

Book Reviews

Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan and Pierre Walter (eds.) *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds*. New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 2003. Hardbound. Indian Rs 550.00.

Gender refers to the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed needs are satisfied, whereas gender relations are the ways in which a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities and the identities of men and women in relation to one another. Gender relations are complex, dynamic and socially embedded having many interlocked dimensions.

This book launched 12 studies of forest-dwelling indigenous peoples in China, India and Malaysia. Of these, six studies were done in matrilineal communities, five in patrilineal communities and one on women and hunting. These 12 studies used open-ended individual, and collective interviews, and fieldwork-based qualitative assessments in their overall analysis. This research sought to describe and explain gender relations in forest societies through the voices of indigenous women and men. The book looked into the manner in which gender relations were transformed in the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal societies. It also views gender relations as a crucial factor in the management of land and forests and maintains that continuing invisibility of women in these areas only compounds poverty, shortage and the increased workloads of forest-based women.

The contributors of this important volume explore the changes in gender relations within indigenous communities, from matrilineal or gender egalitarian systems to ones where male domination is the norm. They looked at changes in gender relations in forest societies in four situations. The first is that of the imposition of colonial or national state rule over forest communities and the takeover of forests for central purposes. Along with the exclusion of local communities from the forest, this also resulted in the imposition or, at least, importation of “mainstream” values that restricted women’s space and exalted the domestication of women. The second situation is that of the revolts, historical and contemporary, to reestablish local community control over the forests. In this regard a number of these revolts were accompanied or preceded by internal purification movements to eliminate women who were denounced as witches. That third situation is that of the response of national states to these autonomy movements by shifting to devolution as a policy. This is accompanied by the fiscal problems of these central states and the failure of state enclosure, which made such devolution necessary and feasible. The

impact of these contemporary devolution measures was, in the first instance, usually negative for women's participation. Women's exclusion from traditional village councils was carried over into formal state-sponsored committees. As devolution has failed to address the question of gender and social inequalities in many forest societies, this resulted in both the accumulation of forest income and power under the control of the local elites at the expense of the exclusion of women from the ownership, control and institutional management of forests and other resources. The fourth and current situation is where women's inclusion in committees is becoming more a policy norm. In many places, all women groups have come up for forest management and protection. Women are seen to perform better in many management and production tasks. However, these new norms of women's inclusion, though still limited in space both vertically and horizontally, have also come about through a process of struggle by women, often supported by various external actors.

The present analysis also highlights that in patrilineal societies men hold virtually all formal positions of power and decision-making whereas the major responsibility of women lies in production or income-earning which does not necessarily lead to social empowerment or gender equality within the household. In matrilineal systems, women's control over forestlands has generally enhanced gender equality by giving women a greater say in how forestlands are used. It is also noted that many women have a fair knowledge of medicinal properties of trees, roots, herbs and medicinal plants useful for reproductive health. It was explored that women's role in hunting in some situations was never specifically denied nor was prohibited by customs or religious injunctions. When the stage of agriculture emerged, the gender roles were probably clearly defined and hunting for women survives as a mere ritual. The phenomenon of the fireplace symbolises gender division into male and female fireplaces. A number of taboos and kinds of worship of the fireplace is found among almost all nationalities as they worship the god of fireplace during festivals, in the harvest season and in the times of sickness. The large scale absence of women from formal local forest management is not because of women's backwardness in formal education rather it is a manifestation of male dominance at all levels in decision-making which translates at the local level into a general reluctance to involve women in local decision-making.

The present research highlighted that state-sponsored colonisation by the dominant religio-cultural regimes like Hinduism, Christianity, Lama Buddhism and Confucianism led to centralisation of forest management as well which had a destructive effect on indigenous gender relations as they disordered the position of women as that of subordinate to men and reinforced their exclusion from political and spiritual life and community decision-making. The study recommended the need to develop a state-sponsored institutional structures through broad based consultative processes in which the least powerful and most forest-dependent, women in particular, are assured prominent opportunities for discussion and decision-making.

Finally, it is concluded that unless the power and hierarchy-based gender relations are fundamentally transformed there will be no right kind and right amount of social capital for women in any traditional society. It is also an established fact that the exclusion of women leads to inefficiency in the community, since their exclusion means their local knowledge is not adequately taken into account. This study seeks to provide a broader understanding of contemporary changes in the economy and society of indigenous peoples which leads to informed and improved policies and enhanced project interventions. This quest will contribute to the Millennium Development Goals of achieving gender equality and halving rural poverty by 2015. This volume is an invaluable addition to the literature which will help researchers and policy-makers in gender studies, natural resource management, and conservation by providing invaluable insights into the lives of forest dwellers in Asia.

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