

Redefining Social Geography of Rajasthan

THINGNAM SANJEEV

Sprout: *A Social Geography of Rajasthan* is a fascinating study of how geography plays a pivotal role in shaping and reshaping of spatial and social formations. The book focuses on the constant struggle of different groups of people for appropriating space, the tussle between capital and labour in determining the social structures as well as practices and the relation between “the social and the spatial.”

The book is groundbreaking in terms of its presentation, the way it illuminates ideas and events with the clarity of a schoolbook. By using graphics, illustrations, pictorial maps and dialogues, it opens up a new way of approaching and understanding geography which ties up with Sunny’s claim of building on “the informal spaces of reading that should be available to the people” (in acknowledgement). The book is thus heavily driven and informed by a sense of social justice, and is indeed, a pioneering work of its kind on Rajasthan in particular, and geographical studies in India at large. Deviating from the general trend of geographical reading with its focus on the physical landscape, Sunny tries to show how the processes of production and distribution of a region determine the social formations.

Geographical Studies

The book could be contextualised against the backdrop of geographical studies of the 19th century with its emphasis on the man/milieu matrix. Two important approaches can be identified here—the German and the French school. The German school based their studies on landscape and human settlement and the various aspects of how they organised their environment and formed a cultural landscape. For instance, the knowledge of cultivation and domesticating animals and how they organised these resources are equated with the

Sprout: A Social Geography of Rajasthan

by Yemuna Sunny, 2014; Hoshangabad: Eklavya, pp 147, ₹255.

“civilised” groups, while the so-called “primitive” groups are largely dependent on hunting, gathering and fishing.

Geographical studies mostly dealt with social and cultural aspects of human distribution until social geography emerged as an area of research between the 1950s and the 1970s. Paul Vidal de la Blache’s emphasis on *genre de vie* (way of living) marked the shift from geography playing a deterministic role to how man and environment are in constant interaction. In such a framework the same environment might generate different avenues and meanings for different social groups. Later geographical studies tried to straddle both these approaches.

The book provides us a window to critically examine the various social challenges that retrograde and divide the people of Rajasthan. It argues that popular knowledge on geography is generally confined to “the encyclopedic form” and attempts to reinvent and reinterpret new perspectives on geography. By using social imagery to explain various modes of life of Rajasthani society, Sunny shows how geography becomes the site where human groups interact with nature to produce goods. It is the unequal nature of this interaction that has produced the social categories of class, caste and gender. She has captured local cultural perspectives through the references to oral traditions, ancient texts, folklores, plays, folksongs and food culture of Rajasthan. How the Rajasthanis as a community viewed their own geography and their responses to the changing spatial relationships have also been explained. The book constitutes a relentless interrogation into how the social geography of Rajasthani society has been governed by the caste system and

how it is this very system that has denied the underprivileged class/caste like Dalits free access to public spaces.

Social History through Cartography

The book navigates the gamut of social history of Rajasthan by using cartographic tools to explain several phenomena which constitute the physical as well as social realities of Rajasthani society. Starting with an inquiry on how people imagine Rajasthan with images inculcated through reading, listening, pictures and films, it introduces the characters Mala, Abdul and Mini to discuss and dismantle the various stereotypical images of Rajasthan such as that of Rajasthan being a land of desert with only camels for transportation, and so on. What emerges is a much more cohesive understanding of a place based on various processes of interaction across history.

The second and third chapters delve into how human society struggled with the environment and developed certain practices of mobility to maintain their livelihood. Since western Rajasthan is quite arid and hot in summer, people had to be constantly on the move for sustenance depending on the season. Thus, they developed the pastoral form of life. There are many traditional cattle- and sheep-rearers, who are divided into different social groups such as Rebaris, Raika and Maru Raikas. The handling and processing of resources is also divided on the basis of caste, like the tanning of leather is usually done by a particular caste, while another caste, Kharwal, looks after the making of salt.

The changing significance of land over the course of the modern period shows how the tribes have been systematically alienated from their land and resources for years. For instance, *orans*, patches of green land, which were traditionally worshipped as local deities, were converted into revenue forests in the postcolonial period and restrictions were imposed on the rights of the people living in these areas.

Shifting Alignments

A critical analysis on the interaction processes of the role of geography on class, caste, gender and state formations is

further worked out in the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters. Sunny briefly explains various stages of social formation and how geography influences human society in terms of landownership and creation of boundaries by certain groups. Spatial redistribution of tribal communities has been explored by bringing in the Marxian dialectical materialistic approach. The transformation of tribal society into a kingdom and gradually into a modern state has been explained through the production of surplus.

