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Gender in the Himalaya: Cultural Politics of Gendered Identity, Place, and Positionality

Kim Berry
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The entire Himalayan region is marked by a gendered history of work, mobility, migration, and movement. This special issue of *HIMALAYA* seeks to further the analyses of gendered relations and subjectivities as they unfold in the Himalayas today. Titled “Cultural Politics of Gendered Identity, Place and Positionality,” the suite of six original research articles brings together feminist scholars who have long-term research relations with communities in the Himalayan region. This scholarly collection foregrounds an understanding of gender that lies at the intersection of locally salient axes of difference and contested terrains of meaning and practice. We draw broadly on the framework of ‘regional modernities’ developed by Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal (2003), and invoke the complex, dynamic relationships among regional cultures and political

economies with national and transnational discourses and practices. Through this conceptual lens, the collection of papers explores how colonial and nationalist gendered discourses articulate post-coloniality in the Himalayas and how they are configured through the projects of development, feminism, regional autonomy, and neo-liberalism more broadly. Of additional concern to several of the authors in this volume are the politics of knowledge production, including the ethics of transnational feminist scholarship, and the politics of positionality in research and representation.

Himalayan Feminisms: A Brief Overview

It is generative to think of the Himalayas as a *frontier*. Consider the region's long history of trans-local connections through trade networks, labor migration, and episodes of conquest and resistance. According to Anna Tsing, a *frontier* is not a place, project, indigenous category, but rather an enactment of "nonlinear leaps and skirmishes that come together to create their own intensification and proliferation" (2005: 33). It is a shifting terrain constituted by local and trans-local forces and actors that shape everyday practices. This framework allows us to examine the multi-scalar dimensions of regional modernity, as well as to examine the gendered relations and subjectivities that are constitutive of the cultural politics that make and remake the Himalayas.

Since the eighties, and especially with the worldwide popularity of social movements such as Chipko which included a prominent presence of women, there has been an effort to engage the question of gender and gendered livelihoods in the Himalayas. In a critical response to essentialist and functionalist readings of women's participation in environmental campaigns, development projects, and social movements, a rich body of work has emerged over the last two decades that attends to the complex ways gender operates at the intersection of material and symbolic realms (see Shiva 1988). This literature has increasingly drawn attention to the ways gender intersects with ethnicity, kin position, caste, religion, age, and other salient markers of difference within locales (see Uttara 1994; Mawdsley 2000; Gururani 2000, 2002; Chatterjee 2001; Rankin 2001, 2003; Berry 2003; Klenk 2004; Nightingale 2011). Especially, with critical analyses of development projects and discourses that have shaped the social geography of the Himalayas since the mid-twentieth century, several authors have engaged with the cultural politics of development, empowerment, and participation from a gendered perspective (see Pigg 1992; Rankin 2001, 2003; Berry 2003; Ahearn 2004; Klenk 2004).

Along with critical evaluation of development, a rich and growing body of work has engaged with the political economy and colonial history of environmental politics. In the emerging field of feminist political ecology, many feminist scholars have focused on forests and forestry and contributed a gendered perspective to discussions of ecological knowledge, subject formation, access to resources, livelihoods, and governmentality (see Agarwal 1994; Rangan 1996; Nightingale 1999; Gururani 2000, 2002; Linkenbach 2007). In the domains of water and irrigation too, several contributions have taken seriously the intersections of caste, gender, and class in resource

politics (Baker 2007). Much of this work analyzes a politics of gendered exclusion that has resulted from the overlay of development discourses on state-led resource management endeavors (see Adhikari 2001; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2002; Buchy and Subba 2003). An equally important body of scholarship has attended to the colonial and postcolonial politics of gendered labour relations as they have played out on tea-plantations (Chatterjee 2001; Besky 2008). More recently, in light of the political upheaval and massive transformations in Nepal, several scholarly interventions have analyzed political change through gendered lenses (see Gautam et al 2001; Tamang 2002; Shneiderman 2003, 2009; Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004; Aguirre and Pietropaoli 2008).

Furthermore, some of the most reflective works on feminist methodology and the politics of positionality have emerged from work on Himalayan women's songs, stories and life histories. For example, Narayan and Sood (1997), partnering on folktales within the foothills of the Indian Himalayas, and March (2002), working within the Nepal Himalayas, reflect on the politics of knowledge production within structured inequalities. This work embraces the possibilities (and not simply the limitations) of partial perspectives, ultimately claiming space for the significance of dialogue across differences. Their work thus demonstrates the possibilities of understanding, empathy, and long-lasting relationships that are meaningful but also simultaneously asymmetrical, revealing both "shared humanity" as well as "unexpected differences" (March 2002: 2).

