

BOOK REVIEWS

Arunachalam Jaya, U. Kalpagam (eds.), 2007, *Rural Women in South Asia*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur (India), ISBN-81-316-0095-5, pp-289 + ix, 650/-

This Volume is the outcome of series of insightful seminar papers presented in the seminar held at G.B Pant Social Science Institute Allahabad to commemorate the silver jubilee of the institute and Women Welfare Forum (India) in 2007. The seminar was intended to take stock of the contemporary challenges in rural women's empowerment in South Asia and to work towards viable solutions through a process of networking and dialogue, to evolve a coherent perspective for the South Asian region as a whole. Rural women in south Asia have much in common- despite countries and communities having specific problems. In this book, the first three chapters discusses the issues- the rural women encounters such as, stark poverty and deprivation; limited access to resources; assets and income; illiteracy, poor health and malnutrition; various forms of social exclusion, patriarchal structure of household and society, recurrent violence in their everyday lives etc. Subsequent chapters have been dedicated to issues pertaining to different countries of South Asia.

In the first chapter, U. Kalpagam gives a brief account of issues related to rural women of South Asian nations like food insecurity (p6) in Bangladesh; high rate of maternal mortality as well as 'Dubai Disease'¹ in Pakistan (p22); problems of severe physical, economic and social isolation in Sri Lanka (p28); gender violence (p9) and low literacy rates in Bhutan, Nepal & Pakistan. The issues pertaining to poverty, has been raised by the author while taking India as a case study. Rural women in India feel the weight of poverty the most. The oppressive practice of dowry is linked with women's inferior access to land (p29). Even after globalisation there is little evidence to suggest that for the mass of rural women engaged in field labour life is any better (p31). Rural women in India suffer much Patriarchal and social violence, somewhat similar to Bangladesh and Pakistan. Problems like foeticide, infanticide of girl children, rape, and dowry deaths have similar trends in these countries (p33) as considered by the author.

Second Chapter titled 'Rural Women, Work and Empowerment' by Preeti Rustagi deal with trends in human and gender development indices for South Asia (p47). The author has given some basic indicators like GDP, urban population and female economic activity rate to substantiate her argument about Asian region as being predominantly rural, tradition bound, and inhabited by culturally diverse population (p49). The author though has tried to show the improving status of women, however the challenges to women empowerment remains critical. Issues like concentration of women in conventional occupations particularly in unorganised sector, invisibility; non recognition of women's contribution to the economy remains unaccounted (p57).

¹Dubai Disease refers to the forceful migration of rural women of Pakistan to Dubai, where they are sold off to take up prostitution as a means to earn their living.

It has been argued by the author Seema Joshi in the third chapter 'Gender Discrimination in South Asia' that gender discrimination tends to hamper the growth by creating inefficiencies. The extent of anti female bias is worse in south Asia than in most other developing countries. The main focus of the study is on pre market discrimination faced by women (p76) which does not change even after globalisation as there was emergence of new phenomena of 'feminisation of occupations' in south Asia. These arguments have been supported through data 'gender discrimination in the labour market' (p.79). Hindrances in the form of socio-cultural factors affecting women's participation in productive work in countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan has also been taken into account by the author (p82). This chapter deals with different facets of lives and work in the South Asian context, some in a comparative perspective. They highlight issues as varied as rural women's poverty and work in the visibility of women's work and the gender ideologies that promote such invisibility, human capital and labour market discrimination in South Asian region and the Poverty paradigm and NGO empowerment strategies in the SAARC Countries.

Specific country studies deals with issues such as women's labour force participation and their autonomy and decision-making power in Pakistan, state initiatives in micro-credit for women in Nepal and its effects, new employment opportunities for young rural women in Bangladesh, the empowering potential of non-farm employment for Sri Lankan women and grass root participatory democracy in rural India to mention a few.

Chapter Four is about the rural Women and empowerment; an economic perspective from Pakistan by Hina Nazli who has examined the economic empowerment of Pakistan's women in rural areas by looking at their participation in the labour market. Cultural and social taboos in Pakistan make women's role almost invisible (p93) such as limited role of rural women in the decision making (p97), low participation of rural women in the labour market (p99), and wage discrimination faced by women in the informal sector (p102). It has also been pointed out by the author that if the household work is valued in monetary terms then women's contribution would be significant because women spend a large amount of their time in performing household chores (p105). In spite of all these the micro credit plays a significant role in improving the status of women in Pakistan.

Fifth chapter is case study of Lalitpur district of Nepal explaining the micro credit programmes and the status of rural women by Puspa Ghimere Niraula. Through this chapter the author has tried to explain the background of micro-credit programmes and project for women in Nepal (p117). In spite of the weaknesses and limitations, the micro credit programmes implemented in the Lalitpur district are quite successful in social mobilisation and empowerment of women. As compared to economic independence and group solidarity, women's groups were found less aware about their personal as well as their reproductive health (p 137). Micro-credit programmes will be an effective tool for social mobilisation and women's empowerment if all the males of the community are equally mobilised or made aware about social, legal, political and economic aspects of gender equity, together with their female counterparts (p138).

