

On Gender and Resistance

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* Sujit Kumar Chattopadhyay. *Gender Inequality, Popular Culture and Resistance in Bankura District*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2016. pp xiv + 257. Rs 1495.

The book, in its seven chapters along with an introduction, glossary, bibliography and index, is a study, on the basis of the case studies carried on in the Bankura district of West Bengal, of the interconnections and correlations between the issues of gender inequality, popular culture and resistance. Accepting how the popular culture plays an equivocal role in maintaining as well as a counterattacking the gender inequality that is visible in rural Bengal, the author has tried to explore the possible implications of the popular folklore of Bankura district in formulating resistance against the prevalent gender bias in the everyday cum predominant cultural praxes. It is interesting to note that although the author has exclusively included the folkloristic forms like folk songs (like Tushu, Bhadu and Jhumur of Bankura district), riddles, rhymes and proverbs as the cultural components he does not use 'folk culture' but uses 'popular culture' in his title, instead.

In the introduction entitled "Defining the Problem: Current knowledge, Sources and Methods", a detailed description of the existing literature, research gaps and methodology has been provided. Chapter one, "Gender Inequality: Concepts and Approaches", begins by clarifying the terms like 'discrimination', 'difference', 'exploitation' and 'oppression'. Thereafter the 'Various Concepts of Gender Inequality' has been examined under different lens like, 'Religious Approach' (that includes Christianity, Hinduism and Islam), 'Biological Approach', 'Psychological Approach', 'Sociological Approach' and 'Feminist Approach' with an elaboration of the Liberal, Radical and Marxian feminism. The overall implication of these approaches for examining gender inequality is understandable, but how the author has possibly used all/some of these theoretical frameworks in his work or whether there is a coherent set of theoretical assumptions

that the author has been drawing from all these theories is not specified. In the second chapter, "Defining Popular Culture— Various Concepts: Role of Popular Culture and Social Resistance", the author has defined folklore and critically summarized a whole range of diverse theoretical perspectives related to folkloristic, like 'Mythological Approach', 'Philological Approach', 'Borrowing Theory', 'Anthropological Approach', 'Nationalist Approach' etc. without hinting at the way in which the author might have planned to use them selectively in the work. It is difficult to understand how one can connect these discussions based on varieties of mediations and methods together. Again, by straightjacketing the conventional folk as the popular culture the author seems not to have looked into the transition that has been taking place in these traditional folk items by the impact of modernization. Chapter three deals with "Demographic, Social and Cultural Account of the District of Bankura and Various Forms of Popular Culture". This is a well-researched chapter where, with a comparative analysis of data collected from the census of 1991, 2001 and 2011, an attempt has been made to expose the gender gap in terms of literacy, marriage, life-expectancy and work-participation of females in Bankura. Additional effort has been made to scrutinize the marriage systems and dowry, widow remarriage, status of women of the different scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of the region. "Popular Culture and Gender Inequality in Bankura Folk Songs" is the title of the chapter four in which a very interesting sociological study of the three major forms of folk songs popular in Bankura has been undertaken to reveal how the women questions related to domestic violence like wife-beating and sexual violence, child marriage, dowry and polygamy get addressed through Bhadu, Tushu and Jhumur songs. The author has made ample illustrations to justify his stance. For example, the following Bhadu reflects bluntly the items that the groom demands in dowry:

*With so many daughters—
Many houses are under obligation with so many daughters*

*As there is no bridegroom without a dowry of rupees one thousand!
Then a bicycle and watch—
A bicycle, a watch, bangles and a necklace—
Give the groom a set of utensils and also a transistor. (p 111).*

The pathetic condition of a wife in the house of her in-laws gets a poetic expression through this Tushu song:

*I cut a fish into big pieces
Fish-bones were not boiled
Elder brother-in-law makes ugly gestures
I shall not keep my life alive. (p 119).*

The painful lives of the emigrant women who are brought to Assam under false hopes only to be exploited as labourers get depicted in this Jhumur song:

*Let us go, my darling
To Assam as
We are in distress here.
O my darling
There is (are) green tea-gardens
In Assam.*

*O my beloved,
You have cheated me
You have cheated me.
In Assam I get only
Parched rice and liquor of tea.
Saheb says, come! Come!
The babu says, bring them captured
Sardar says, whip them on back*

*O my beloved!
You have cheated me
And brought me to Assam. (p 131).*

“Popular Culture and Gender Inequality in Bankura: Riddles, Rhymes and Proverbs” is the title of the chapter five that illustrates how the similar forms of oppression and gender inequality as expressed through the songs also get revealed through the riddles, rhymes and proverbs. According to the author, there are mainly three forms of discrimination against the women that one can perceive through the riddles, rhymes and proverbs: first, associating women in a sexual context to degrade women’s social status; second, objectification of the females that undermines their identity as human beings; and third, de-humanizing women by projecting them as inferior compared to men. A few examples can be cited from the book to show how the patriarchal agenda of suppression and mistreatment of the women get translated into the proverbs, riddles and rhymes:

1. *The fair wife goes fair
and life ends with being slapped.
(The answer [of the riddle] is ‘Cooking pot’) (p 142).*

2. *Bird, Bird, Bird,
Let my seven co-wives
Be pulled and hauled to the bank of river
I shall see (the funeral pyre) from the ferry. (‘Rhyme’, p 151).*

3. *Cowries for son,
Rope for daughter.
Daughter is a lump of mud,
is only to throw in water. (‘Proverb’, p 160).*

The next chapter, “Recent Challenges to Gender Inequality”, while examining the impact of civil societal associations, political movements and governmental interventions in resisting the gender inequality also shows how programmes for the sustainable development of the women have slowly been initiated through strategic emphasis on increasing women’s literacy rate, enhancing income through Sell-Help groups and generating awareness regarding the health of women and children. The most fascinating are the songs of resistance created during IPTA movement in Bankura:

*You did not allow me to go to school,
you gave me your son to my lap
You gave marks in the wall
how many days you have worked.
Why do you want to make me a blind like you
Shall I also give my son in my daughter’s lap?...
...Don’t make me like a blind.
Please open my eyes. (p 193).*

In the concluding chapter the author has summarized his findings along with elaborating upon the further scope of the study.

Personally I feel that this kind of conscious contribution by a male researcher to women studies is very much essential to inculcate sensitivity about women and their plights in our patriarchal society. However, while describing the misery of the women as expressed in the folk songs, the flat statement made by the author, “The mother-in-law and sister-in-law are often the prime movers in the oppression” (p 212) needs a bit of more insight, as how these in-laws are made to internalize the patriarchal ethos, in order to do justice with the issues of the subjugation of women; else the entire objective of the work becomes debilitated. Nonetheless, this book will be useful for those interested in and working on gender studies, area studies, folklore and cultural studies.