

Bina Agarwal. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia.* Cambridge, UK/New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 572pp. Hardbound.

A Field of One's Own is a pioneering study on gender and property in South Asia. It argues that the gender gap in 'effective' ownership of property is the 'single most important' economic factor in explaining gender inequities in South Asia, where land ownership is not only a symbol of economic status but also of social prestige and political power. The author explores the complex, and often unrecognised, reasons for this gender gap and suggests some innovative solutions.

The book is unique in that it combines a cross-cultural, cross-country comparative perspective (covering India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) with an interdisciplinary approach using economic, historical, ethnographic, and legal sources, as well as the author's own fieldwork in north and northeast India. Agarwal's original theoretical contributions (in fact her extension of the theoretical boundaries of economics to incorporate gender), her complex, exhaustive, and nuanced arguments, and her authoritative historical accounts make the book an indispensable source of reference for scholars. At the same time, Agarwal's skilful storytelling, her uncovering of historical evidence, and her incorporation of women's wishes, frustrations, and voices make it a source of inspiration for reformers, activists, and grassroots groups. On both these counts, the book should be of interest to policy-makers.

The book is divided into ten chapters. In chapter 1, the author makes the case for women's independent rights in land on the basis of the welfare, efficiency, and equality/empowerment arguments. On grounds of both women's and children's welfare, there is a strong case for supporting such rights, given the considerable evidence both of intra-household gender inequalities in the sharing of benefits (such as health-care and food) and gender differentials in spending patterns (women spending more on family and children than men). The efficiency argument is multi-faceted and says that titling women could increase agricultural productivity in a variety of ways. The equality argument stems from the belief that women's land rights are an important part of gender equality, which is a measure of a just society. The empowerment argument is also multi-faceted, including the argument that women's struggle for land rights can prove to be the single most critical entry point for women's empowerment in South Asia, not only in terms of the end result but also in terms of the transformative potential implicit in the process of acquiring such rights.

Chapter 2 lays out the conceptual framework to characterise gender relations within the household, the community, the market and the State. Agarwal extends A. K. Sen's application of the game-theoretic bargaining model to the household in new directions. Recognising that there is an underlying conflict between those cooperating and that the outcome is determined by relative bargaining power, Agarwal outlines the factors that contribute to bargaining power in an agrarian economy. The author then

extends the bargaining approach to examine gender relations in the workplace, within the community, and the State. Outlining the factors that contribute to bargaining power in all these contexts is Agarwal's original contribution to the literature on bargaining.

Chapter 3 discusses in great detail what rights in landed property were customarily enjoyed by women under the patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral systems of inheritance. Prior to colonial rule, the inheritance of property, including land, was governed by local customs in South Asia. Under the *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga* legal doctrines, which influenced the formulation of contemporary Hindu law, "women could inherit immovable property such as land only under highly restrictive circumstances and . . . at best could enjoy a limited interest in it" (p. 91). But there is some evidence that women's rights were greater in practice than we might deduce from scriptural texts, notably in the south and the west and particularly for those of élite backgrounds. The author observes that "unlike the Hindu texts the Koran gave women significant inheritance rights, including in land, although these rights were still unequal to men's" (p. 98). However, in other than matrilineal Muslims, many Muslims of South Asia appear to have followed local customs of inheritance similar to those of the local patrilineal Hindu communities (among whom women's rights were highly restricted), which were at considerable variance with the Sharia.

But among traditionally matrilineal and bilateral communities in southwest and northeast India and Sri Lanka, women's property rights were "not the exception but the rule" (p. 99). Agarwal discusses extensively and in much detail the different types of such communities and their characteristics, such as the Garos of northeast India, the Khasis of northeast India, the Nayars, Tiyars, Muslim Moppilas, Phadiyas and Chettis of southwest India, the Nangudi Vellalars of Tamil Nadu, Jaffna Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, and matrilineal Moors.

Chapter 4 analyses how and why women's customary rights in land in matrilineal and bilateral communities were eroded due to exogenous forces over which women could exercise little direct control. Among other forces, "the large joint family estates came to be partitioned; formerly egalitarian tribal societies grew economically differentiated; there was an increasing penetration of market forces; there were notable shifts in the techniques of production, the social division of labour, and land relations; sexual mores altered; and patriarchal ideologies spread in influence" (p. 153). The author analyses the different complex set of factors to highlight these developments in each of the three communities: the Garos of northeast India, the Nayers of Kerala, and the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka.

Chapter 5 outlines how the existing inheritance laws on landed property evolved in South Asia, and identifies the persistent gender inequities therein. For Hindus, from the nineteenth century onwards, what essentially emerged was a crossbreed of classical Hindu law, customary law, and statutory law broadly termed as Anglo-Hindu law. For Muslims of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, property inheritance

able to retain the inherited land, control over its disposal and transfer (through sale, mortgage, bequest, or gift) and its use may still vest in varying degrees with men. As far as self-management is concerned, such cases are rare (except in tribal and hill communities of India and Nepal), both because of pressure from male relatives and women's social context.

