
Book Review

Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India

Jessica A. Albrecht ^{1*}

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The anthology *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India*, edited by Shweta Prasad, is an informative and very broad engagement with the questions and problems that are already raised in the title of the volume, despite its seemingly limited focus on the context of India. It consists of 17 concise chapters that engage with the topic in such a way that it is useful and applicable to other contexts as well. This is because it is structured into three parts: (1) a more theoretical and methodological macro approach to the field of gender, the environment and development; (2) regional examples of women's specific challenges and responses, with specific focuses on water and infrastructure; and (3) present-day and envisioned strategies that might be applied to other contexts as well.

The edited volume is based on the premise that the Global South carries the burden of the excesses of the Global North, stemming from the latter's own economic development of the twentieth century as well as their impact in organising the structure of development in other parts of the world as well. As this (masculinist) form of development is based solely on economic growth, it cannot take into account other forms of development, especially any that do not harm the environment and increase the oppression of women at the same time. This remains the prevailing mode of thinking, despite the fact that feminist and environmentalists have argued since the 1960s and 1970s, respectively, that those issues are drastic and interconnected. This anthology engages fruitfully with this problem by new and insightful theoretical engagements and the narration of case studies from the perspective of India.

The first part, Macro Scenario and Environmental Discourses with Gender Lens, consists of four chapters that deal with the question of the relationship between women, the environment, sustainable development, ecofeminism, and the gendering of knowledge systems. The first chapter, by Janki Andharia and Lavanya Shanbhogue Arvind, uses the concept of vulnerability from a material and discursive theoretical perspective to argue that the relationship between women and nature within the context of ecofeminism is necessary for a reconceptualisation of sustainability from a (critical) intersectional lens. The second chapter, by Vijaylakshmi Brara, applies a feminist critique towards the influence of patriarchy and masculinity and contrasts it with women's indigenous knowledge. Jyoti Prasad Saikia and Suravi Pathak also engage with women's knowledge in ecofeminism – in particular in

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, GERMANY

*Corresponding Author: jessica_albrecht@gmx.de

relation to agriculture and women from poor and rural backgrounds. Premula Raman, in the fourth chapter, calls for a new relationship between nature and humanity and, therefore, a reconfiguration of development.

The seven chapters of part two, Profile of Different Regions with regard to Environmental and Development Challenges and Responses, more thoroughly engage with individual case studies – regional or event-connected – which enables the authors (Ramarao Indira and G. Shanthi, Sushil Kumar and Deep Shikha, Nibedita Bayen and Shilajit Sengupta, Sunayana J. Kadle, Geeta Balakrishnan, Nasmeem Farhin Akhtar, as well as Sheela Suryanarayanan, Rajib Nandi and Srishti Sharma) to look more closely at the agency of women, their role as women, and their simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility as women. The chapters reach from engagements with women's challenges in relation to natural disasters, their societal and bodily relation to water as a resource and burden, to differences between urban and rural lives and how this needs to inform development strategies more holistically and inclusively.

Lastly, part three, Strategies for Environmental Safety and Sustainable Development, aims to show different pathways towards sustainability. It consists of six chapters (by Sunita Dhal, Linda Lane and Nilima Srivastava, Sangeeta Desai and Ashish Desai, Biswarupa Ghosh, Khevana Desai, K. Velumani, and Simi Mehta) that not only highlight the importance of women but also highlights women's existing work and achievements within the context of environmental activism and sustainable development. Women's agency, in these case studies, stems from their specific place within the tradition and gendering of agriculture in India, their role as mothers, leaders of households, and food production.

Coming together, the chapters of the edited volume argue that any step towards sustainability, and specifically sustainable development needs to be a holistic step that equally considers the importance of gender and the environment in decision-making, strategies, and policies. The anthology succeeds in bringing together a vast number of scholars from India who engage with these questions and provides an insightful overview of the current state of problems and challenges faced by women in India and possible pathways for reconfiguring the relationship between gender, the environment and sustainable development.

The anthology stands in line with feminist scholarship in two ways: firstly, since many of the chapters are the fruit of collaborative scholarly work, it highlights the successfulness of collaboration that the authors praise in their case studies. Secondly, it engages with contemporary feminist scholarship in relation to indigenous knowledge (production) and meaningful engagement with on-ground activism and women's agency beyond the scholarly frames of subalternity and oppression.

However, the anthology also has a couple of shortcomings, specifically in relation to the use of gender. Despite it being amongst the triad of theoretical frameworks and alleged contents, there is almost no engagement with gender as a critical framework *per se*, but the book focuses on case studies of femininity/women in the main. One noteworthy exception is chapter two, Need to Steer Development Patterns through Women's Knowledge Systems, by Vijaylakshmi Brara. The collapse of women with gender, which is common within the development discourse, is not challenged, neither by the authors nor the editor, and it is even sometimes explicitly affirmed. This leads to an (implicit) exclusion of gender as a broader category of analysis. The collection would have been enriched by more inclusion of scholarship that deals with masculinity, and the contextual construction of gender discourse itself in the context of India that informs the environmental and development discourses. This leads to the second omission, namely the embeddedness of the discourse that equates women with nature in colonial structures – despite the editor mentioning that the gender binary is a 'modern western concept' (p. 17). These colonial structures have been criticised by decolonial feminist scholars around the world (Jackson, 1993; Mohanty, 2003; Resurrección, 2017; Rigby, 2018). In general, there is insufficient engagement with such scholarship outside of India, which might have helped to see exclusions and boundaries that were implicitly and explicitly drawn by the editor and the authors.

Lastly, I have to note that the editor and some of the authors explicitly refer to a so-called 'Oneness' of the Indian culture, which conceals inner-Indian religious, cultural, language, ethnic, caste, and class divides. It might be seen to stand in line with specific Hindu conceptions of universalism and oneness, that many oppressed groups within India have criticised. Coming from a feminist perspective and arguing for a new form of (Indian) ecofeminism, as this anthology proposes, such exclusions, omissions and assumptions should be made explicit and/or critiqued. In general, there should be a more thorough engagement with the cultural contexts of the case studies and more reflections on the historical and contemporary assumptions that are made. These tend to be concealed by the focus on the divide between Western political and economic ideology and Indian women, as it leaves no room for further critical evaluations of the role of the Indian state, Indian institutions and context-specific patriarchy as players in this field.

Nevertheless, the edited volume is a useful companion to any interested reader, may it be students, early career researchers or established academics. It achieves what it set itself out to do: provide an overview over women, the environment and sustainable development in India, including a variety of contexts and perspectives, especially in relation to regionality and the urban-rural divide. It proves to be an insightful read for anyone who looks for theoretical engagements as well. This is not only limited to scholars of India or South Asia, since the conclusions

that are drawn might apply to other contexts as well. In fact, the volume editor could have made a stronger case for global alliance instead of Indian exceptionalism. There is a strong foundation for such a feminist claim within the individual chapters.

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