

Imagining Public Plural Spaces

The concept of plurality cannot be discussed merely in the realm of demographic conditions, where vibrant communities, faith, gender, classes, and political positions can co-exist, but rather in a political and institutional context where the continuous construction of spaces can be discussed, negotiated, articulated, and accommodated irrespective of hierarchical and exclusionary debates. With increasing modernization and globalization, people have created tension, forcing the public sphere, authorities, and cultural establishments to look beyond a homogeneous public sphere.

The Journal of Politics, Society, and Culture, under the aegis of the Centre for Studies of Plural Societies, reflects on how societies sustain meaningful coexistence amid technological transformation, political fragmentation, and shared public spaces. To explore legal, cultural, political, and economic pluralism, the current issue, *Imagining Plural Public Spheres*, brings together vibrant contributions that approach this issue from diverse yet interconnected perspectives. The articles raise significant and daunting questions about what happens to public plural life when the spaces through which people participate in society are digitized, become vulnerable to exclusion and violence, and fragment. The contributions span varied domains, including digital markets, community identity, caste, religious pluralism, the politics of new media, the impact of print culture, and the normalization of violence, as well as how individuals and communities become visible and politically significant in the public sphere.

The issues therefore regard the plural public sphere as a lived and contested domain through media, markets, identities, institutions, memories, and political practices, by questioning the normalization of violence and the everyday negotiation of belonging.

The articles clearly analyze how the concept of plurality can enable difference to coexist within the public sphere despite increasing political polarization, majoritarian divisions, and violence.

Particularly within the realm of political theory and constitutional democracies, *Sumit Howladar's* intervention, "Beyond the Majoritarian Horizon: Examining the Indian Narrative of Minority Rights and Liberal Public Sphere," delineates the intricate constitutional framework surrounding minority rights and the profound tensions among stakeholders charged with fostering a pluralistic public sphere. The article investigates four domains—namely normative, institutional, pedagogical, and technological—to scrutinize how liberal plural public life safeguards diversity when democratic majorities themselves may become agents of exclusion.

Utilizing the cases of *Sabarimala*, *Triple Talaq*, and the *Waqf Board Case*, the article critically examines vocabulary grounded in insufficient constitutional formalism and statist secularism. It underscores the importance of adopting a more comprehensive theoretical framework that considers individual agency, cultural autonomy, and democratic participation as independent variables.

Furthermore, the tension between exploring the potentialities of pluralism and the persistent exclusion within *Geetanjalee's* and *Sakalasooriya's* work, "Shadow of Peace: Hegemony, Violence, and the Unfinished Plural Public Sphere in Post-War Sri Lanka" highlights the discussion surrounding political actors who instrumentalized the attack to consolidate majoritarian power. The extremist social movements exacerbated the communal divide, and justice for victims remained systematically postponed. The attack should not be understood as an isolated incident of the Easter Sunday attack but rather as embedded within histories of conflict, insecurity, communal mistrust, political hegemony, and contested notions of belonging.

In the context of overtly subsidized conflict, the war might have ended, resulting in plural public spheres, without resolving the political, institutional, and social structure through which the exclusion is reproduced. Thus, a plural approach will require more than the absence of violence, and greater emphasis on institutional trust, equal citizenship, recognition, accountability, and the capacity of different communities to inhabit the public sphere without fear.

The articles then proceed to examine digital and economic participation, wherein *Divya Mehta's* "Plural Market Public: Digital Platforms and Women's Economic Participation in Jaipur's Handicraft Sectors" extends beyond traditional political institutions. Markets can serve as public spaces—arenas where economic agency fosters new forms of social

visibility, interaction, recognition, and autonomy. Digital platforms empower women artisans and entrepreneurs to surmount spatial, institutional, and intermediary barriers that have historically regulated their market participation. Although digital platforms are not synonymous with empowerment or emancipation, they are influenced by disparities related to gender, skills, capital, networks, technological literacy, and algorithmic visibility. The article explores the potential of digital economic spaces as plural markets, which can facilitate new opportunities for participation while also creating inequalities in novel and complex ways.

The relationship between digitization and collective identity is further examined in *Choudhary Sharukh's* "Beyond Borders, Across Faith: The Digitization of *Muley Jat* Identity," where communities can be reconstructed through online networks, archives, narratives, images, and other translocal connections. The article primarily addresses the politics of digital belonging, focusing on those who possess the capacity to narrate a community, preserve its memory, and delineate its boundaries in the digital age. Digital public spheres offer spaces for identities that are continually reconstructed through interaction with others.

The politics of belonging manifests in various ways, each of equal importance, as exemplified in *Jahnvi Dwivedi's* "The Anxiety of Belonging: Print, Precarity, and Preservation in *Kanyakunj Manch*". The concept of print culture introduces discussions surrounding memory, community formation, and cultural development. Communities frequently become deeply invested in these processes. The digital era has engendered unprecedented changes, functioning concurrently as an archive of memory and as a technology for boundary delineation. Consequently, *Kanyakubi Manch* provides insight into the close relationship between cultural preservation, precariousness, and the conceptualization of community.

