

Bina Agarwal. *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2010. xxvi+496 pages (including 11 boxes, 12 figures, 94 tables). INR 625; Hardback South Asia; ISBN: 9780198068631. USD 120; Hardback; 9780199569687. GBP 25; Paperback; 9780199683024.

Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry

The forefather of political economy, Adam Smith, spent his life trying to understand and explain the laws that govern the production of wealth and shape the material progress of modern society. Well before the publication of his seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations*, he acknowledged that with progress and modernity came inequality. While many forget that governance and inequality are central themes of economics, Bina Agarwal is not one of them. Even as she engages the methods and debates of her field, she pushes its boundaries. For example, in *A Field of One's Own* (1994), she examines women's exclusion from private land ownership in South Asia, and focuses attention on the gendered nature of inequality. Her latest book, *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*, foregrounds women's roles in the use, management, and protection of communal forests in India and Nepal. She contends that "the gender perspective" is virtually absent from the green governance literature, and merits attention not only for women's equity and empowerment, but also for the greater common good.

In her introduction, Agarwal reminds us of the key issues that frame her study. Forests are important in the 21st century because they foster biodiversity, help mitigate climate change, and provide natural resources for economic development. Indeed, rural communities across the world depend on forests for their subsistence and livelihoods. However, communities—like forests—are not homogeneous but rather differentiated by class and gender, and different members relate to forests differently. These differences, especially those of gender, have important implications for how forests are governed. Yet according to Agarwal, discussions of common property management or collective action around forests pay scant attention to gendered interests—or when present are restricted to "questions of equity and women's limited participation."

Agarwal claims to venture into "uncharted territory", and to address the lacunae in the field she asks questions such as: What is the impact of women's presence and representation in forestry institutions? Do women make a difference to the decisions made in these institutions? If so, do these decisions make an appreciable difference to the conservation and management of forests? What is the "critical mass" of women needed to make this difference and to improve their socio-economic wellbeing?

Agarwal addresses these questions by mobilising a hefty set of data on community forestry institutions collected during her fieldwork in 94 villages in India and Nepal in 1998–1999, and through surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews conducted by the author and her research team in 135 community forestry institutions in 2000–2001. The bulk of the book is dedicated to the assessment of this primary data. The results empirically confirm what was formerly just a hunch—that women's presence in local institutions is important, "for improving both efficiency and equity, for enhancing both justice and welfare, as well as empowering women." (p. 28)

Agarwal's findings about women's role in community forestry institutions resonate with Danish economist Ester Boserup's (1973) seminal work on women's role in agricultural production. Drawing on existing economic data and her own field work, Boserup showed that women made a considerable contribution to agriculture, and argued that for reasons of economic efficiency, family welfare, and gender equity, it made sense to integrate women into the development process.¹ But Boserup's work is sadly absent from the book's bibliography, as is much of the recent critical literature on women, gender, and the environment. This is a pity because an engagement with this literature would have enhanced the book's conceptual argument and central claims. The author is correct in highlighting the importance of examining environmental concerns through a "gender lens," and the need to problematise the parameters of a "gendered analysis." However, her claims that such work has not been done will only be accepted by those unfamiliar with the tradition of critical feminist scholarship on the environment.² Indeed, many contributions to this scholarship have been informed by Agarwal's previous critique of ecofeminist positions—that women are not a unitary category, and that their knowledge of, and access to, natural resources is mediated by gender in conjunction with class position, ethnicity, caste, geographic location, age, and so on. Yet frequent generalisations about "South Asian women" appear in the current work. For example, Chapter Three (*From Absence to Negotiated Presence*) traces "...the history of South Asian women's absence in traditional institutions of governance... and the process through which they have sought to establish a presence in modern institutions of governance" (p. 56) in broad brush strokes.

Agarwal's earlier critiques also come to mind when the current volume utilises debates on gender representation in western political institutions to understand women's participation in community forestry institutions (p. 171), or

when it extends work on women members of parliament to understand rural women's collective actions related to green governance (p. 408). In neither case is there an adequate explanation of how insights on women's participation in particular historical, class, and institutional contexts are "creatively extended" to understand women's actions in other (quite different) class, caste, and geographical contexts. Furthermore, the two key terms of the book, "gender" and "green governance" receive little critical analytical attention, but rather are taken as givens. Indeed, the terms "gender" and "women" are used interchangeably throughout the book. This work's critical and theoretical contributions then are perhaps more specifically targeted at the disciplinary and methodological contexts of the author's field.

It would follow that the backbone of the book is Part II, which includes the extensive data set, detailed discussion of methods, and descriptive statistics outlining the complexity of whether women's participation makes a difference in managing community forests. In six chapters containing 13 appendices and 72 tables, Agarwal tests various hypotheses and explores the variables that might affect the impact of women's presence for effective governance. This part contains findings from interviews and participation observations, but its core is empirical and quantitative. Readers curious about non-discrete variables, the contradictions of social relations, and the specificity of particular conjunctures may find themselves skipping it. On the other hand, economists and policy makers may find much of use in this primary material.

The last part of Agarwal's book highlights the necessity of alliances with other civil society organisations, and the role of the state in enhancing poor women's participation in community forestry institutions and ensuring that their needs are met. It identifies many obstacles to women's effective participation in green governance—a long history of exclusion from the public sphere, limited influence in political decision-making, patriarchal norms, and misperceptions about women's capabilities, among others. Yet the author is optimistic that the growing number of pro-poor and gender-inclusive organisations and institutions in South Asia will lead to positive outcomes for green governance, and that women's empowerment will be a welcome by-product. Painted as it

is on a wide canvas, the book will contribute to the various fields that the author aims to engage—environmental studies, political economy, and gender analysis. But given the varying depth of its analyses, it will not do so equally.

NOTES

1. Boserup's work has many limits as much subsequent discussions of it have pointed out. But it remains an important referent for work on women, gender and development, and for feminist economics. It also laid the foundation for the "Women in Development" approach, which institutionalised discussions about third world women's roles within development.
2. See Hawkins and Ojeda (2011) for one recent review and discussion of this literature.

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Kiran Asher

Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA; and Forests and Livelihoods Portfolio, CIFOR, Bogor, Indonesia.
E-mail: kasher@clarku.edu

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