

Gender, Poverty and Livelihood in the Eastern Himalayas. Edited by Sanjoy Hazarika and Reshmi Banerjee

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Gender, Poverty and Livelihood in the Eastern Himalayas. Edited by Sanjoy Hazarika and Reshmi Banerjee

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This highly informative collection of essays, edited by Sanjoy Hazarika and Reshmi Banerjee, is a welcome addition to our understanding of everyday issues of mountain communities in the Eastern Himalayas, especially from the perspective of women. While the topics of gender, poverty, and rural livelihoods have been under discussion for a while across geographies, the perspectives of women, especially from the Eastern Himalayan region, have been particularly lacking; thus, this book fills an important gap. Its predominant theme is how women in fragile contexts (ecologically, economically, socially, politically) experience additional layers of challenges in navigating their everyday lives around basic questions of food, water, safety, security, and employment—among others.

The 7 chapters in the book provide illustrative case studies from different states/regions in the Eastern Himalayas (Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya, Assam, Mizoram, and Burma) on issues as wide ranging as socioeconomic challenges faced by women, access to and control over resources, questions of patriarchy, everyday misogyny, discrimination, and violence. These case studies demonstrate the differential experiences and vulnerabilities of both women and men across ethnicities, mediated by gender power relations and the associated dynamics. The key argument, which runs across all the chapters, is that policy making and practice, apart from being gender sensitive, should also factor in regional and topographical differences and be sensitive to the specific needs of mountain communities.

The chapters offer various levels of conceptual and analytical depth as well as varied levels of engagement with feminist theories and methodologies. For instance, the chapters by George Van Driem and Subhadra Mitra Channa provide a detailed background on the rich linguistic history of the Eastern Himalayan region and the Northeastern identity, respectively. They argue that the understanding of the Northeastern identity is not only essentialized, but also fictionalized, through a continuous process of construction and reconstruction; and this is done in a manner that is far

removed from the reality of everyday existence. Jwala Thapa, through her discussion on water accessibility issues, highlights that though women are critical for both household- and community-level water management practices, their representation and involvement in both domestic and policy-making spaces and processes are negligible. According to Thapa, the main barrier for women is the technological bias that is skewed toward men. This resonates with Bina Agarwal's work (2009) on the role of women in forest management and fishery institutions, where she argues that increasing their stake in decision making can not only enhance resource conservation but also address efficiency and equity concerns of natural resource management.

Marchang Reimeingam's chapter reiterates the value of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in enhancing rural women's employment in Sikkim and shows that, although the demand and supply of jobs often do not match, Sikkim is doing much better than most of India in terms of performance. Reshmi Banerjee's chapter demonstrates how elite Burmese women who managed to gain entry into positions of power often did not articulate the concerns of women who were more marginal to them. This resonates with gender, race, and class literature, which suggests that not all women in positions of power advocate for the interests of other women. Often, class, race/caste, and ethnicity interests get priority over gender concerns.

Rini Tochhanwng's rich oral history account of the Mizo uprising in Assam highlights the contentious, as well as courageous, navigation of ordinary citizens caught in the middle of a war. Apart from reiterating how, in conflict zones, women's bodies become the sites for violence and humiliation, it discusses how some women transcended gendered social norms, to actively take on roles that would traditionally be seen as masculine and pertaining to the public space. The chapter reminds us how, with regard to sexual violence mediated by the armed forces in the Northeastern region, nothing much has changed in the last half century (McDuié-Ra 2012). In the contemporary times of jingoistic politics in India, where the armed forces are part of everyday conversations from the point of national pride, such reminders are necessary and timely. Finally, Tara Douglas's research project with young indigenous youth on art, technology, imagination, and representation is quite fascinating for those interested in reflexive methodologies, cultural politics of representation, and what a decolonial research collaboration could look like.

The strengths of the book are its methodological diversity and rich empirical insights into the history, politics, social structures, gender, state-society relations, and everyday struggles of mountain women who, despite challenges, have played and continue to play a critical role in shaping their society. The only weakness of the book is the title, which does not do justice to the rich collection of essays, which are on a wide, representative range of topics, not necessarily pertaining only to poverty and livelihoods in the Eastern Himalayas.

What I particularly find refreshing in this collection is the inclusion of authors who have personal or historical connections with the Eastern Himalayan region. So far, this region and its communities have experienced persistent neglect on the research and policy-making front; it is quite unusual to find scholarly representations from members of different communities from within the region. Given the recent interest in the decolonialization of academia, the inclusion of such diverse voices, from a country as diverse as India, is relevant and timely.

The book should be extremely useful for those seeking to gain a better understanding of the assumptions about men and women from the Eastern Himalayas as well as the challenges and paradoxes within which most of them navigate their everyday lives. The book opens the door for more critical thinking and discussion on inclusive policy

making that integrates the various intersecting issues concerning the mountain communities in the Eastern Himalayan region. Researchers and scholars in gender studies, sociology, social anthropology, development studies, human geography, Northeast and Himalayan studies, and South Asian studies, as well as policy makers and practitioners in the development sector, might find this book particularly useful.

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