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Societies, Social Inequalities and Marginalization: Marginal Regions in the 21st Century

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Societies, Social Inequalities and Marginalization: Marginal Regions in the 21st Century

Edited by Raghubir Chand, Etienne Nel, and Stanko Pelc. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017. xix + 311 pp. Hardcover: US\$ 139.99, £ 99.99, ISBN 978-3-319-50997-6. E-book: US\$ 109.00, £ 79.50, ISBN 978-3-319-50998-3.

Inequality is a major global challenge. While significant progress has been made in poverty reduction, with improvements in various development indicators, for the last several decades, the benefits of these developments have not been equally distributed. Paradoxically, the very processes of development further marginalize some places and people. It is in this context that this edited book sets out to explore the concepts of marginalization and marginality and to build an analysis through an empirical examination of its manifestation and causes in different parts of the world, drawing particularly on mountainous areas of South Asia. Organized in 18 chapters, the book brings together thematically diverse empirical studies on the livelihoods of people living in marginal mountainous regions of South Asia and beyond. It is unfortunate that there are no chapters on marginal areas in Nepal, given that there has been some interesting discussion on margins, marginality, and marginalization in Nepal (Blaikie et al. 1980; Gellner et al. 1997; Shneiderman 2013).

Speaking from the perspective of the Himalayan regions, the authoritative writing on marginal areas in South Asia is mostly written by “Northern” scholars or those based at Northern institutions. In a recent article, Liechty (2018) provides an intriguing account of how the

Western writings constructed a particular imagination of the Himalayan region marked by mystical alterity. The present volume offers several essays written by “Southern” scholars based at institutions in peripheries of South Asia. Given the number of chapters and the diversity of topics tackled in the book, it would be an injustice to try to summarize the individual chapters in this review. Instead, it is more useful to focus on the overall conceptual discussion and pick up on some of the interesting issues that emerge in different chapters.

Chapter 2, by Pelc, offers an overview of the concepts of marginalization and marginality. It presents a brief discussion of the words “marginal” and “marginalization” and then goes on to summarize various meanings of marginalization offered by different schools of thought. Pelc concludes the chapter by saying that marginality is very complex and hard to define. Accordingly, we are left with very little understanding of what marginality and marginalization actually mean. At the outset, it would have been useful to get a more thorough conceptual discussion on the very meaning of margins, which is always in reference to the center or mainstream. Marginalization, or the process of making of margins (and the core or mainstream), is a political and historical process and could have been discussed as such. It would have been useful to see a more comprehensive conceptual discussion on marginality, drawing on existing social theory and engaging with related concepts such as border, borderland, core/periphery, and social exclusion, among others. Such a discussion of margins, marginalization, and marginality would necessarily have included an analysis of the process by which margins are produced in relation to the core or mainstream. As it stands, the political-economic framework needed to contextualize the lives of people discussed in this volume is absent.

Part I contains 5 chapters that are framed within the theme of poverty, social inequalities, and marginalization. These empirical chapters offer useful insights into the marginality of the selected regions. They describe the situation of people living in marginal regions, but it is unfortunate that we do not learn much about the marginalization of these places and people: How did these people and places become marginal in the first place? Part II contains 7 chapters that offer insightful discussion on the themes of indigenous communities, identity, livelihoods, and biodiversity. These chapters focus on livelihoods of specific ethnic groups living in marginal areas. It would have been interesting to expand these chapters analytically to include state–society relations. Two chapters in Part III deal with the question of migration. Outmigration is a major feature of livelihoods in marginal areas of South Asia, particularly in the mountainous regions. Migration processes may be a key feature of marginalization and/or an adaptive response to it. The dynamics of migration remind us that marginal areas are not sedentary and isolated from the forces of globalization but play a key part in it. Despite rich potential, the chapters do not delve into what migration means in the context of marginalization. Part IV, titled “Policies and Strategies,” has two chapters that deal with the potential of tourism and cash crops for the economic development of marginal populations in these marginal places.

Overall, the empirical chapters offer important insights. However, they are descriptive and do not delve into analysis. A much more explicit link between the concepts of margins, marginality, and marginalization and the empirical chapters would have made the book more coherent. It would have been good to see a more systematic gendered analysis: The rich possibilities offered by Chapter 4 (on women in Uttarakhand) and 5 (on women tea garden workers in

Darjeeling) for discussing women's position remain unexplored. It would also have been more productive to see a discussion of the relations between indigenous populations and the state. Likewise, the discussion of migration could have been organized within a broader analytical frame.

Given that many of the chapters are based in the mountain region of South Asia, it would also have been useful if this volume had built on the specificities of mountains, drawing on the work of Jodha (1990). Jodha outlines six specificities, of which "the first four, namely, inaccessibility, fragility, marginality, and diversity or heterogeneity, may be called first order specificities. Natural suitability, or 'niche' for some activities/products, for which mountains have comparative advantages over the plains, and 'human adaptation mechanisms' in mountain habitats are two second order specificities" (Jodha 1990: 2). Jodha makes these distinctions because the latter specificities are responses or

adaptations to the first order specificities. These six specificities appear very much applicable to all empirical chapters in this edited volume. Recognition of the latter two specificities discussed by Jodha offers a useful framework for policy response. Despite the challenges, the specificities of marginal areas offer a political and economic space for bringing about positive changes in these areas.

To conclude, it is useful to think of margins, marginalization, and marginality in the context of presence and absence of conflict, violence, and resistance. Often, longstanding grievances in marginal areas crystallize and are expressed through violent and nonviolent resistance, and we have seen a number of examples both within and beyond South Asia. The scholarly debates and discussion on ethnicity, politics, and violent conflict in Nepal, as well as state-society relations in the margins of the Himalayan states, offer a productive space for further exploring issues raised in this volume.

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