However, Sunny does not interrogate much on how and why the tribal communities were distributed in the hill and plain areas. An interesting reference from a different context is James Scott's study of South-east Asian state formation titled *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South-east Asia*, which argues that tribal communities in the region chose to stay away from state coercion in settling in the hills. Some tribal communities of Rajasthan like Sahariya community are settled in the plains and not in the hills, but Meenas have settled both in the hills and plains.

The demographic distribution of people is often determined and mediated by the processes of state expansion. During the colonial times, many tribes who resisted these expansions were branded as "criminal tribes." While many tribes were pushed out of their lands, there were some tribal groups which were subsumed under the Rajput fold. An inquiry into how such negotiations were worked out within the rigid social structure of Rajasthan, the nature and forms of such interactions, would constitute a fascinating study. The tribal rebellions of the 19th century have been the subject of many studies; however, we have not witnessed any popular social movement in the case of Rajasthan. Is it because of the lack of social cohesion or geography or the caste system which has prevented such kinds of movement to emerge?

The dry western region and the wet eastern region of Rajasthan are divided by the Aravalli range. In western Rajasthan where water is scarce, people are traditionally trained to tap this valuable resource by adopting different methods like digging small wells called *kui* and

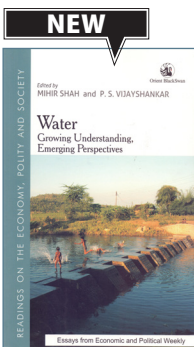
kund (bigger than *kui*). *Kuis* are built and maintained by *Chezaro* and *kunds* by another. The battle over the control and distribution of water has been a subject of contention. If the revenue-driven colonial state aggravated the problems of drought and famine, caste politics crept into the distribution of water thereby limiting its accessibility to the unprivileged caste/class. After independence several canals, dams and reservoirs were built to counter water scarcity problems. However, mega dams and development projects result in displacement issues which remain unaddressed.

Spatial distribution and display of power is visible in the numerous forts and palaces that Rajasthan is replete with. These structures and spaces, where power was concentrated and exercised, also serve as sites where social relations were mediated. Palaces like the *Hawa Mahal* were built from where the upper caste women could see events of everyday life in the streets. On many occasions, women from the lower caste, particularly *Rudaalis*, were invited to cry in public on the death of a family member. The palaces were the spaces where

Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives

Edited by

MIHIR SHAH AND P S VIJAYSHANKAR



Pp xiii + 559 | Rs 895
ISBN 978-81-250-6292-9
2016

For decades after independence, Indian planning ignored the need for sustainability and equity in water resource development and management. There was just one way forward, that of harnessing the bounty in our rivers and below the ground. It was only in the 1990s that serious questions began to be raised on our understanding and approach to rivers.

This collection of essays, all previously published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* between 1990 and 2014, reflects the multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary character of water and spans hydrogeology, sociology, economics, political science, geography, history, meteorology, statistics, public policy, energy and ecology.

The essays are arranged thematically and chronologically: Water Resource Development and Management, Historical Perspectives, Social and Political Dimensions, Economic Concerns, and Water Policy.

With detailing of the huge diversity of concerns and points of departure, *Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives* will be invaluable to students and scholars of sociology, economics, political science, geography, ecology and public policy.

Authors: Baba Amte • Suhas Paranjape • K J Joy • Jayesh Talati • Tushaar Shah • R Maria Saleth • Dinesh K Marothia • Marcus Moench • Navroz K Dubash • Rahul Ranade • P S Vijayshankar • Himanshu Kulkarni • Sunderrajan Krishnan • David Gilmartin • Margreet Zwartveen • Rohan D'Souza • David Hardiman • Niranjant Pant • Lyla Mehta • Anindita Sarkar • Deepa Joshi • Biksham Gujja • Vinod Goud • Shruti Vispute • Ramaswamy R Iyer • A Vaidyanathan • K Sivasubramaniyan • E Somanathan • R Ravindranath • Isha Ray • Sulochana Gadgil • Siddhartha Gadgil • Avinash Kishore • Shilp Verma • Aditi Mukherji • Partha Sarathi Banerjee • Mihir Shah

Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd

www.orientblackswan.com

Mumbai • Chennai • New Delhi • Kolkata • Bengaluru • Bhubaneswar • Ernakulam • Guwahati • Jaipur • Lucknow • Patna • Chandigarh • Hyderabad

Contact: info@orientblackswan.com

various forms of art were patronised by the ruling class. However, in the absence of royal patronage many of the traditional art forms are now patronised by the common people and this continues to reshape the social geography of Rajasthan.

