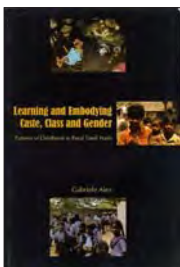


India



Gabriele Alex, *Learning and Embodying Caste, Class and Gender: Patterns of Childhood in Rural Tamil Nadu*

Chennai, India: National Folklore Support Centre, 2009. ix + 207 pages, appendix, glossary. Paperback, US\$15.00/Rs. 400 (India); ISBN 978-93-80431-01-7.

LEARNING and Embodying Caste, Class and Gender is a short but solid ethnographic monograph about caste, class, and gender inflections in regard to childhood in three geographically proximate and socially intersecting communities in the state

of Tamil Nadu in southern India. As with all good ethnographies, this one is richly descriptive, with analysis woven throughout and moments of important theoretical deliberation. One of the book's most significant interventions is a methodological one: the author both argues for, and gives serious attention to, children as cultural actors "who themselves actively experience, interpret and shape notions of gender, caste, kinship and education" (x). The author views childhood as a "contested field, highly loaded with moral values" (ix) and differentiated, in the south Indian context, on the basis of caste, gender, and class. By means of this methodological shift, the author is able to shed new light on the functions of childhood rituals, the inculcation of gender norms, kinship, and cross-caste relations, and also the interplay of work, schooling, and class status in this part of the world.

The book is a revision of the author's PhD thesis from Brunel University (West London, England), the fieldwork for which was carried out across a total of sixteen months in the period from 1998 to 2003 in an area in the "agricultural heartland" of Tamil Nadu. Subsequent to the PhD, the author collected additional field data. Her fieldwork techniques included participant observation (sometimes involving videotaping), structured and unstructured interviews and focus groups, compiling maps, and census taking. In the book, the author examines the themes of childhood and adolescence through a comparison of practices and values in three communities within the same area (consisting of two villages and the low-caste settlement or "colony" between them). The three communities consist of the Vagri, a recently settled low-caste group whose traditional means of subsistence involves hunting and petty trade; the Mutturājā, a low-caste group of previously landless agricultural laborers; and the Kaḷḷar, the regionally dominant caste whose wealth traditionally derives from landowning.

The introductory chapter is a straightforward layout of her methodology and research setting, and also presents a literature review regarding caste and childhood in South Asian and anthropological studies. The extent of the literature review, while appropriate for the format of a doctoral thesis, strikes one as overdone for a book, particularly as much of this work (for example, on child raising practices and adult personality traits) is not referenced later in the book, and that which is (or could be) is adequately explicated at those later moments. The general goal in reviewing this literature is to establish that "childhood is always determined by historical and cultural constraints, and that childhood as a category is socially constructed" (22).

In chapter 2, the author describes the history and current configuration of the human geography of the villages and colony in question, including the uses of "private" and "public" space and the differentiations of identity demarcated by and through it. Here she also outlines the cultural, economic, and religious distinctions among the three communities. Chapter 3, then, hones in on the everyday use—including games, play, and other leisure pursuits—of space by children in the three communities. To get at children's own spatial perceptions, the author asked them to draw and describe their streets and villages. The drawings, included in an appendix, help bring the children's socio-spatial frameworks to life for the reader. Further, the drawings illustrate the spatial extent and cultural salience of the children's knowledge of their surroundings.

In chapter 4, the author narrows the focus to those rituals in each of the three communities that concern pregnancy, birth, and puberty. She indicates that while other South Asian scholars have employed a mother-centered, or alliance-functional approach to birth rituals, her alternative approach views the child as the main protagonist of the rituals, which establishes the child as a social (and cosmological) persona. Such rituals, she demonstrates, have an effect on other relationships (especially that between the child and mother's brother) as well. Charts provided by the author offer summaries of the various rituals in the three communities, allowing for easy comparison. Individual cases bring to life and particularize the author's ethnographic assertions.

