, Das Gupta thus provides us with a textbook study of the construction of class within the South Asian community in North America. She describes the social, political, legal and ideological processes which produce the "professional" compared to those that produce the "disenfranchised". She argues that despite their middle class background, spouses who have arrived on family sponsorship do not have the privileges of class-based security, which lays the ground for their abuse.

Yet, it is surprising that the author does not look at the construction of her own protagonist – the 'middle class activist'. This could have been done in comparative perspective, comparing North America to South Asia where there is a century-long tradition of middle class involvement in social change in the subcontinent. An analysis of the background and trajectory of the activists would have been useful to compare with similar groups in the U.S., as in the well known studies by Doug McAdam or more recently by Laura Pulido, and given that Das Gupta is primarily concerned that her account be useful to the broad "minority" activist public.

An explicit foil of her work is the writing of contemporary activist-scholar and compatriot Vijay Prashad. Das Gupta documents South Asian activism as an autonomous radical tradition, whereas Vijay Prashad locates immigrant struggles within a rubric and framework already created by Black radical struggles¹. He unearths "polycultural" syncretism as a key dynamic impelling South Asian activist energy. Das Gupta, in contrast, grounds activist energy in the desires of the largely middle class and a few working class activists who have formed groups to assist and "liberate" their compatriots trapped in economic and social circumstances in which they have little power. The

author herself is a veteran of one of the women's group she describes. Yet, she does not have a strong argument against "syncretism" and the cross-fertilization between struggles, especially when we know that immigrants have filled the jobs held earlier by native minorities, which is the longstanding settlement pattern in the U.S. and which has had political implications. The author also could have infused a working class-based language, politics and perspective into her narrative, a weakness we realize when we observe that we hardly hear from the clients of the groups she describes – the working class women who have faced abuse or working class queer individuals.

Further, her methodology means that the complex range of immigrant life is only presented only through the lens of "who is being organized", which is a highly selective method. Mothers and children, schooling, employment, and access to affordable health care, as broad issues of concern, for instance, are significant issues absent in her narrative. Without judging the difference, these struggles are key in the landmark study by Julia Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams*, based in Black women's organizing in the U.K. In other words, the structural weakness of the book is its relatively weak sociological and comparative grounding.²

To conclude, I would say that the author succeeds in persuading us that the struggles she documents are at the forefront of challenging contemporary inequities but not in arguing for a transnational complex of rights *over* citizenship rights. We might also ask why strong models of multiculturalism would not meet her requirements. Yet, the strength of the book is that it forces us to think through these theoretical issues from the unusual lens of community justice.

I recommend this book highly to practitioners, activists and academics. It can serve as a model of an "intersectional" analysis for students and as a benchmark for a Canadian-based study on the topic to measure itself against. Those who work in the area of immigration can gain much from her exposition for she discusses in fascinating detail the impact of successive Immigration Acts on the diverse nature and interests of immigrant populations. Another major strength of the book is that it delves into the issues, the details, and the difficulties and triumphs of organizing marginalized populations, making it very useful for activist-scholars thinking through comparable issues.

The argument that claims of contemporary immigrant groups go beyond those for inclusive citizenship is timely, and this book puts it forward intelligently and compassionately.

Notes

¹ This is not unique to Vijay Prashad. Scholars of Chicano, Asian and Latino experience also acknowledge that these communities have to negotiate the Black-White dichotomy of the U.S. and have been frequently influenced by currents in Black struggle.

² There is a growing literature on multi-ethnic coalition making between different sections of racialized workers and populations which she references but not systematically. These include for the U.S., Bill Mullen *Afro-Orientalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2006), as well as older literature from the U.K. such as Sivanandan's *A Different Hunger* (Pluto Press 1987).

Sara Abraham
University of Toronto-Mississauga
sara.abraham@sympatico.ca

Sara Abraham is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto-Mississauga. She has a forthcoming book entitled *The Multiracial Project in the Caribbean: Its History and its Promise* (Rowman and Littlefield). Thanks to Cynthia Wright for a prompt read and detailed discussion and

suggestions for this review.

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/unrulyimmigrants.html>

March 2007

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online

CJS Online