Narayan and Sood's and March's critical reflections on methodology are part of the prominent feminist interventions in the last few decades of social science scholarship which attend to the positionality of the researcher in shaping the contours of knowledge. Emerging from intense debates and discussions among feminist scholars in the eighties and nineties, there has been a shift in feminist scholarship to pay special attention to the practice of research and the politics of knowledge-making. This line of inquiry and critique has been particularly influential in the disciplines of anthropology and cultural geography in which feminists such as Abu-Lughod (1990), Chatterjee (2001), Gold and Raheja (1994), Hanson and Pratt (1995), Kobayashi (1994), Massey (1994), McDowell (1992, 1999), Nagar (2002), Narayan (1993), Strathern (1987), Visweswaran (1994), and Wolf (1990) among others have not only interrogated established research methodologies but also put forth frameworks for feminist research and ethnography. By drawing attention to the explicit and implicit inequalities of power between

the researcher and the researched, feminist ethnographers have advocated for collaborative, participatory, and dialogic research processes that acknowledge and negotiate the power differential.

In drawing from this influential body of feminist work in the Himalayas, the scholars whose work is highlighted in this special issue reflect on their own research and further the discussion on gendered subjectivities, political mobilization, and activism. Below we discuss the articles in the context of three interconnected themes: development as discourses, practices, and imaginative spaces; the co-constitution of gendered subjectivities and new spaces for political mobilization; and feminist methodologies.

Development Imaginaries

All of the articles in this special issue relate to development, not only as sets of practices and institutions, but also as sites of imagination and discursive terrain. In her article on the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) in Kathmandu, Coralynn Davis charts the history of discourses shaping 'women's development' over the decades: from a focus on women's domestic roles as mothers and wives, to the integration of women into 'mainstream' development programs, and finally to 'women's empowerment,' the latter concept being overdetermined by neoliberal logics of income generation and entrepreneurship. Davis also highlights a discursive focus on cultural preservation within Nepal, particularly of Newar architecture in Kathmandu Valley, as integral to projects of promoting tourism. About the JWDC she writes, "It is no wonder, then, that a project bent on empowering women, generating income through tourist market activity and preserving cultural material and practice excited the imaginations of primary and secondary development aid institutions, not to mention international tourists."

Davis's primary focus is the contested meaning of sisterhood as it operates within the space of the JWDC. While within western discourses of feminism, sisterhood has been a prime signifier of solidarity among women (often minimizing or negating differences through romanticized use of this term), Davis argues that 'sister' for Maithil women more readily signifies separation, hierarchy, and jealousy. Drawing on cultural meanings of sisterly relations rooted in kinship practices, language, storytelling, and everyday speech acts, Davis explores JWDC workers' strategic use of the multiple meanings and registers of a variety of words for 'sister' to negotiate hierarchical differences and conflict of interest: between foreign tourists who purchased the paintings and the craftswomen who produced them; between women

workers and managers of different communities, ages and levels of formal education and literacy; between Nepali women and the US women they closely engaged with—both the founding director of JWDC and Davis herself. Davis argues that, "For the women producers at JWDC, using the term 'sister' provides access to a world of status and privileged connection that is part of the very stuff of development, locally articulated." The same signifiers are used by local women to negotiate ambiguous relations of trust, dependency, intimacy, hierarchy, and difference in such a way that their tactical movements and subtle critique do not put at risk those important social ties.

Similarly calling attention to the concept of development as a meaning making practice, Radhika Johari refers to 'developmentalizing' as "an active and open-ended process of becoming" to highlight "competing imaginaries that shape and texture varied forms of practice." She interrogates development flows within District Kangra of Himachal Pradesh (India), attending to the transnational discourses and histories of project funding which emerge out of and give shape to development imaginaries: cold war anti-communism; national sovereignty through food security; watershed management and livelihood strategies to promote environmental and social well-being; and women's empowerment. Tracing the history of the Changar project in District Kangra, funded through a bilateral agreement between the German Agency for Technical Cooperation and the state government of Himachal Pradesh, Johari argues that local activists and groups interact with transnational imaginaries, contributing to the flow of meanings and shaping institutional spaces and practices. Ultimately, she states: "'developmentalizing' is an inherently creative process that generates a multiplicity of forms, perspectives and approaches; some of which offer potential for social and political empowerment at the grassroots."

While other authors in this special issue do not focus on development as a primary theme, it reverberates throughout each article. Katharine Rankin and Andrea Nightingale highlight the relationship between imaginaries of development and political mobilization. In an analysis of the political transition in Nepal, they interrogate one of the key tropes of contemporary development discourse, what they refer to as the "desire called civil society." They simultaneously critique the absence of attention to economic inequalities underlying this faith in the transformative power of civil society while also highlighting the hegemonic forms of inequality within this arena. They argue that studies on political transition in Nepal must "move beyond the prevailing preoccupation

with inclusion of named marginalized groups in formal modes of political representation. Instead, more attention must be paid to the ways in which social inequality and injustice is institutionalized in everyday life.” They further argue that the household is a key site for the analysis of the reproduction and normalization of inequalities, and that radical projects of political transformation will have to interrogate entrenched inequalities within the household as well as beyond it.

