

Brenda Cranney. *Local Environment and Lived Experience: The Mountain Women of Himachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001. Hardbound. 287 pages. Indian Rs 495.00.

Rural communities in the less developed countries depend for their livelihood on a subsistence economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry. So is the case of rural communities in India. The state of Himachal Pradesh is an example where forests are the main source of food and income. Inappropriate or badly managed development programmes in these areas have resulted in the depletion of natural resources, causing environmental degradation. This naturally affects the lives of the local population, especially the poor women of the area, as forests provide the main source of output vital to their household economy.

Local Environment and Lived Experience is the microanalysis of women in the two villages, Ichasser and Dev Nagar, in the state of Himachal Pradesh. It provides a critical overview of development programmes and how these programmes have changed the daily pattern of their lives. The change is explained in the own voices of local women—describing their intervention, coping strategies, and resistance. The author has explored different features of village life, household economies as well as women's agency affected by the implementation and abandonment of development programmes.

After giving the background and methodological details in the introduction, the author elaborates on the relevant theoretical literature in Chapter Two. Criticising the structural development literature she argues that it is patriarchal in nature and does not take into account the needs and strengths of gender perspectives. Moreover, it focuses on issues at the macro level and provides more quantitative than qualitative information. In her view, analysis of political economy is important but it would rather be more useful when women's experience is included separately. Women contributors to development literature combine the structural approach with gender analysis. This literature recognises the gendered division of labour and women's role in subsistence production. Household strategy theorists have examined the social, cultural, and economic aspects of women's subordination and how these affect women's role in production and social reproduction. The author views the eco-feminist theory as relevant but points out its drawback, that it neglects of political economy issues. Environmental degradation and depletion has a bearing on all areas of women's lives. Therefore, it is necessary to consider political economy issues apart from ideological ones to understand the basic economic reasons behind the destruction of the environment and the oppression of women. She observes that all theoretical perspectives are 'interwoven and inter-constitutive'. And the reason behind the failure of many development projects in India could be their inability to assess the importance of such an integrative theoretical basis. Her thesis is that women are not unintelligent recipients of development inputs. Therefore, their thoughts and views must be given voice if development is to have any meaning.

In Chapter Three, she reflects on her research methodology, which relies heavily on qualitative methods to illustrate the intensity of different tasks that women perform and the emotions associated with it. The techniques used for this purpose are 'voices of the women' and 'photographs'. She thinks this is the best way to ensure that women are not marginalised and their feelings are fully articulated. And photographs give the feeling of a living presence to the text. In addition, this chapter also outlines the difficulties faced by the author in undertaking her fieldwork. It is also stressed that the researcher should express personal feelings and experience to be critically aware of how these inform and shape the research.

The fourth chapter explains the macro dimensions of development in Himachal Pradesh. She traces the history of capitalism in India (with particular focus on forestry), then narrows it down to Himachal Pradesh, and finally, to the village level. It has been shown how the daily lives of women have been affected by capitalism at the national or macro level. Her apprehension is that government policies do have a trickle-down effect on the lives of the rural poor, but most of the time this effect is not positive.

Chapter Five gives details of the two villages, Ichasser and Dev Nagar, in the light of the framework in which women's workloads can be viewed. In this chapter, village details are followed by interviews of three women belonging to three different age groups, 14, 36, and 70. The three women share their perception and experience of inappropriate and unsustainable development. They explain the importance of forests in their lives and how a deteriorating environment has made their life difficult. They also explain the ways in which their current struggles have led to the emergence of agency, resistance, and political activity in their lives. Interviews are written (as if) in their own words, which develop the reader's interest in the text. The photographs (as claimed by the author) heighten the effect of what they say.

The next chapter provides glimpses of various aspects of women's work related to social reproduction and economic sustenance. Using the concept of domestic political economy, the author suggests that 'production for exchange value and production for use value' cannot be separated in the context of rural women's work. Capitalist transformation has depleted the natural resources. This not only increases the workload for women, their daily fodder and fuel wood collection, but has also lowered further the already trivial forest produce. Now the majority of the women no longer rely on subsistence farming alone to feed the family; they are forced to buy from the market. This has increased their indebtedness to shopkeepers. Despite all these miseries when women are asked about what they wish to make their life easy, they only want the water problem to be solved, and to some extent better access to fuel wood and fodder. The primary concern of all women is to feed their children and get them educated so that they can find productive employment. In the light of these changes in their day-to-day lives, women do not remain passive

recipients of circumstances they are engulfed in, but instead use their agency to express their concerns and find ways to elude some change.

Chapter Seven highlights the issue of women's health affected by environmental degradation and poverty. As the depletion of the environment leads to a scarcity of resources, their workload increases, as they have to spend more time searching for fodder and fuel wood to meet their family needs. This affects their health negatively. Although the health of the entire family is affected by poverty, patriarchal cultural attitudes in society lead to more burdens being placed on women and girls. So is the access to education that is always affected by increased poverty. Girls are the first to leave school if the family cannot afford to send all children to school. In short, there is a fundamental link between inappropriate development, environmental degradation, increased poverty, increased workload for women, their poor health, their limited life choices, and their educational deprivation.

In Chapter Eight, the author raises the issues of culture, experience, agency, and resistance. Family relationships and cultural experiences have also been affected by capitalist development. Himachal Pradesh is in a state of transition where tradition and modernity coexist. This duality of modernity and tradition is manifested in women's lives, i.e., patriarchal cultural attitudes about women's specific roles and the need to adapt to changes to ensure the survival of the family. This chapter focuses on women's increasing agency and forms of resistance to patriarchal oppression, and how these connect to questions of tradition and modernity. They resist mostly in their private, everyday lives and, to a smaller extent, in the public domain.

In the conclusion, the author summarises her research experience and explains how the focus of the study has changed. She also reflects on how she felt while writing the book; how the hardship women faced and their struggle have affected her, personally as well as professionally as a feminist sociologist looking for a responsible method of conducting research. She highlights three aspects of research on the subjective level—insider research, women's voices, and photographs that helped her to develop the research approach. Throughout the book, she overly emphasises on her research approach. No doubt it is interesting, but it is not unique. The use of these techniques is very common in qualitative research studies.

She concludes by drawing a link between unsustainable capitalist development and environmental degradation and depletion, and its impact on women's productive and reproductive work, their health and their experience of family, culture, and agency. Women in the two villages are still living in uncertainty as none of the benefits of development has trickled down to the villages. Capitalist transformation has posed new challenges for rural women. In order to deal with these challenges, women have developed certain strategies. They have become active politically. They do not speak with one voice but with many voices of resistance, power, subservience, critique, determination, and hope.

This is an interesting book to read. Based on extensive qualitative research and conceptual explorations, the book will be useful to those working in such fields as development and gender studies.

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