Chapter sixth by Nazneen Ahmed and seventh Fazila Banu Lil, have been dedicated to the issues of rural women in Bangladesh. Ahmed begins her discussion by giving a general profile of women in Bangladesh and explains the notable features of rural economy (p144). The author moves further by analysing the role of main actors behind the changes in the rural economy (p 147). The author believes that the empowerment is a broad and complex concept. In this process the empowerment process needs to include the eradication of negative social structure, so that women can discover their inner capacity and the right to influence decisions (p155). While discussing about poverty in Bangladesh, the author tries to incorporate both the viewpoints of both the persons who are affected as well as those of the institutions which are involved in analysing and working with the objective to change the poverty situation (p159).

Chapter Eight is based on case studies of rural women in Sri Lanka in non-farm activities. The papers employ diverse methodologies such as statistical analysis of labour force and human capital development data and historical anthropological analysis. The methodology employed reflects in part the researcher's role as social activist. Thiruchandran has analysed women's narration in the post trauma counselling of women in the war affected Sri Lanka (p.217) in Ninth chapter of this book.

Furthermore issue of violence against women in the age of globalisation has been raised in the tenth chapter by Subhadra Mitra Channa. She insists on raising the voice against violence by using any means available at our disposal. She has thematically arranged her paper explaining the notion of violence (p232), personhood and rights (p.234), concept of honour and hierarchy of female bodies (p.236), violence and the process of 'Othering' (p.240). Eleventh Chapter is based on Punjab's experience of women leadership of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The author Prabhjot Kaur Kahlon tries to throw light on the socio-economic (p.254) and Political profile (p.256) of rural women leaders in Amritsar and Gurudaspur district of Punjab (p.250) with the help of data collected from 60 villages headed by women sarpanches. Azad is optimistic in last chapter of this volume, about working women's forum as a viable and successful empowerment experiment transforming itself into social movement.

The strength of the book is that it acknowledges and highlights the differences between countries and communities and yet recognises the commonalities of the South Asian experience. It convincingly argues that rural women's experiences in South Asia needs to be understood through structures of poverty and inequality, social and cultural contours of gender ideologies, the multiple patriarchies, caste and class dominance etc. A sense of optimism pervades as country's experiences reflects the renewed concerns and commitments for rural women's empowerment in both state policies and social activism in the region during last decade. Only such an approach can in the long run whittle down the power of structural patriarchies and ensure gender equality on the society. All the chapters in this book rely heavily on primary data. These data based chapters will be beneficial for the researchers having interest in any of the subject matter discussed in the book. The researchers can develop their research out of the data provided. Moreover, it will also cater the needs of any enthusiastic reader interested in understanding the

status of rural women in the entire South Asian Region. Comparative methodology used in the introductory chapter of this book will give a bird's eye view of status of rural women in all the SAARC countries.

Surabhi

Doctoral Researcher
Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Shobna Nijhawan , *Periodical Literature in Colonial North India: Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 358, 750/-, ISBN 0-19-807407-7

Journals constitute popular culture, and often times lead to the formation of dominant ideology, and in many ways, also serves to challenge it. They are sources of information which in fact go beyond the factual, and provide subjective and even opinionated texts on a variety of subjects, thereby engaging the reader in discourses on a public platform even though the nature of engagement may be personal, within the private spaces of the household. Journals therefore form a valuable body of sociological literature that have in recent times been given prominence within the ambit of cultural studies, and have been recognised as a crucial publishing genre to study the socio-political trends and development of a given time.

Accordingly, Shobhna Nijhawan's *Periodical Literature in Colonial North India: Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere* makes important observations on various journals that were in circulation within the Hindi-speaking and Hindi-reading women-spheres of the pre-independence era. Nijhawan shows how such journals often espoused resistant voices, along with the dominant, thereby archiving the multifarious and conflicting discourses of a particular time. In such a situation, journals, especially those that were meant mainly to cater to the female populations of the Indian subcontinent during colonial times, become indispensable to scholars of post-colonial gender studies researching on both social and political issues. They also become important sources for scholars studying the dissemination of information in a particular period, the language and idiom of expression, the various styles of articulation, the different ideological positions, the kinds of audience reading such journals, the social attitudes that form the background or influence the formation of the text, etc.

In this, Shobna Nijhawan gives detailed descriptions of the thematic preoccupations of select journals in her book, and even manages to analyse the impact as well as reception of the same. She raises important questions such as, "How did the women's periodical as a publishing genre become important at this crucial historical conjuncture in the formation of a national Hindi language and literary canon? Are they perhaps 'minor literature' because they are considered irrelevant to the Hindi literary canon and the world of politics; or because they address supposedly insignificant audiences?" (34). In addition to that, she provides important insights into the social and political context of the publications so that the reader is able to decipher not just the background, but also the influence of the texts on women and girls, and on society as a whole.