If print provided a fundamental infrastructure for community formations, digital media has revolutionized the architecture of public interaction. *Anusua Ganguly's* "The Paradox of Hyperconnectivity: New Media, Identity, and Fragmented Public" addresses these transformations with precision. The digital age has generated new forms of connectivity that foster greater social cohesion. Algorithmic filtering, selective exposure, online communities, affective polarization, and identity based on networks can create multiple public spheres.

The digital age has facilitated unprecedented forms of connectivity; however, such connectivity does not inherently foster social cohesion. While individuals may experience increased technological connectedness, this does not necessarily translate into social

and political unity. The primary concern lies in understanding how hyperconnectivity can coexist with fragmentation. A pluralistic public sphere necessitates diverse voices, which in turn require some shared differences that can be negotiated.

The significance of this distinction is accentuated by the contribution of *Jaimine Vaishnav*, *Simarjeet Makkar*, *Supriya Daniel*, and *Shoaib Mohammed* in their work, “The Atrophy of Democratic Praxis: Mobocracy, Majoritarianism, and the Erosion of Popular Sovereignty in Contemporary India.” Democracy encompasses more than just elections and institutional frameworks; it also depends fundamentally on daily practices such as deliberation, dissent, accountability, restraint, and recognition. The notion of democratic praxis underscores how mobocracy and majoritarian coercion may transform popular participation into tools for intimidation and political dominance. When participation is driven by fear, exclusion, or disproportionate power, the public sphere risks transforming into a space where democracy is inherently diminished from within.

Rusha Chatterjee’s commentary “Making Sense of Ruptures: Facets of Normalized Violence in India,” underscores the salient instances of violence directed towards ordinary individuals and highlights the normalized manifestations through which violence becomes deeply embedded within social life. Consequently, violence functions through mechanisms such as exclusion, humiliation, discrimination, spatial segregation, institutional indifference, and the systematic denial of recognition. These processes gradually redefine the boundaries of the public sphere—certain individuals become highly visible as objects of surveillance or suspicion, whereas others become invisible as political subjects. Therefore, Chatterjee’s scholarly contribution prompts us to interpret violence not merely as a disruption of public life but as a fundamental mechanism that shapes and organizes public life itself.

The contributions illustrate how the public sphere is progressively influenced by digital platforms, markets, media, community networks, and cultural archives. In this context, identity and belonging are subjects of ongoing negotiation through processes of recognition and power. Furthermore, pluralism is inherently linked to inequality and violence; the presence of multiple voices does not guarantee meaningful inclusion when participation remains constrained by exclusion, dominance, or fear. Thus, digital transformation offers a dual potential—enhancing agency and connectivity while simultaneously fragmenting public spheres and reaffirming inequalities—thereby rendering the digital public sphere a contested domain rather than an inherently democratic one.

The two book reviews deepen these concerns by revisiting questions of law, pluralism, gender, and historical imagination. *Anindita Bhattacharjee*’s review of Kalindi Kokal’s

State Law, Dispute Processing, and Legal Pluralism: Unspoken Dialogues from Rural India foregrounds the relationship between formal state law and the multiple normative orders through which disputes are negotiated in everyday life. Legal pluralism complicates the assumption that the state holds a monopoly over legitimate dispute resolution. It instead draws attention to the layered and negotiated character of authority within plural societies.

Swapnil Sreemani's review of Gyanendra Pandey's *Men at Home: Imagining Liberation in Colonial and Postcolonial India* raises critical questions regarding gender roles, domestic life, and the concept of liberation within a historical context. The home is frequently regarded as a private sphere. The review argues the issue's overarching argument that distinctions between public and private domains are neither innate nor immutable. Instead, these boundaries are historically constructed and politically contested.

The contributions understand the plural public sphere not solely as the coexistence of diverse identities, but as the ongoing creation of spaces where difference, dissent, and participation can thrive without domination or exclusion. The issue warns against idealizing plurality, illustrating how communities, digital networks, markets, and democratic institutions can themselves reproduce hierarchies, antagonism, and violence. Therefore, pluralism should be interpreted as a democratic practice of negotiating difference within conditions of unequal power, necessitating continuous attention to questions of belonging, participation, and whose voices are recognized. In this context, the issue synthesizes empirical, theoretical, and historical perspectives to examine the various infrastructures through which plural public life is constructed and contested; it also investigates ways in which public spaces can sustain authentic inclusivity when participation, belonging, and power are substantially unequal.

The issue underscores the commitment of the Centre for Studies of Plural Societies to investigating how institutions, technologies, narratives, and social practices influence notions of belonging, participation, and recognition. Through a variety of case studies, the contributions illustrate that plural public life operates simultaneously on local and global levels, giving attention to the issues of power, inequality, memory, identity, and democratic institutions. *'Imagining Plural Public Sphere'* advocates for a public sphere that is continually reconstructed across politics, culture, technology, markets, and law. Pluralism is depicted not as a static condition but as an ongoing democratic practice that calls for meaningful engagement across differences, institutional engagements, and sustained resistance against exclusion, fragmentation, and domination.

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