The Daughters on the Earth can be located in a broad framework of definite ideologies and social arrangements that largely negotiate power and treatment of women in cultures. The cultural valuation of womanhood stems from the matrix of ideas at the root of women’s work, role attributes and potentiality. It is when religious and social ideologies marginalise women and exclude them from power structures and positions of control.

Against this backdrop, this book raises fundamental questions such as, ‘how did it come about that peasant women who are known to have initiated agriculture, and continue to be actively involved in agricultural production, remain so marginalised in the ownership and control of land?’ and, ‘in this sense do all women constitute a class vis-à-vis men or should women be seen as an integral and constituent element of castes and classes and thus differentially placed with regard to access to land?’ (p.15). These questions can be answered meaningfully in conjunction with another one, that is, how does marginalisation work in other spheres of life and existence? Thirty women belonging to Chamar, Musahar and Kol communities in the Naugarh region of Chandauli near Varanasi have a pragmatic answer. They uphold that a little over about five bighas of land (i.e. about five-eighth of an acre), which would pass on to daughter or son whoever supports them in old age, would go a long way in liberating them from dependence on men.

The book, divided into six neat chapters overlaid by an introduction, explores the issue of women and land from historical, anthropological and socio-legal perspectives. Derived from what is referred to as ‘participatory research’ in Banda and Varanasi, and from insights into colonial Awadh, the author takes a position that the basis to gender equality in the
context of land and production is the problem of landlessness. She argues that unless the issue of landlessness is addressed squarely, the gender equality in other domains will not hold water.

The author contends that ‘for women, lack of power in public domain is compounded in the private sphere as they experience powerlessness within households, exercising little control over their own earnings, autonomy in decision relating to household expenditure or the sale of agricultural produce’ (p. 12). Juxtaposing the voice of Chamar, Musahar and Kol women with the author’s contention leads to a complex equation between economic independence and social empowerment. The relationship between the two variables is neither direct nor inverse but dependent on several other factors of which the elements of social organisation, beliefs, and customary laws are, to mention, only few. To propound that women’s right over land will solely bring social security and empowerment in their lives may be farfetched in many situations.

The focus of this work is on the historical processes whereby women’s accessibility to land and productive resources is diminished. It largely explores three such processes: the shift from community to private ownership of land; the growth of agriculture and the stratification in society as also rising devaluation of women’s labour; and the Sanskritisation and upward mobility in the rungs of casteist society. Processes such as these affirm and re-affirm gendered imbalance in production accruing from and control of land resources. What comes out most clearly is the near inseparability of women’s disengagement from the ownership of land and the devaluation of their labour and work on it.

The author sums up the work by reiterating what the work seeks to demonstrate that, first, to know the peasant world it is important to know how peasant women relate to land, and this relationship varies according to caste and class of women; second, women’s authority over land and the rights to own it are the key to their position in society; third, historical processes have worked in keeping women away from meaningful rights over land; fourth, empowering rural women is crucial to ensure them secured access to productive resources; and fifth, the focus of enquiry into women’s right to land has to be shifted away from the individual to collective ownership (p. 171). The major findings of the study suggest that women demand joint ownership of land with men and, importantly, seek to strengthen control over gram sabha land in villages collectively. They seem to have realised the power of collective initiatives in achieving empowerment in patriarchal societies.

In another context, the relationship between women and land is encrusted in the dialectics between nature and gender. It provides a distinctive framework and sets the agenda for cultural ideology and
separatist tendencies in management of gender in cultures. The other
terrain is that of myths and beliefs that legitimises the position of women
in society articulated through specific symbols, rituals, poetry, and songs.
There is, surely, some mention of these in the book, though scanty and
scattered. In fact, the author sensitively draws attention to the conceptual
difference between land and earth, and between owning a land and
belonging to it. One awaits intense and in-depth implication of such fine
distinction in the lives and worldview of people – both men and women.
The main title of the book does raise hope in this regard.

There is no denying that this finely produced book delves deeply
not only into the historical processes as mentioned earlier but also into
the exploitative systems supported by the state. What sets it apart from
other works on similar themes is the constructive approach that goes
beyond bemoaning the secondary status of women and their greater
liabilities in comparison with men to touch upon options and alternatives
available to them.

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