

Kailash Rai, ed. 2073 v.s. *Pahicānko Khojī: Ādivāsī Janajāti Mahilākā Sāmājik, Sāmskr̥tik, Rājnitik Sandarva (2016–2073)*. Kathmandu: Indigenous Media Foundation.

In *Pahicānko Khojī* editor Kailash Rai has made a commendable effort to bring together a wide range of scattered writings about indigenous women in a single volume. The book contains 25 articles published between 2016 and 2073 v.s. (c. 1960 to 2016 AD). More than half of the contributions are by *Janajāti* women; they include activists, researchers, NGO workers, and a former constituent assembly (CA) member. *Janajāti* women organizing for their rights and writing about their experiences is a relatively recent phenomenon. The book makes this evident as the articles by *Janajāti* women were all written after 2000 AD.

The book is divided into seven sections. Broadly, the different sections shed light on the status of *Janajāti* women within and outside their community, their organization and social movement, and their concerns regarding the constitution and state restructuring. In the introductory chapter, editor Rai provides an overview of the book and some thoughtful observations on the *Janajāti* women's movement. All the articles underscore the fact that the debate on *Janajātis* should take into account gendered manifestations of caste/ethnicity, while any discussion of women should recognize that the experiences of indigenous women are shaped by their caste/ethnicity and gender.

The first section entitled “Sāmskr̥tik Cinārī” contains rare writings on *Janajāti* women published in *Svāsnimānche* magazine between 2016 and 2020 v.s. All seven authors are men: two are Newar, four are Brahman, and one is a Rai. It is unsurprising that all the early writings on *Janajāti* women were by men. Given their history of marginalization and low literacy rates at the time, *Janajāti* women were not in a position to represent themselves. Most of the articles in this section reveal how *Janajāti* women are perceived by men from other caste and ethnic groups. The authors portray indigenous women as belonging to communities free from the oppression of Hindu patriarchy. In their view, *Janajāti* women are independent, free spirited and actively participate in both the domestic and public spheres. Although true to some extent, their accounts echo the noble savage sentiments that characterize European travel literature of the colonial era. Western European writers from that period routinely portrayed non-European peoples as the

idealized “other” – beings who existed in a primitive, beast-like stage, uncorrupted by civilization.

In a similar vein, in “Kuluṅkā Āimāi,” Jeevnath Koirala writes, “It is surprising that even in the 20th century, many mothers and sisters in certain corners of our country live like savages” (p. 21). However, the “soul” of these mothers and sisters “is very pure,” he adds. On the Rai women of Bhojpur, Krishna Joshi remarks: “Day by day they are trying their best to blend with modern, civilized society” (p. 40). Written at a time when the writers were not constrained by the need to appear politically correct, these articles reveal a tendency that still prevails among high-caste groups: the tendency to view *Janajāti* groups, especially those living in rural areas, as ignorant and uncivilized.

Most articles in the book seek to counter the notion that “Nepali women” make up a homogeneous category. Drawing on a seminal 2004 essay “Nepalmā Bikāse Nārīvād” by scholar Seira Tamang (2004), Kailash Rai recounts how the Nepali state, particularly during the Panchayat period, systematically erased the cultures and identities of *Janajāti* women by lumping them into the generic category of “Nepali women.” All Nepali women were essentially characterized as possessing the culture and customs of high-caste Hindu women. Man Kumari Thada Magar illustrates the diversity among women that exists even within the single Magar ethnic group. Sangini Rana Magar criticizes the government and non-governmental organizations for importing Western approaches in the name of women development while completely ignoring existing indigenous practices that are empowering for women.

The *Janajāti* writers maintain that the continuing hegemony of Hindu high-caste culture has undermined the egalitarian aspects of indigenous culture. Compared to the dominant Hindu culture, they write, the customs and values of *Janajāti* communities allow greater freedom for women. However, as Sangini Magar points out, indigenous communities have increasingly adopted and internalized Hindu norms that endorse men’s superiority. The Hinduization process that began with the formation of the Nepali state has thoroughly penetrated all areas of society. Kailash Rai thus points out the need to acknowledge that *Janajāti* communities are no longer as egalitarian as they would like to think. The takeaway from their articles is that we need to re-examine gender relations within indigenous communities and confront the widespread prevalence of Hindu patriarchal values.

