

Book Reviews

***Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans.* By Sangay K. Mishra. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 276 pp., \$27.00 Paper.**

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Desis Divided is an important contribution to the scholarship on ethnoracial politics. Sangay Mishra offers a compelling warning to pay heed to the diversity *within* ethnoracial groups. Focusing on South Asian Americans, Mishra shows that the complexities of social stratification make the concept of “South Asian American politics” problematic—to say nothing of the concept of “Asian American politics.” The book draws on the trailblazing research of scholars such as Cathy Cohen, Christina Beltran, and Ange-Marie Hancock, who have helped us understand the complexities and limits of solidarity within ethnoracial groups, and the importance of intersectionality.

Mishra’s central question is how ethnoracial political mobilization shapes political incorporation. Drawing primarily on 60 in-depth interviews, he provides fine-grained explanation of the shortcomings of political mobilization that lumps a diverse population under a single identity. Although he appears to be unaware of the insightful work of philosopher Anne Phillips (*Multiculturalism without Culture*, Princeton University Press, 2007), he echoes her concern with simplified representations of cultural groups, given their likelihood of reflecting only one perspective and working to “privilege an identity that is in reality more complex and contested” (3). Mishra argues that “often what is presented as South Asian American . . . mobilization only represents a specific segment of the population. Thus, ethnoracial solidarity politics are created around narrow sets of issues that fail to engage with diverse realities of the community” (210).

Examining diversity within ethnoracial groups is well-trodden ground, but the book moves to less-familiar territory with its attention to religious cleavages. In addition, it explores how caste cleavages function in the United States, a dynamic that has received very little attention from political scientists.

The examination of the response to 9/11 highlights Mishra's sophisticated understanding of intersectionality. He observes that one aspect of the backlash should be defined as racialization, since it involved marginalizing individuals based on appearance. At the same time, the response to the backlash showed religious cleavages, with Hindus responding differently than Muslims and Sikhs, with the former sometimes even talking about highlighting their differences by wearing a *bindi* (in some ways similar to the ethnic disidentification between Chinese and Japanese immigrants in earlier eras).

American multiculturalism helped channel these religious responses. Mishra argues that groups "found a very specific institutional and ideological discourse . . . that enabled the consolidation of their religious-based responses" (100). While some South Asian Americans worked to build a panethnic coalition to respond to the backlash, others took advantage of an American multiculturalism, which "defines the very trajectory of social and cultural representation of minority communities by foregrounding discrete religious and cultural identities" (100). Within that interpretive context, Mishra suggests, it was easier for groups to define themselves as victimized cultural minorities—e.g., Sikhs, Hindus—rather than try to respond through building a panethnic or other broad coalition.

The relatively privileged position of Desis also generates a more fragmented political incorporation, Mishra argues. Greater wealth makes it easier to move into majority white suburban communities, skipping the ethnic enclaves that have been a launching point for many immigrant populations. Without these enclaves, prospective South Asian candidates have no choice but to mount deracialized campaigns, which do not depend very much on South Asian—or any Asian American—votes. South Asian Americans have also become significant players in fundraising, but this applies only to deep-pocketed donors. Collectively, the "unique mode of mobilization" of Desis "precludes large segments of South Asian political aspirants from getting drawn into the political process" (211).

Even where shared ethnicity plays an important role, mobilization is still often very selective, Mishra contends, since it usually emerges in

professional organizations. Although these groups are part of a rich tradition, which has played an important role in advancing the interest of South Asian Americans, “they are deeply embedded in occupational and class interests tied to particular professions and aimed only at a smaller segment” of the larger population (138). These realities, the book suggests, should lead us “to reconsider ethnoracial solidarity as *the* most important step to overcome the social and political marginalization of immigrant and minority communities” (209–10).

The book also examines some of the many groups advancing the interests of working-class Desis, but observes that these are also pieces of a fragmented political incorporation picture. In addition, Mishra argues, some of the most prominent groups, such as South Asian Americans Leading Together, “have been traditionally marginal to the dominant Asian American organizations” (150), limiting some of the larger coalitional possibilities.

Two of the final chapters turn to transnationalism and diaspora issues, an interesting focus but not one that coheres well with the rest of the work. Mishra’s evidence suggests that interest in country-of-origin politics does not reduce the likelihood of involvement in U.S. politics, echoing the findings of other scholars of Asian American politics (most notably Pei-te Lien). However, like previous political science research on this question, he does not examine whether a focus on country-of-origin might limit the quality of political engagement, as well as work to discourage alliances with groups who do not share the same overseas concerns. As historian Charlotte Brooks has shown in her careful studies of Chinese American politics (*Between Mao and McCarthy*, University of Chicago Press, 2015), overseas interests and U.S. political involvement can be counterproductive to the long-term interests of immigrants by directing their attention away from types of political mobilization that would better serve their lives in the United States.

Nevertheless, this is a very fine piece of scholarship which expands our understanding of a rapidly growing population. Although we have considerable scholarship showing both the diversity within panethnic categories (such as Asian Americans or Latinos) and also the diversity within the subpopulations within those categories (such as Chinese or Mexican Americans), we have relatively little on South Asian Americans. Furthermore, the book makes a significant contribution to the broader study of ethnoracial politics, joining that list of works, which have substantially advanced our knowledge of intersectionality and the complexities of political identities.