

Book Review: Gender and Democracy in North-East India: Politics of Inclusion and Empowerment by Jayanta Krishna Sarmah

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Sarmah, Jayanta Krishna, ed. *Gender and Democracy in North-East India: Politics of Inclusion and Empowerment*. Purbanchal Prakash, Guwahati, 2019. 512 pages. Hardcover, \$16.81

South Asia, one of the oldest inhabited places on the planet, has an intriguing history. This region of course includes India, the largest democracy in the world, with nearly half of its population being female; yet, the plight of India's women is just being told. *Gender and Democracy in North-East India* throws light on multifarious dimensions of the obstacles in the way of the empowerment of India's females. The book is a compilation of twenty-six chapters, written by thirty-six scholars, who collectively unveil the multi-layered prejudices and discrimination directed against women in India's north-east states.

Social sciences view gender as a social construct, including gender discrimination in traditions, customs, and even architectural designs. In India, women exist within the confines of well-defined traditional roles of being shy, submissive, imperceptible, and self-sacrificing, all of which strengthen the patriarchal system. The contrasting characteristics of the public and private lives of women create a multitude of challenges, often resulting in their reversion back to traditionally constricted roles as a means of resolving conflict. Although the Indian constitution affirms the equality of women, violence against women largely goes unresolved.

A core theme of the book centers on education. While education is a tool of emancipation for women, the authors demonstrate that women in India's northeastern states have higher dropout rates than the national average. While enhancement in women's literacy rates have increased their rate of labor market participation and their earnings, there is still a long way to go before women have equal respect and position in the domestic and social spheres of life. Indian women constitute the largest illiterate group in the world, which also has the effect of exacerbating criminal activities against women. Less awareness and lower socioeconomic

standing push women into trafficking. Assam, for example, with its low educational attainment rates for women, has double the crime than the national rate.

The authors make clear that, for the sustenance of democracy, equality of all before law is imperative. While there is increasing trend in women's political participation and leadership, since independence (over seven decades ago) there has been only a 7 percent increase in female political representation. Although Naga women have played part in peace-making activities, their political participation languishes. Political parties continue to view females as unable to raise funds and, thus, unelectable. When included in government, women also tend to be placed in less significant ministries.

The authors agree that rights are claims that place boundaries on the power of state and it is government accountability that maintains the true spirit of equality. For a population as diverse as India, ethno-cultural religious societies or identities play significant role in shaping individuals and the application of federal rule. Though the Indian constitution—in principal—upholds the equality of the sexes, it also defers to customary laws in the northeast that continue to exclude women's full participation in local democratic structures.

Another discriminatory characteristic discussed in the work is skin tone, which is related to caste structure in India and the socioeconomic standing of a female. Be it media, social setup, or match-making, the advantageous position of lighter skin tones are quite evident. The focus on skin tone objectifies women, reinforcing their subservient status in a patriarchal system.

With regards to economic standing, land is a valuable asset and its ownership directly and individually empowers women; yet, there exists in many regions a dominant culture of preferring males over females in inheritance. Customary laws stand in high support of maintaining the

dominance of men in ownership rights and in getting financial support by institutes. For change to appear in such practices, modification in social structure will be needed.

In order to empower women, the authors argue, “gender budgeting” has become more common in some circles within North-East India. With the aim of increasing financial independence and rationality the Indian Government launched the “Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas” to turn women into development agents. Entrepreneurship, the authors show, empower women by transforming them into rational economic agents, as well as a source of economic gains.

Religious practices also shape ideological beliefs and social practices. India’s caste system has led to the segmentation of the society. Notably, the authors are of the view that Christianity has enhanced the awareness of rights of people, thus advancing women’s empowerment.

Even with these developments, the authors argue that significant challenges still remain. The region of Sikkim offers opportunities for women to improve themselves politically and economically; however, domestic violence still prevails. Men use violence against women as a tool to “solve problems.” Conscious efforts are made to keep people from turning towards legal help for resolving issues where most of them are sorted out in the local vicinities.

There are also lethal practices of witch-hunting women, which unmistakably stand as a great violation of human rights. This pagan practice, prevalent from the ancient past in this region, works as a means of controlling a particular person or even a family.

As a lecturer in political administration, I found this book’s insights to be of the utmost importance. National governments can legislate but local officials administer the laws. We see how easy it is to ignore laws when there are no resources to enforce them, or when local customs

are given preference to federal law. Ignorance, poverty, tradition and isolation all reinforce a patriarchal structure which privileges a few. This in-depth look into the multi-lingual, ethnic, religious northeast region of India is a sobering reminder of both the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic structure as it operates within the subcontinent.

This work can serve as a reference for people involved in understanding dynamics of social fabric of India and its linkage with the empowerment of women. It is an important contribution to women's studies and is a must read for students of India and Southeast Asia.

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