Several articles in sections five and six illustrate how the intersection of gender and ethnicity/caste produce distinct challenges for indigenous women. Notable examples include Sheela Adhikari's article on the impact of the Kamlari system on Tharu women's education, Manju Gurung's article on indigenous women and labour migration, and Dev Kumar Sunuwar's article on human trafficking among indigenous women. Adhikari, for instance, shows how the low educational achievement of Kamlaris is connected to the history of land dispossession among Tharus. The articles in these sections suggest that the problems of indigenous women, such as poverty, landlessness, illiteracy and low educational status, as well as various forms of violence against women, cannot be treated in isolation from the history of exclusion faced by their communities. Thus programs and policies aimed at addressing women's problems must take a genuinely targeted approach, one that takes the particular cultural and economic realities of indigenous women into account.

Articles in sections two, three and five highlight the stake indigenous women have in two major movements of Nepal – the mainstream women's movement and the indigenous peoples' movement. As the writers point out, despite their major contributions, both these movements have yet to make meaningful efforts to include indigenous women's voices. The mainstream women's movement, led by high-caste Hindu women, tends to view the issues of marginalized groups as divisive and communal. It hasn't adequately acknowledged the diversity among Nepali women or raised the distinct issues faced by women from indigenous and other marginalized groups. The *Janajāti* movement, which emerged in the 1990s, continues to be led by men and treats indigenous women activists as junior partners in the movement.

As the concerns of indigenous women were treated as marginal within both the *Janajāti* movement and the mainstream women's movement, *Janajāti* women felt the need to create a separate organization dedicated to their cause. Section two describes the emergence of the National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF), an umbrella of 36 indigenous women's organizations from across Nepal. This section provides a critical and constructive analysis of the NIWF's role, achievements and challenges. Kailash Rai recounts how the NIWF faced sharp criticism from the male-dominated Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) for "dividing and weakening" the indigenous people's movement. Despite the backlash and practical challenges involved in starting a new organization,

indigenous women activists continued to organize and raise the issues of indigenous women and made considerable contributions.

Despite their huge sacrifices in establishing a federal republican Nepal, indigenous women have gained little in the new order. Kamala Roka Magar, a former CA member, reminds us that a large proportion of rural youth who fought in the decade-long Maoist war were indigenous women. Many were raped, tortured and killed. But two decades later, their core demands remain unaddressed in the new constitution. Arguably the most important of these demands is identity-based federalism. Most writers in the book assert that federalism that recognizes identity is essential for the social, cultural and economic empowerment of indigenous women. They unanimously claim that the emancipation of *Janajāti* women is inextricably tied to indigenous peoples' autonomy and self-governance in their historical homelands (Bhattachan p. 170; Roka Magar p. 131; Thebe p. 107; Bajracharya p. 133). Thebe argues, for instance, that Limbu women in the east can only gain their political, cultural and economic rights in an autonomous Limbuwan.

One of the main strengths of the book lies in its ability to articulate the demands of indigenous women. The collected writings indicate that indigenous women activists have identified key issues that the state and non-state actors need to address for their empowerment. The position papers and declarations of the NIWF included in the annex are useful for understanding the movement's spirit and agenda. Many of the demands draw on the relevant international human rights conventions and declarations that Nepal has ratified. In addition to issues raised by the mainstream women movement, indigenous women are asking for: a) recognition of their identity as indigenous women; b) proportional representation on the basis of ethnicity and gender in all state structures including in political parties; c) rights over their ancestral lands and natural resources; d) rights to receive information and education in mother tongues; and e) preservation and promotion of traditional institutions and customary laws.

Section seven provides an updated and modified version of a bibliography first compiled by Kailash Rai and published online by Martin Chautari in 2068 v.s. It includes writings about indigenous women published between 2016 v.s.–2073 v.s. in various sources, and serves as a valuable resource for anyone working on the indigenous women of Nepal.

As the editor mentions at the outset, the book is far from comprehensive and represents an initial effort to collect the writings about indigenous

women in a single volume. The information provided in the book thus tends to be general and repetitive at times. The book would have been richer if the broad observations made by some of the writers were supported by data and empirical evidence. However, available data on *Janaajāti*s are rarely disaggregated by gender, and data on women is rarely disaggregated by caste/ethnicity. The acute lack of data on women from *Janaajāti* and other marginalized groups is yet another indication that the mainstream women movement has not been able to address the heterogeneity that exists among Nepali women. It is also interesting to note that nearly all of the available recent writings on *Janaajāti* women are by *Janaajāti*s. There is no contribution from mainstream women activists.

The book identifies many critical but under-explored topics related to *Janaajāti* women and opens avenues for further research. Despite its limitations, the edited volume will help expand the discourse of gender and caste/ethnicity in Nepal.

Reference

Tamang, Seira. 2004. Nepalma Bikāse Nārīvād. In *Nepalko Sandarbhama Samājśāstriya Cintan*. Mary Des Chene and Pratyoush Onta, eds., pp. 552–557. Lalitpur: Social Science Baha.

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