The book ultimately establishes how such print forms are imperative to the study of literary, cultural, social milieu of a time.

Indeed, the journals in question were an important source of information on private and domestic issues concerning women. Nijhawan writes:

Readers of *Grihalakshmi* receives a wealth of knowledge pertaining to household affairs, child rearing, nutrition, and healthcare. Besides domestic advice, they were introduced to essays, anecdotes, poems, and fictional literature that contained messages about values and morals on topics such as friendship, respect, modesty, humility, and politeness..." (65).

The book therefore demonstrates how the journals not only provide us with information on the prevailing customs and practices but also how they allowed the women readers to gain knowledge and information on subjects ranging from the quotidian to the tabooed, which in turn helped them in decision-making both within and outside the domestic spheres. Apart from that these journals contained narratives and accounts both fictional and non fictional which were educational as well as meant for entertainment. They allowed women to form ideas and opinions, encouraged independent thinking, and were in many ways, means of liberation for many.

Nijhawan however does not merely celebrate the journals, but also critiques them in many ways. Significantly enough, the author proposes that these publications influenced men as well as women. She remains mindful of how most journals in circulation then were influenced by patriarchal structures of society, and had specific agendas as they promoted patriarchal ideologies. Indeed, the journals were often subject to patriarchal censorship and surveillance. Moreover, women were dependent upon men for subscription, and their approval on the choice of reading material. Nijhawan says, "Such censorship confirms my earlier hypothesis that women's periodicals were considered quite a serious source of political information" (7). She therefore points out how these journals were never devoid of political discourses that tried to mould women in particular roles, such as that of the '*grihalakshmi*' and '*pativrata*'. Moreover, they tried to straddle the western/modern with the traditional and while some journals managed to alter people's opinions on women's social duties, some stressed on '*suhag*', '*adarsh pati prem*' and so on.

Nijhawan however seeks out the subversive elements in such journals and comments on how some of them allowed space for women to question and resist patriarchal codes of conduct, and gender oppression in general. She says, "Many female contributors rejected the relegation of women to a private or spiritual sphere from which they were supposed to represent an essentialised 'Indianness'" (44). Indeed, having been influenced by the journals, women were making decisions that impacted not just their own selves and their immediate families, but also the larger body politic. Emancipation of women, which was one of the primary agendas of most editors, along with, of course, entertainment, therefore allowed the female audience to find voice and the means to communicate to a large audience – something which they earlier did not have at the same scale. At the same time, most journals remained mindful of 'traditions' and 'Indian culture' etc. In such a situation, issues of tradition, modernity, and change that found ample space in the discourses that were disseminated urban as well as semi-urban spaces, further complicated matters because patriarchy was questioned, and the position of women in society

was debated constantly. For this reason the journals very often contained futile rhetoric that did not serve to help the cause of women very effectively.

However, it remains that these journals encouraged women to think independently and make informed choices both personal as well as political. In addition to that, more of and more of these journals were encouraging women to engage actively and physically with the outside/public world. Issues concerning nationalism and patriotism which also figured majorly in the texts, brought into question women's participation in freedom movements, and their resistance to colonial rule, which was hitherto multi-variegated, and often underplayed, muted, discouraged, or scarce. Thus, politics, nationalism, and anti-colonial efforts were the most common ways through which women were emerging from the private and engaging with the public. Thus, the journals greatly aided identity formation amongst women as they gained exposure to a variety of discourses through them. The writings within the journals therefore not only tackled mainstream ideologies pertaining to gender but also political issues such as that of patriotism and nationalism. Indeed, the literatures within the journals provided them with the idiom with which to carry out discussions, or think about various socio-political issues, in an altogether new language, which proved to be emancipatory in many ways.

Hindi women's periodicals thereby produced new models for women who were now engaging with the 'alternate' discourses that these journals contained about womanhood and femininity. Print culture which became inextricably linked to the generation of public discourse was undoubtedly a potent form of communication that was recognised as non-mainstream, yet as literary publications in their own right that greatly influenced the Hindi speaking community as a whole. Amidst all this were the language debates around Hindi, and the various vernaculars that could serve as a medium of articulation, and later be standardised or nationalised. The Hindi movement that formed the backdrop of these publications was a fertile ground for the periodicals to conduct discussions on feminist-nationalist identities and activities. Literature was being made through them, and conventions of writing were discarded in favour of free and creative self-expression.

Shobna Nijhawans's *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere* explores not just the literatures produced within these journals, but also the readers who shaped the writings. It is well-researched in the sense that journals used for study have been scrutinised from various perspectives, and the arguments detail not just the radicalism of the journals, but also the parochialism and limitations. The book is recommended to scholars and general readers alike, who may be interested in knowing what women readers of colonial North India read, and what they wrote.

Ipshita Nath

Assistant Professor (English)
Sri Aurobindo College (Evening)
University of Delhi