Chapter 5 investigates how children come to locate themselves within the kinship relations of their communities. In this chapter, the author argues that kinship should be seen as a lifelong process beginning in childhood, and she notes that children are a critical part of kinship politics among adults. One of the author's aims in this chapter is to demonstrate how, as the world of education, work, and caste have changed in the region and middle class values have become ascendant, "children have now become the vehicles for upward mobility" (99), particularly in those communities whose kin networks serve as resources for access to better schooling and more lucrative jobs. The author also shows how attention to female discourses shift the view of Tamil (and more generally Dravidian) kinship, thereby bringing into relief the critical importance of the relationship between the child and mother's brother. Again in this chapter, the author productively uses the kinship practices of each of the three communities to shed light on the other two and employs the description of individual cases to illustrate her points. Notably, the author includes cases of children without kin, adults without children, single parents, and orphans to show how the kinship system does and does not stretch to enfold "exceptions" into its structures. Data are also presented showing that children's close relationships with other children are mostly with kin.

Next follows a relatively short chapter, chapter 6, on gender, romance, and sexuality. Here the author begins by arguing the already well-established point that gender is a sociocultural construction and that childhood entails a process of engendering, one aspect of which is the increasingly divergent expectations for boys and girls as they grow older in regard to mobility, retention of earnings, and responsibility for domestic and subsistence labor. The second point she makes is a more original one that is well substantiated through her own ethnographic cases, namely that the gendering of children and adults is different, sometimes even opposing. One case in point is heterosexual romantic, flirtatious (but nonsexual) relations among adolescents, which—in contrast to normative marriage—take place in the public sphere, may openly occur across class and caste, and are, of course, self-chosen. The author also presents some useful information on extramarital affairs and the practice of intercaste heterosexual relations that have a coercive component and which constitute an expression of the confluence of caste and gender privilege and oppression.

In chapter 7, the author examines how new economic and professional opportunities associated with "modernity," and dependent on and shaped through public

and private schooling, reconfigure but also in some cases reinforce caste, class, and gender relations and identities. The author points out that the official anti-caste stance taken by the government in schooling plays out more problematically in practice. She demonstrates that the already existing advantages of the Kaḷḷar are harnessed by them to take further advantage of the new educational and career opportunities available. At the same time, the Kaḷḷar are able in some instances to exclude others from such opportunities, simultaneously blaming them for their “failure” through accusations of “backwardness” (a process that rings familiar here in the United States). The Vagra are the most excluded from these opportunities (while their children have more access to income-generating work). The low caste Mutturājā lie somewhere in the middle on this count. In this chapter, the author might have extended further than she did the argument that neo-liberal government policies designed to eliminate (and in part successful at attenuating) caste privilege are simultaneously having the effect of extending class disparities. The author seems to let the “well meaning” politicians who create such policies a bit too easily off the hook. Further, in this last substantive chapter, the author lightly engages with but misses the opportunity to deeply examine the strikingly *gendered* implications of the dynamics of schooling, work, caste, and culture (about which a significant literature exists). On a lesser note, one also wishes to know more about the reportedly common practice of suicide among males in the area, which is mentioned in passing in chapters 5 and 6. The author does, however, make a forceful argument about the differentially mixed consequences of (anti-) child labor policies across the communities in question. Chapter 7 is followed by a succinct and clear summary of the book’s main findings.

The editing of *Learning and Embodying Caste, Class and Gender*, which was published by the National Folklore Support Centre in Chennai (2009), might have been tighter. In addition to a smattering of typos and missing quotation marks, as well as indentation around direct quotes in a few of the cases presented, more glaring errors are evident in the misplacement of figures in chapter 5 and the repetition of others in chapter 7. Further, the quantity of substantive footnotes throughout the book seems excessive. Some of the information in these footnotes might have been placed in the text itself. Also, it is sometimes confusing that on certain subjects the author explicitly compares the three communities, while on others she does not. These primarily editorial concerns, however, do not detract from the fact that, with very few exceptions, the author’s prose is clear, well-organized and blissfully free, except where essential, of jargon. Indeed, her text—appropriate for advanced anthropology undergraduate students and specialists alike—makes a fine ethnographic addition to the global sociocultural study of childhood and kinship, and to the study of community intercaste relations in South Asia.

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