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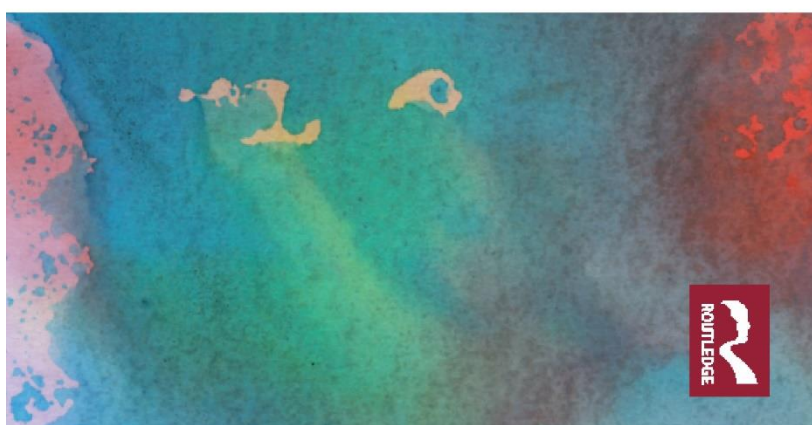
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# **GENDER, SPACE AND AGENCY IN INDIA**

**EXPLORING REGIONAL GENDERSCAPES**

Edited by  
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The book *Gender, Space and Agency in India: Exploring Regional Genderscapes*, is a commendable addition to the existing literature on the complex negotiations of space and gender that produce everyday gendered lives. Breaking away from what has been referred to as the 'hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon world' and its 'flawed representations' of the diverse category of non-white women, the book aims to foreground the struggles, experiences, and agency of ordinary women from different regions of India in how they negotiate their strongly contextualised lives. It discusses the role of socio-cultural and economic spaces within different regions that throw up regionally unique challenges interspersed with opportunities that allow agency within the overall structure of 'classic patriarchy' in the Indian scenario. Altogether, the book comprises eleven chapters where the editor's first and concluding essays knit the other contributions together in making this point. Following the theoretical framework of Chapter 1, chapters follow the excavation of agency in a set of diverse spaces within different regional genderscapes that are embedded over various states/ administrative units from Assam in Northeast India to Jharkhand, West Bengal, Delhi, Punjab, Goa, Gujarat, and Ladakh.

In her introductory chapter, Datta offers the conceptual framework of 'regional genderscapes' to reiterate the complex, enmeshed, and sometimes subtle, sometimes vivid interconnections between geographical contexts (terrain, agro-climatic conditions, economy, etc.) and social construction of gender roles. This concept of regional genderscapes allows for the differences within the category of women to be noted and highlights the fact that there are local variations in the way patriarchy is constituted. The editor, Anindita Datta draws upon studies to establish that these variations may be linked to the geomorphic terrain, cultivation practices, and women's labour on family farms. As stated above, the book offers perspectives from various regions of India to understand the links between space, gender, and gendered agency within the framework of

dynamic and ever-evolving regional genderscapes. Space, therefore, becomes the critical lens in examining women's agency, and here the book makes its key contribution in asserting that the role of spatial or geographical contexts, while as important as other intersectionalities such as caste, class, and religion, in studying issues of access, empowerment or agency, often get washed over by the more visible forms of socio-cultural stratification.

This entire volume, staying true to the abovesaid approach, provides nine case studies offering varied perspectives about women from different regions and various stages of life and socio-political spectrums. Rituparna Bhattacharyya (Chapter 2) discusses how young middle-class Assamese women negotiate the dichotomies created and reproduced by the interactions of traditional gender structures with changing socio-cultural situations wherein, even though the women are better educated and employment-oriented, they tend to adhere to traditional gender roles due to custom and socialisation yet are seeking agency through education. Patricia M. Kewer and Martha E. Geores, in Chapter 3, discuss cases of young women who have overcome social, economic, and geographic challenges from four different states to study in the United States—the role of agential spaces is highlighted in each case. Chapter 5 by Barnali Biswas discusses the way agential spaces are generated in the case of rural women of West Bengal while negotiating their restricted access to public space in the context of decentralised political decision making.

While Basabi Gupta discusses tribal women in Jharkhand facing violence and the stigma of being 'witches' for asserting their property rights (Chapter 4); Swagata Basu portrays how urban women face domestic violence in Delhi, deriving agency from the space provided by Mahila Panchayats (women's courts) and women's networks of solidarity (Chapter 6).

Other chapters discuss the everyday challenges of gendered spaces across other regional genderscapes. In India, widows, by and large suffer from stigmatisation and marginalisation.

Kanchan Gandhi in Chapter 7 illustrates the severe hardships faced by the widowed women from rural Punjab exacerbated by the intersection of caste and class. Chapter 9 by Nairwita Bandyopadhyay and Ashis Kumar Saha examine how women in the drought-prone regions of Gujarat negotiate the water crisis and the ways through which they create agential spaces through collection and management of water in their homes. Touching on the issue of migration, in Chapter 8, Ajay Bailey discusses how masculinities of migrant men are differently performed in spaces that are inclusionary/exclusionary. Taking the understanding of gendered spaces a step further, Sara Smith (Chapter 10) elucidates how the female body itself becomes an instrument of territory-making in contested geopolitical spaces. All the case studies are extremely rich in narratives from the field, transporting the reader to a wide variety of contexts while offering rich insights into the interactions of space and gender. While almost all cases discuss the importance of education, only Chapters 2 and 3 have a special focus on this theme.

The concluding chapter beautifully sums up the entire volume by providing a theoretical context to the case studies and locating these daily and unnoticed acts of resistance within the framework of indigenous feminisms, which are otherwise often invisibilised. Using Hiemstra's methodological strategy of periscoping (p. 148), Datta recognises agency in acts of resistance and in acts of compliance to tradition and daily negotiations rooted in the gendered contexts of the subjects. She 'trains the periscope' to recognise the feminist counter spaces created in these cases, be it the *Mahila Panchayats* of Delhi (Chapter 6) or rural women branded as witches seeking refuge in urban anonymity in Jharkhand (Chapter 4). These counter spaces thus are recognised as spaces of power and agency, however transient, existing in the very spaces of powerlessness and lack of agency (p. 155).

Throughout the volume, the reader notices how the oft-discussed boundaries between the private and the public sphere are increasingly blurred as the local political economies face a transition. Be it the middle-class Assamese women (Chapter 2) or women in rural Bengal recognising their greater say in household decision making once they become panchayat members (Chapter 4) or the geopolitical struggles played out via the territories of female bodies (Chapter 10) or simply the autonomy experienced due to better spatial mobility (Chapters 3, 6), women are constantly creating the counter spaces of resistance while being situated in their traditional patriarchal contexts. As social scientists studying the Indian subcontinent, it is imperative to acknowledge these spaces and understand their implications for the future of gender relations in societies in flux. This volume is a welcome step in this regard.

Overall, the book marks an important contribution to the field by offering fresh theoretical insights and a methodological lens to understand links between gender, space, and agency. However, a broader coverage by including more studies from states known for lower levels of empowerment such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh as well as from States in South India would have significantly enriched the volume. The absence of maps also hinders readability for those unfamiliar with Indian states, even though a link in Chapter 1 does provide a searchable map where places named in the volume can be located. Despite these, the book is an important contribution and a strongly recommended read for students, researchers and teachers of human geography, sociology, regional development, gender studies, urban planning, and anyone interested in the links between space and gender.