Protests Through Songs

The author captures the voices of resistance through the bhajans of Mira Bai, the 16th century Bhakti poet. The author narrates how her songs are sung by marginalised communities as a form of protest against social inequality and the segregation based on caste, religion and gender. The *bhajniks* who are mostly women of Mewar working in the fields and brick-kilns have been singing Mira songs for years. The Manganiyars and the peasants are also known to use Mira bhajans to resist the Ranas. Mira Bai has thus been resurrected as a symbol of change and protest. In the author's words, "Mira's *bhajans* tell us of the tension created in society when two people come together, one of the privileged and another of the underprivileged" (p 97).

However, Mira also constitutes a site of contesting and contrasting claims and imagery. While comic and story books provide a predominant image of Mira as a lover of Krishna, the nationalist cause appropriated Mira as a symbol for organising women. These images were premised on sanitising Mira's subversive potential with no reference to her challenge and rejection of caste and social norms.

Socio-economic Landscape

Since Rajasthan is located in the trade route between the Arabian Sea and the Indo-Gangetic plains and Central Asia, it resulted in the emergence of new cities and the Baniya class. A pictorial map showing the development of all the major cities of Rajasthan in the book lucidly illustrates the land. The author explores how the intermediary role that the Baniyas or Marwaris had played as the moneylending class declined and was substituted by banks and cooperatives after India's independence.

The emergence of cities and the contours of their development are also

determined by their geography. She highlights how certain cities of the Thar Desert acquired peculiar characteristics of development. While the cities in the river valleys developed through agriculture, it was the reverse in the cities of the Thar desert like Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner. These cities thrive on the levies charged on the trade route and agricultural activities were developed later on. In the post-independence period, the cities were shaped by the strategic importance for defence and desert tourism.

Despite the geographical differences, the commonalities of language and shared cultural heritage can be seen in terms of stories, folklore and food habits. However, the book highlights how tensions are created from the complex interplay of geography and state, capital and caste, class, gender which remould the cohesiveness of the Rajasthanis. The coming of the new economy in the form of desert tourism, desertification, mining, construction of canals, building of roads, dams, is affecting the environment. These tensions have ramifications on both the physical and social landscape of Rajasthan society. The testing of the atom bomb in the Thar Desert in 1974 and 1998 is an example. Apart from this, social practices like female infanticide, sati, bonded labour, child marriages and child selling continue to beset the region.

Sunny has framed her analysis on the basis of materiality and the specificity of a particular region and allows us to introspect how the man/milieu interaction cannot be treated in an isolated manner, but it generally has a cascading effect both on the physical and the social relations of a particular region. Her book is not only an engaging, insightful study of social geography in Rajasthan but exhibits a disconcerted effort towards a redefinition of reading and knowledge, of the ways in which knowledge is distributed and consumed and of how it could transform social relations.

Thingnam Sanjeev (sanjeevthingnam@gmail.com) is Assistant Archivist in National Archives of India, New Delhi and his area of research is spatial history of North East frontier region of India.

MANOHAR

RECENT BOOKS

THE COMING OF CONSUMER SOCIETY

Kulwinder Kaur (ed.)
978-93-5098-130-6, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 200p., Rs. 895 (Hb)

SIKHS IN ASIA PACIFIC Travels among the Sikh Diaspora from Yangon to Kobe

Swarn Singh Kahlon
978-93-5098-120-7, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 352p., Rs. 1195 (Hb)

LITERARY AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN INDIA

Raziuddin Aquil and
David L. Curley (eds.)
978-93-5098-136-8, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 222p., Rs. 795 (Hb)

NOTES ON THE RACES, CASTES AND TRADES OF EASTERN BENGAL

James Wise
Edited with an Introduction by
Ananda Bhattacharyya
978-93-5098-118-4, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 542p., Rs. 1995 (Hb)

PATHWAYS TO NATIONALISM Social Transformation and Nationalist Consciousness in Colonial Tamil Nadu, 1858–1918

S. Ganeshram
978-93-5098-104-7, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 242p., Rs. 950 (Hb)

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN PUNJAB

A Contemporary Account
of Sikh *Sants*, *Babas*,
Gurus and *Satgurus*
Joginder Singh
978-93-5098-132-0, 2016,
Demy 8vo, 432p., Rs. 1495 (Hb)

THE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUPS IN INDIA Privileges and Predicaments

K.K. Misra (chief ed.)
Suresh Patil, A.V. Arakeri,
J. Sreenath, K. Ravi, et al. (eds.)
978-93-5098-106-1; 2016;
Royal 8vo, 772p., Rs. 1250 (Hb)

for our complete catalogue please write to us at:

MANOHAR PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS
4753/23, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-2
Phones: 23284848, 23289100; Fax: (011) 23265162
e-mail: sales@manoharbooks.com
Website: www.manoharbooks.com