

Narrating Love and Violence: Women Contesting Caste, Tribe, and State in Lahaul, India

by Himika Bhattacharya. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017, 205 pp., ISBN 978-0-8135-8953-4.

Reviewed by Nilamber Chhetri

In this book, Himika Bhattacharya discusses the experiences of women living in the region of Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh. Using multiple sources such as storytelling, autobiography, poetry etc, the book documents oral narratives about love, sexuality and the violence committed against women in the region. It uses ethnographic co-performance as a method to open up new possibilities for exploring the troubled lifeworld of these women within the polyandrous society of Lahaul. The book documents the voices of Adivasi Dalit women living at the intersection of caste and tribe in the region.¹ Taking into account women's narratives around gendered violence perpetuated by a host of actors, the book offers fresh insights into women's lifeworlds in Lahaul. Drawing inspiration from Dalit feminism, the book weaves a complex yet compelling narrative that goes beyond the standard victim-agent framework. Using co-performance and dialogic exchange as her method, the author unearths subjective worldviews of women to document their quotidian experiences of discrimination.

Within the space of six chapters, the book provides deep insights into the vulnerabilities of women in the region. It discusses the discursive tropes that represent women as both agents of the modern democratic state as well as victims of tribal cultural practices. According to

1 According to the District Census Handbook of 2011, the Schedule Caste (SC) population in Lahaul consisted of 1,699 persons, of which 853 were males and 846 females. The total Scheduled Tribe population consisted of 15,163 persons, of which 7,501 were males and 7,662 females (p. 31). Though this concerns a relatively small number of people, this data is significant with regard to Bhattacharya's emphasis on the shifting contours of 'caste' and 'tribe' and the politics involved in their usage as constitutional categories. The usage of terms such as 'tribal' hence did not consider them Dalits' and the demands of local leaders to be granted dual status (both as SC and ST) highlight the complex intersection of categories in Lahaul (Bhattacharya: 44–47).

Bhattacharya, the government's official designation of the district as a 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) zone increases the vulnerability of Dalit women, who are bereft of protective laws such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act, which are not applicable in Scheduled areas.² The uniqueness of this setting paves the way for a fascinating investigation of the working of a caste system within the tribal community and of the multiple hierarchies operating in the region. In noting these aspects, the book unearths the meaning Lahaulis attribute to the social categories of tribe, caste and gender. Drawing on stories about rape and suicide, the book eloquently presents the narratives of honour and dishonour that circulate within the intervening space of tribe and state. It recounts compelling stories that depict how the tribal political rhetoric of glory and honour subjugates women, stripping them of their agency.

The overlapping boundaries of caste and regional identities are graphically documented throughout the book. Through the voice of women protagonists, this work succinctly captures the anguish women in Lahaul suffer. Interestingly, it discusses the practice of forced marriage and the trauma and social stigma faced by women who dare to defy these cultural practices. According to Bhattacharya, love is the cardinal theme through which women weave their stories. It reaffirms the self-worth of the narrator and registers her challenge to the caste-based discrimination in the region. Love thus acts as the medium through which women choose to narrate their stories in the midst of violence and discrimination. According to Bhattacharya, this refashioning of love transforms it from an ordinary fact of life into a radical political tool that is relayed to challenge the hegemonic constructions of society. This rendition suggests an epistemic shift from the individual to a community-centred conception of love.

Using women's ruminations about love and marriage within a polyandrous setting, the book portrays another idea of love that positions the self within the community. Bhattacharya counterpoises these conceptions to statist views, which regard polyandry and other

2 The wholesale labelling of Lahaul as a Scheduled Area in administrative parlance has negated the internal working of caste in the region, creating a 'bubble' in which social hierarchies and statuses are played out exclusive of official apparatuses. The Swangla community, for example, considers itself Brahmin, but its location in the region places it in the ST fold in all dealings with the state.

customary practices as immoral acts. Such a view reflects a deep-seated casteist and patriarchal discourse, wherein women are represented as promiscuous and unruly beings who cannot be protected by the state against any impending violence (p. 49). According to the author, systematic erasure of indigenous practices is conspicuous in the official discourse, which promotes monogamous unions and in turn reinforces sexual and caste domination (p. 101).

The book provides a gripping analysis of the patriarchal moorings of the state and the tribal community in producing women as unreliable subjects. This is demonstrated by a discussion about the relevance of memory to the violent death of a woman in the official and public discourse. The story of Bina (pp. 107–115), who commits suicide due to her failed marriage with a violent husband, forcibly illustrates this. The book examines the official documents surrounding her death, which transform her death from murder to suicide and finally to an accident. However, by going beyond the official, juridical narrative about her death, Bhattacharya offers a succinct analysis of the memory of the event embodied in the collective memory, which is common knowledge but never openly spoken about. Comparing these divergent death-related narratives, the book documents the shifting contours of memory reinforced by normative codes of gender and sexuality that are perpetuated by both the state and the tribe at large.

Weaving multiple stories and life experiences, the book sets out to recover women's memories that have been suppressed in Lahuali society. Bhattacharya argues that memories of caste violence are not chronologically patterned but are loosely woven upon multiple nodes of experiences, which produces an alternative mode of knowledge. The book emphasises the processual aspect of memory, noting the intersectional marginality of the women of Lahaul who navigate within structures of tribe and caste. The author argues that memories are intentionally recollected by the women to combat the deliberate forgetfulness of their public representatives, be it the state or tribal leaders (p. 141). By documenting the counter-narratives embedded in women's lived experiences, the book attempts to outline the role of remembering, which aims to transform vulnerabilities into acts of resistance.

The book effectively documents the anguish, the pain and the remorse that the women endure in their everyday lives. These are not just

qualms and complaints: lurking within these narratives are experiences of love that have been reconfigured as forms of resistance against systemic domination. Bhattacharya offers a fascinating account of the contestations and collusion of the oppositional patriarchies of state and tribe in reinforcing marginalities and perpetuating gendered violence in the region. This compels us to rethink the categories of tribe and caste through the lens of gendered violence and invites us to accompany these women in their everyday struggles. With its astute handling of the subject matter, deep ethnographic insights and unflinching commitment towards a gender-just society, the book is likely to stir the interest of academics and activists alike. It will be of immense value for scholars of gender studies and for those exploring the contested nature of social identities and categories in South Asia.

Reference

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