



---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Environment, Knowledge and Gender: Local Development in India's  
Tharkand by Sarah Jewitt

Review by: Gunnel Cederlöf

Source: *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (2004), pp. 138-140

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Swedish Society for Anthropology  
and Geography

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3554297>

Accessed: 31-03-2021 19:34 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography, Taylor & Francis, Ltd. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*

Indeed, as Andreas Faludi is probably the best-informed observer of the ESDP process, a slim volume of some 224 pages necessarily denies us access to a significant amount of his knowledge and insights on this topic, be it for reasons of academic clarity or otherwise.

Nevertheless, the history of the conception and birth of the ESDP and the European discourse that surrounded it – with all its mysteries – becomes much more concrete and thus understandable in the authors' sure hands. That the book is well written facilitates our better understanding of rather complex relations, and in parts it feels like reading a detective novel rather than an academic publication.

This leads us to the question of the target audience of this book. The book is written in an accessible style, thus permitting even the layperson, in ESDP terms, to enjoy it. The authors identify three target groups: those immediately involved in the ESDP process, professionals engaged in the application of the ESDP, and students entering the field of planning. Bearing in mind however that the authors are well known in the field of academia, one may wonder why the research community itself

was not identified as a target group. Admittedly, many researchers might read the book with a certain degree of scepticism given the low-key analytical and theoretical approach adopted by the authors, though of course this is a reflection not of the authors' well-documented ability, but rather of the basic design of the book.

Serving the target audience identified by the authors, the book concentrates on providing an informative approach, and on providing loads of background information, most of which is likely to be new to most planners and researchers. Therefore I concur fully with the sentiments raised in the title of the last chapter "the show must go on". I do so, not only because the ESDP is such a nice gimmick for keeping European planners occupied, but also for the sake of more worthwhile reading and well-written books by Andreas Faludi and Bas Waterhout.

*Kai Böhme*

*Nordregio, the Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Stockholm, Sweden*

**Environment, Knowledge and Gender: Local Development in India's Jharkand.** Sarah Jewitt, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002. (ISBN 0-7546-1654-1)

Over the years, researchers across different disciplines and research fields have interacted in their concerns for the environment and the environmental impact of development interventions by nation states, companies and international organisations. The social sciences and the humanities, notably anthropology, geography, sociology and political science, have integrated their thinking with the experiences of ecological studies and generated works, which have fed into the debates on the environment. Soon, attention focused on the historical trajectories, which had produced the critical situations that were observed in the research works, and environmental history developed as a multidisciplinary field that hosted much more than the classical, historical research into nature, environments and landscapes.

Still a young discipline in South Asia, environmental history developed in the 1980s with Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods, Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Western*

*Himalaya*, (Oxford University Press, 1989) as a first monograph. Political ecology gained a new momentum in the 1990s where work focusing on Europe and North America inspired studies linking politics, social change and development with urgent questions of the environment. The field has been much developed theoretically by, for example, Arturo Escobar in 'After nature' (*Current Anthropology*, 1999). Gender research within agrarian studies highlighting women's right in land made deeper explorations in such monographs as Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own* (Oxford University Press, 1994), opening up new fields to explore. Sarah Jewitt has usefully brought experiences from these different research fields into correspondence with development research in her book *Environment, Knowledge and Gender*, focusing on the vast forest tracts in east India.

In a critical evaluation of populist and eco-feminist analyses, supported by in-depth fieldwork in the Indian state of Jharkand, Sarah Jewitt explores the reach and validity of this perspective or discourse in local realities. There is a general concern among eco-feminists, radical populists and anti-development theorists that Western technologies are inappropriate, and work to displace people and al-

iate them from their traditional environments and skills, while having destructive impacts on the environment. Such technologies should be replaced by appropriate indigenous alternatives. Eco-feminists, like Vandana Shiva, employ a gender dimension to these critical debates and argue for the exclusive capacity of women, in particular poor women in the Third World, to manage and develop nature in an eco-friendly and sustainable way. However, these perspectives are now being increasingly criticised. Likewise, arguments that favour traditional knowledge systems for being 'uncontaminated' by Western scientific knowledge systems, are being attacked from within the same scientific research fields. Critics, such as Bina Agarwal accuse this line of thought of giving a romantic representation of women in socially and economically vulnerable situations and for validating traditional knowledge systems and techniques against the tide, i.e. against the impact of industrialisation on marginal areas. Jewitt sides with the critics. While acknowledging that populist and eco-feminist ideas have attracted attention to the socio-economic and environmental problems created by top-down, male-dominated development projects and to their often inherent neo-colonial and orientalist presuppositions, she questions the critics' capacity to formulate viable alternatives. In spite of their focus on local realities and bottom-up approaches, Jewitt argues that such 'populist eco-feminism' works to conceal the repressive social and gender structures even among women. Quoting Agarwal, Jewitt agrees that it 'has tended to obscure ... the political economy of factors underlying women's subordination, nature's degradation, and their interlinks' (p. 48). Gender is, further, seen as only one of several factors influencing knowledge possession. Class, caste, socio-cultural norms, age and individual circumstances act equally to structure access to environmental skills.

