

Gender equations

The book shows how women get a raw deal in practically every department

OVER the past twenty years, successive debates in the history of feminism in India have revealed that there are as many differences as similarities among women, whether the topic is infant mortality, development, economic opportunity, legal status or political participation. It has also become a truism now to say that not all peasant women, Muslim women — so on and so forth, share same femininity, social role or politics. But recent history of feminism has also shown not the impossibility of establishing such an agenda. The platforms and policy recommendations offered in the name of 'women' were produced by intense negotiations. It is this political process that identifies 'women'; they do not exist as identical natural beings outside it. It is within such a calling that *Status of Rural Women in Karnataka* claims to have been attempted.

The book is a compilation of studies that were carried out through questionnaires administered to about 1,171 women and 1,103 men between August 1994 and July 1997 in six regionally representative districts of Karnataka — Chitradurga, Kolar, Bijapur, Raichur, Dakshina Kannada and Kodagu. The study was conducted with an overall objective to assess the impact of social, economic and political policies and programmes in Karnataka in securing women their constitutionally guaranteed rights and to advocate such policies, programmes and other interventions which will raise the status of women and ensure gender justice.

The study draws a distinction between "condition" of women and "imposition" of women. By condition they refer to the material state in which women live — low wages, poor nutrition, lack of access to health care, education, training etc. Position includes the social, legal and political status of women as compared to men. Most development interventions are focused on the former — on improving the living conditions of existence. Notwithstanding the significant gains of the past two decades in terms of government employment, legislative correction and the contributions made by women's groups, NGO's and research centres, there is a significant need for intervention in altering the structures of subordination and inequality. Institutionalised forms of discrimination has meant lack of access to and control over resources, a coercive division of labour, devaluation of their work, lack of control over their self, skills, labour, mobility and sexuality, time and fertility. Their powerlessness is expressed in male violence against women, sexual exploitation that erodes all human dignity and a very acute experience of vulnerability.

This is the point of departure away from the 'typical' ways of dividing the women of the country into sectors — education, legal political etc., before analysing the situation of women vis-a-vis men. Although such studies, we are told, include the parameters of the incidence and prevalence of violence against women, divisions into sectors systematically ignores certain structural locations that women's lives are embedded in



STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN IN KARNATAKA

By Srilatha Batliwala, B K Anitha,
Anitha Gurumurthy and Chandana Wali
Bangalore: National Institute of
Advanced Studies, 1999, pp 341

specific historical locations.

As indices of gender equality, the terms 'access' and 'control' are used to capture women's autonomy and status. Access refers to tangible and human resources but control is located in the context of shared power and thus is more complex than that of the former. Control over resources is the bargaining power to define or determine the use of that resource. A case in point is women's right to determine whether and whom she

eracy rates are low and so on. If this is the situation in areas concerning 'access', areas of control don't seem to fare better either. In terms of control over reproduction and birth control, status of women appears very low. Data collected also seems to suggest that while women's awareness of the injustices within the family is high, they are caught in a vicious circle where there is little social sanction. The self-perception of women in regard to their status, equality and rights are also taken into con-

Discrimination against women has meant lack of access to and control over resources, a coercive division of labour, devaluation of their work, lack of control over their self, skills, labour, mobility, time, sexuality and fertility

will marry, and whether, and when, and how many children she will have.

Certain key aspects over which women's access and control may be assessed are identified. Among other things these parameters include, women's access to food, health, asset ownership; income and occupational status; their labour, marriage; reproduction and sexuality; physical mobility and physical security, access to education, credit, and other public resources; their political participation; access to law and justice. Thus, substantiated through hard facts the book shows that practically in every department that is listed above women seem to be getting a poor deal. The portion of food allotted in the context of a household is rather poor. The total investment on the health of women is very low. Female lit-

sideration in making a case for gender equality.

Further, the book aims to analyse the intersecting and multiple ways in which access to and control over resources, mediated through social institutions and structures, affects gender relations. In short, the purpose is to generate a more holistic picture of the inter-linked dimensions of status across the various indicators.

Although ambitious amounts of statistics and data have been collected in an attempt to reconstruct the moral and material conditions of women vis-a-vis men, the study fails to produce an ethnography that is conceptually innovative.

Sudha Sitaraman