

Book Review

Erik de Maaker and Meenal Tula (Eds.), *Unequal Land Relations in North East India: Custom, Gender and the Market*, Guwahati: NESRC, 2020.

Reviewed by Bankerlang Kharmylliem

In *Unequal Land Relations in North East India: Custom, Gender and the Market*, editors Erik de Maaker and Meenal Tula presents a collection that provides insight into land issues of the tribal communities of the Northeastern states of India. The book, through its six chapters, explores land questions that are very unique to the tribal populace.

Land is a central theme for tribal ethnic peoples in North East India. It has been a driving force for culture, governance and politics. Increasing population has accelerated concerns related to land, more so in the rural areas. This volume critically analyses a number of issues at the fore related to land. The book reminds us of the giants of colonial rule and the modern state respectively being the past and present agents of undesirable land developments.

In the introductory chapter the editors framed a number of topics like the customary, gender and the rural monetisation and their association with land. According to the authors, land complications became more pronounced and severe ‘when the region became incorporated in the colonial state, from the early 19th century.’ As a scarce asset, land creates problems of inclusion, exclusion, power, ethnic movements besides others. This chapter sets a finer context for a better understanding of the chapters that follow.

The chapter *Swept Away? Responses to Shifts in Land and Livelihood Patterns in North East India* starts off by highlighting that laws and policies of the government has caused a shift in land ownership and land utilisation, from the community to private hands, which is destructive to livelihoods. Such circumstances are

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unsustainable for the interest of land. The chapter traverses many states of the region to get a clearer perception of causes for land alienation. Land alienation has given rise to other complications like conflict, landlessness and further commodification of land. Besides the state, uneven development is seen as another major cause for land alienation.

In *Women, Property, and Angami Naga Customary Law*, Vizokhole Ltu's many narratives gives an expressive and a somewhat historical understanding of how Angami women have been silent victims of male-centric customary laws pertaining directly and indirectly to land. Land has been a determinant of how such laws have been interpreted and even hardening existing beliefs and traditions. Ltu enumerated how women are disregarded through inheritance laws. She draws from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence where discrimination against women is natural and normal. From performing chores in the kitchen to the inability to fully participate in the local political arena, Angami Naga women have long been sidelined.

Kanki Hazarika's contribution cements the known fact about gender discrimination in land rights. The author examines the plight of Bodo women. The strict adherence and faithful following of customary laws in the Bodo community affects the status of Bodo women. Like the Angamis of Nagaland, Bodo women cannot inherit landed property. The conditions and treatments of Bodo women are rooted in culture. Lack of land rights means smaller potentiality of empowerment in many aspects.

Jagritee Ghosh examines the land ownership patterns of the Konyaks which has resulted in agricultural changes. A major change is the shift to plantation-based commercial crops which has impacted gender relations. She pinpoints that land is fast becoming a commodity and also the changes in land use and patterns of ownership. Land is a resource that is central to livelihood and identity. The leasing of land to local elites is proof of rampant poverty.

In the last chapter, *Fixing Mobile Populations: Changing Identities*, the author goes back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries to understand the connection between the nomadic nature of the Kukis and the recent developments in surrounding the issue of land. The nomadic habits of the Kukis were an inconvenience which ultimately led to the establishment of fixed village boundaries. This caused the breaking up of the Kuki communities. Expressions given to the Kukis such as "unruly tribes", "vagabond communities" and "blood-thirsty" gives an interesting inference of the past and also an interesting read. This paper draws a great deal from Robert Boileau Pemberton's work on the mobility of the Kukis (Kookies). The paper also examines the attitude of the British towards the practice of *jhum* cultivation.

This volume has drawn from extensive research portraying the complexities associated with land as a symbol and a commodity. All of the varied narratives' findings and the very nature of land in the many parts of the North East points to the dominant presence of many cultural groups which was and is manifested in many forms of behaviours, values and identities. All these act as drivers of resistance to change as well as the desire for change. The question of land issues still remains a colossal challenge to governance from the lowest to the highest levels. The book also illustrates that land challenges and solution are complex, more so because of the tussle between the

traditional and the modern.

There is a considerable amount drawn from historical research in this collection of papers. If only the book had more chapters divulging land knowledge from the other states. Nevertheless, this volume will be of interest to scholars interested in understanding the present changing nature of land use, land rights and land development. Since 'competition with respect to access, utilisation and ownership of land is likely to further increase', this volume of mostly case studies will assist future research in the larger domain of land and other fields.

The book tells us that land issues, which will be problems of the future, will require complicated investigation for solutions. Though the book provides no complete solutions, it provides an in-depth analysis of deep-seated grassroots land concerns. Moreover, with increasing landlessness, the concern of understanding land and its position in ushering a sustainable development for the region becomes more pertinent. Also, understanding land in part or as part of the whole system will never cease to be relevant in academia, or otherwise.