Jewitt's argument is also critical of some of the ideas aired in early studies in environmental history, for example, those held by Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil in the early 1980s. Guha and Gadgil were of the view that a major historical change appeared as the colonial forces encroached on Indian forest areas in the early nineteenth century. This watershed separated a historical period of environmental balance where forest populations used the resources in an eco-friendly and sustainable way, from a period of excessive and exhaustive resource exploitation. Such perspectives have since then given way to more nuanced analyses, and

Jewitt prefers to speak of the encroachment of 'Mughal and British colonialism' into Indian forests. Jewitt's argument also resembles the position of, for example, the anthropologist Tim Ingold, who emphasises the role of the place – the actual geographical and socio-cultural environment – for people whose livelihood and lifeworlds depend on an immediate knowledge of the ecology. Such place-based peoples have, one could say, place-based knowledge. However, once the environment is dramatically changed, for example, by extensive management practices in combination with substantial immigration or by displacement, people have also been alienated from their skills. Rather than assuming a gender-biological division of knowledge, Jewitt suggests that socially structuring relations as, for example, gender divisions of labour and cultural restrictions on women's mobility, can equally determine the environmental knowledge that women may possess, since such conditions structure the extent to which women are in contact with environmental resources.

Jewitt aims to investigate the practical value of the eco-feminist radical alternative forms of development for actual, development problems and to assess them against 'mainstream' development-policies. Two villages in one of India's newest states, the densely forested state of Jharkand, have been selected to represent a predominantly tribal, or *adivasi*, population in a fairly underdeveloped region where politics in support of the movement for a separate Jharkand state was important. The region achieved statehood status only during the time of fieldwork. This selection facilitated enquiries into the interaction between technically and socio-culturally derived knowledges and of the influence of the Jharkand movement on local perceptions of environmental issues. The study shows interesting results that to a large extent reflect the different situations of the two villages and the heterogeneity of the Jharkand region at large. One village, Jamtoli, turned out to fit rather well the descriptions of people by Guha and others. The people showed a unity, were ethnically homogenous, and co-operated in and maintained local, democratic and informal socio-political institutions. The other village, Ambatoli, resembling many other villages in the region, was ethnically heterogeneous, lacked village unity and had a marked inequality in land distribution and wealth. Jewitt concludes that the populist models often underestimate such difficulties while exaggerating the disadvantages of modern farming techniques. Thereby, 'it seems to work best as a springboard for local invest-

tigation into gender–environment relations rather than as a representation of reality’ (p. 190).

However, Jewitt claims, there is an important political–ecology dimension in places such as Jharkand, where knowledge systems are far more than technical solutions to limiting farming conditions. For the Jharkand movement, the support of traditional or *adivasi* customs, which local authorities refused to respect, became a matter of self-esteem and self-determination. The popular critics of simple modern technology–transfers have thereby contributed to more participatory approaches and highlighted the increasing loss of biodiversity, as well as the psychological impact of such transfers when indigenous belief systems are violated. At the same time, the solution is not to return to simpler living conditions. Using an example from Jharkand, Jewitt supports a combined indigenous and modern agro-ecological knowledge and resource management. Simply phrased, people ‘adopt new techniques because they believe that it is worthwhile for them to do so.’

In her investigation of forest use and the successes and failures of joint forest management (JFM) initiatives in the study area, Jewitt pushes further for the need for studies of local histories and complex realities. The accomplishment of JFM, she argues, is dependent of detailed local knowledge as well as of the capacity of the Forest Departments to meet the needs for income-generating alternatives

in poor regions. Hence, she criticises the populist alternatives for suggesting bottom-up approaches as an alternative to the top-down development policies of modern technologies, since the populist alternatives only replace insensitive technology transfers by yet another theoretical frame, only this time ‘naive’ and romantic. The image of an ‘original affluent society’ or the ‘peasant moral economy’ is particularly dangerous, argues Jewitt, as this may compel people to remain in unsustainable livelihoods.

*Environment, Knowledge and Gender* is a strong argument against not only eco-feminism but against all analyses that tend to romanticise ‘tribal’ people in the forests as noble and eco-friendly, gender-balanced savages. Likewise, it is a critique of large-scale solutions of environmental problems which remain insensitive to local complexities, be they modern-developmental or populist eco-feminist. Through the polemic frame of her argument, Jewitt may exaggerate the actual influence of populist alternatives in development projects. By and large, the ideas of Western-led modernisation remain in most development projects. However, the book is an important contribution to debates on local development in resource-poor forest regions.

*Gunnel Cederlöf*  
*Uppsala University, Sweden*

**The New Countryside. Geographic Perspectives on Rural Change.** Kenneth B. Beesley, Hugh Millward, Brian Ilbery and Lisa Harrington. Brandon University (Rural Development Institute) and Saint Mary’s University, 2003. 490 pp. (ISBN 1-895397-75-8).

Rural areas are in transition throughout the developed world. In many areas the role of the agrarian landscape is changing, and the emphasis on production of food and fibre has to give way to demands for biodiversity, cultural heritage and recreational space. At the same time, the socio-economic differences between urban and rural areas are fading, as the countryside is getting more and more shaped by urban influence. Thus, though *agricultural geography* is shrinking because of the ever-decreasing importance of agriculture in Western societies, *rural geography* is thriving as a result of new phenomena and new structures invoked by the

transition. This book stems from an international symposium on “The new countryside”, held in Halifax, Canada, in 1999. It contains thirty contributions written by rural geographers from the USA, Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. By the smorgasbord of themes, theoretical approaches and methods offered in the publication, the vitality in rural geography is indeed clearly shown. The editors’ argument for the somewhat wide spectrum is that cross-fertilization will stimulate broader perspectives. They do, however, also sketch a common framework, showing three dimensions of rural change: *milieux*, *spatial viewpoints* and *processes of change*.

The book presents new features in rural areas in transition, new features and relations, giving an updated picture of the countryside, or, more correctly, of a variety of countrysides. The contributions are structured into five sections: Issues, opportunities and production; Reorienting production and serv-