Chapter 8 examines the marked geographic variations in the incidence and strength of factors which affect women's ability to claim and control land. The author hypothesises that we would expect less opposition to daughters inheriting land, claiming their shares in land, and retaining and self-managing them in communities where village endogamy, close-kin marriages, and close post-marital residence are the norm, where strictures on women's sexual behaviour and *purdah* norms are less strict, where rural female literacy and labour force participation rates are high and total fertility rates lower, where landlessness is high, and where the traditional matrilineal and bilateral communities exist. Using ethnographies and macro-surveys, the author constructs cross-regional maps and tables to classify regions into four zones in terms of the degree of difficulty, hostility, and opposition that women are likely to encounter in affirming their rights in land: Zone 1: Pakistan, northwest India, and Bangladesh; Zone 2: central, western and eastern India; Zone 3: Nepal and northeast India; and Zone 4: south India and Sri Lanka. Zone 1 is likely to provide the most hostile climate, and Zone 4 the least. The author highlights the strength of cultural commonalities over religious differences. Thus the patterns in Hindu northwest India are closer to those of Muslim Pakistan than to those of Hindus in Sri Lanka or South India.

However, an alternative classification could have given us five, rather than 4, zones, by splitting Zone 1 into two: northwest India as one, and Pakistan and Bangladesh as the other. This is because out of the nine or so variables that determine the difficulty of women's access to land, there are at least three which are more favourable in Pakistan and Bangladesh than in India. Thus village endogamy and close-kin marriages are permitted in these two countries, and marriage distances are not far. Moreover, "women's inheritance rights are endorsed by Islam and cannot in principle be denied by the orthodoxy" (p. 369). Perhaps this could have been listed as a separate factor. Although female seclusion practices are most strict in Pakistan, followed by Bangladesh and northwest India—in that order, this does not negate the advantages mentioned earlier. As Table 8.9 on cross-regional comparisons shows, Bangladesh and Pakistan perform about the same on all factors, while northwest India is different (better in some, worse in others). The latter is different from Bangladesh and Pakistan on the one hand, and from the rest of India on the other.

Chapter 9 argues that women's struggle for effective land rights needs, simultaneously, to be a struggle to change the existing ideological constructions of gender. It also examines how women have sought to resist gender inequities through

both covert individual action and overt collective action, the latter in the context of grassroots land-related movements. The author here emphasises that the struggle for change has to be simultaneously on the economic and ideological fronts: in her words, it involves a 'struggle over resources' and a 'struggle over meanings'. This struggle has to be conducted in several different arenas—the family, the community, and the state—and across the lines drawn by class, religion, and ethnicity. Even now, there are many, typically covert, ways in which rural women individually resist existing inequities in gender relations, as through passive non-compliance, sabotage, evasion, deception.

Chapter 10 discusses the issues that need particular attention from gender-progressive groups and individuals in the long and difficult struggle for realising women's land rights. These include reforming the inheritance laws and land reform-related legislation which are discriminatory to women. The issue of dowry versus inheritance is also discussed, and the author argues that the general condemnation of dowry has not gone hand in hand with a campaign to strengthen women's rights in inheritance, and that dowry is not, in most contexts, the most effective way of increasing women's bargaining power, and as such cannot substitute, even in the interim, for rights in inheritance. Recent developments include a forging of links between academia and activism, and an emerging recognition that the struggle for land rights involves interlinking diverse concerns such as bargaining with the state, increasing women's presence in public decision-making forums, and relating to diverse struggles as those against communalism, for democratic rights, and for environmentally sustainable, egalitarian, and politically participative development policies.

Agarwal's central argument is that women's struggle for their legitimate share in landed property is the single most critical entry point for women's empowerment in South Asia—in terms of the end result, the process, and the required scale of the struggle. The strategic importance and the transformative potential of this issue, and its significance for academics, policy-makers, reformers, and above all rural women themselves, cannot be over-emphasised. Yet, the present reviewer believes that it would be difficult for this issue to be a successful entry point at least in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and also perhaps in Northwest India. This scepticism stems from two sources: the difficulty of the struggle and "the long march ahead". The difficulty in the struggle for property rights, as well-emphasised by the author, is enormous. Such struggle is likely to meet opposition not only from kin but also from most institutions such as the male bureaucracy, the state, and the religious orthodoxy in some cases. Since effective land rights include ownership and control (including control over the decision-making institutions such as state bureaucracies, judicial and executive bodies), the struggle will be a prolonged one. This scenario is not one of entry point, rather of a very desirable, medium-to-long-run goal. As a contrast, credit may well be

the entry point, though not the long-term goal, as demonstrated by the examples of poverty-lending programmes like the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. Thus, getting property rights may be the desired end, and credit may be one of the means to that end.

Women's empowerment, or lack thereof, is a universal phenomenon. The causes of disempowerment are several and very complex; where it is not the lack of access to property, it is some other factor. It may be interesting to explore whether women were empowered through ownership and control of property in societies where they have a higher status.

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