Shubhra Gururani similarly explores the political mobilization and re-imagining of place in her analysis of the successful struggle for the establishment of the autonomous hill state of Uttarakhand in northern India. She refuses the dominant narrative of Uttarakhand as a ‘remote’ place and instead argues that it “came to be constituted at the nexus of global capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and developmentalism.” Gururani traces the gendered histories of labor, forests, and liquor in this region, framing landscape as dynamic and co-constituting space, place and identity. In this nuanced discussion of emplaced identities, she argues that the continued marginalization of the Uttarakhand region under the state of Uttar Pradesh led to demands for separate statehood. Central to this complex and contradictory movement (sparked as it was by opposition to reservation of government jobs for members of OBCs, or other backward castes) was a discourse of regional disparities and demands for progress, both of which were embedded firmly in the tropes of ‘development’ and modernity.

Rebecca Klenk, also writing about Uttarakhand, analyzes the life of Sarala Devi and her establishment of Lakshmi Ashram in the Kumaon Hills. In this nuanced reading of the life of an exceptional Himalayan woman, Klenk provides us with a transnational story of the creation of this Gandhian institution of and for development alongside a narrative of an individual’s struggles to craft her identity. Klenk traces the possibilities, contradictions and limitations of British born Sarala Devi’s twenty years of work, following in the footsteps of Gandhi, and forwarding a curriculum to craft Indian subjects capable of realizing a vision of village self-sufficiency and simplicity.

Finally, Kim Berry analyzes the emergence of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, a social movement of single women in Himachal Pradesh, highlighting the ways in which the single women’s movement is a response to both feminist activism and development discourses and practices. Heteronormativity, and its implicit assumption that women are or will be married to men, structures both of these discursive and material realms, rendering those women who live outside of marriage as non-normative

subjects whose issues and needs are literally on the margins of development policies and practices. The single women’s movement has carved out a space for single women to craft lives of dignity and security, not as supplemental wage earners but as heads of household demanding full rights of citizenship and access to the development programs and projects of the state.

Gendered Subjectivities and New Spaces for Political Mobilization

Articles in this special issue directly challenge naturalizing discourses of gender, and as Gururani articulates, address gender as “a performative and relational process; a historically constituted and culturally contingent set of relations which are configured by overlapping relations of patriarchy, economy, family, community, and state.” Refusing a simplistic analysis reliant on either romanticized ideas of women’s essential role as protector of the environment, or conservative ideas of women’s inherent position as housewives and keepers of tradition, Gururani argues for a gendered analysis of the struggle for the autonomous hill state of Uttarakhand. She situates women’s mobilization in this movement around issues of “livelihood, household, rights, political/regional identity, equity, and social justice,” tracing the intertwining of transformative and conservative politics within this new vision of self and place.

Klenk also traces the layered meanings of gender and nation through which Sarala Devi crafted her own identity and the institution of the Lakshmi Ashram. She analyzes Sarala Devi’s “shifting subjectivity in the context of her transnational position as she negotiated colonial, modernist, feminist, and Gandhian discourses on nation and womanhood in her mission to ‘uplift’ Himalayan women.” In addition, through her establishment and shepherding of Lakshmi Ashram, Klenk argues that Sarala Devi sought to “reconfigure Himalayan womanhood” and to craft new gendered subjectivities inspired by “Gandhi’s vision of an alternative modernity rooted in village self-reliance.” Klenk demonstrates that Sarala Devi’s modernizing project, both linked to and distinct from Fabian modernizing projects, used tools of discipline through time management, simple self-presentation, rejection of the English language, and immersion in an anti-consumerist agrarian lifestyle, to craft new gendered subjects and subjectivities within Lakshmi Ashram.

Berry’s research on the single women’s movement also focuses on projects of recrafting womanhood, in this case from the margins of patriarchal relations reproduced within marriage. By focusing on the new subject position

of single women, Berry argues that as women disidentify with abject subject positions of widow, abandoned, divorced, and never-married women, and embrace a positive identification with the subject position *ekal nari* (single woman), they produce a new gendered subjectivity. Berry's attention to the production of collective identity within the emerging social movement of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (Association of Empowered Single Women) enables her to argue that "as *ekal nari* is deployed within the context of a new social movement, it becomes a new subject position into which persons are called forth, resulting in both liberatory as well as disciplinary possibilities." By examining leaders' and members' actions within and reflections on the movement, Berry describes the ways in which this movement offers "members with new discourses for imagining themselves, and new opportunities for crafting lives beyond the limitations of heteropatriarchal scripts of womanhood."

Feminist Methodologies

While all contributors in this special issues are deeply committed to feminist research and have adopted feminist methodologies and analyses, Nightingale and Rankin's and Johari's papers engage explicitly with some of the challenges and possibilities of conducting collaborative research in the field. By carefully describing the highly embedded and intimate nature of field-based research, Nightingale and Rankin as well as Johari offer important insights into the fragile nature of collaboration and participation and suggest how we might develop strategies to engage with the challenges in pursuit of a more democratic and genuinely collaborative research.

Drawing on over two decades of research and fieldwork in Nepal, Nightingale and Rankin joined hands to design a collaborative research project to explore the unfolding landscape of democracy in Nepal after the restoration of peace in 2006. Their article offers a candid reflection of their effort to conduct this team-based and collaborative research project. Even though both scholars have extensively engaged with and written on questions of gender, livelihood, markets, and adopted feminist approaches in their research, in the current project on 'politics,' attention to issues of gender was not so explicit. Instead, amidst much anticipation and excitement over the political transition, Nightingale and Rankin chose to focus "on the formation of political subjectivities and the performance of democracy." Drawing on their previous works, they identified spaces of socio-economic exchange and environmental governance as sites where the contours of citizenship and belonging are contested and established, and through ethnography, set out to explore

the institutional terrain of local governance by specifically tracking how everyday practices of authority, claim, regulation, and expertise are constituted and reconstituted in the context of neoliberal development and the Maoist mobilization.

In documenting an ethnography of the political at different scales, Nightingale and Rankin boldly put together a rather large team including Nepal-based researchers, students, research assistants, and involved other scholars, discovering that even though "feminist commitments to the practice of research were always implicit in our approach to conducting fieldwork, we were surprised by how important they became while *doing* the work." Through the project, they found themselves once again rethinking the boundaries of what constitutes the field and returning to the realization that the space of the household remained a critical site of political deliberation and change. More importantly, it was the constant interaction and discussion amongst the 'interpretive community' of the diverse set of researchers which not only made clear the relevance of feminist approaches to fieldwork, but also their multi-scalar understanding of politics and of the political transformation.

Along similar lines, Radhika Johari reflects on her fieldwork in Kangra in Himachal Pradesh and interrogates the challenges and possibilities of conducting collaborative research. Acknowledging not only the aspects of mutuality and sharing that constitute collaborative research, Johari draws attention to the thornier side of collaboration that may come to thwart or even stop research. Identifying moments of tension and disagreement among collaborators, her article uses Anna Tsing's generative concept of 'friction' as a critical component of collaboration. She argues that instead of viewing disagreement and differences as unproductive, such frictions can serve a "valuable methodological frame for exploring tensions that arise within feminist research and collaborative venues." Situating her discussion in the context of changing development regimes over the last five decades in Himachal, Johari makes a strong case for conducting 'location work' in the field, a feminist praxis that takes into account researchers' mobility across places, sites, institutions and self-reflexively identifies and acknowledges the differentials of power that inform such mobility. For her, such location work is an "open ended journey of methodological becoming," which is critical for feminist collaborative work.

By drawing on her long-term field experience and engagements with local activists, NGOs, and researchers, Johari positions herself and her research network in

the context of the developmentalizing of Himachal and identifies a moment of 'betrayal' that took place in the field. Yet, the betrayal produced unexpected collaborations and propelled the formation of a vibrant initiative focusing on *dalit* women, which may or may not have taken shape without this moment of 'betrayal' having come to pass. More significantly, some of the tensions and a sense of betrayal in collaboration over time resulted in centering and integrating the question of gender and caste into proposed projects of empowerment. In this sense, Johari's article is a relevant reflection on the politics of research that highlights the need for openness to thinking with, and not against, friction as a potential opening in reconfiguring the terrain of research and knowledge production.

Conclusion

In bringing together this collection of papers, it has been our goal to engage with the vibrant field of feminist scholarship and animate the discussion of local feminisms and feminist ethnography in the Himalayas. In considering the Himalayas as a frontier that is constituted by a range of context-specific forces as well as historically and politically positioned actors, the papers engage with the Himalayan region but are at once attentive to trans-local forces that configure gendered relations of work, mobility, mobilization, development, and activism. By drawing on their sustained engagement with specific field sites and participation with various local and non-local interlocutors, the contributors offer a grounded assessment of the ways that feminist readings of everyday practices can illuminate cultural politics of difference, inequality, and exclusion.

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