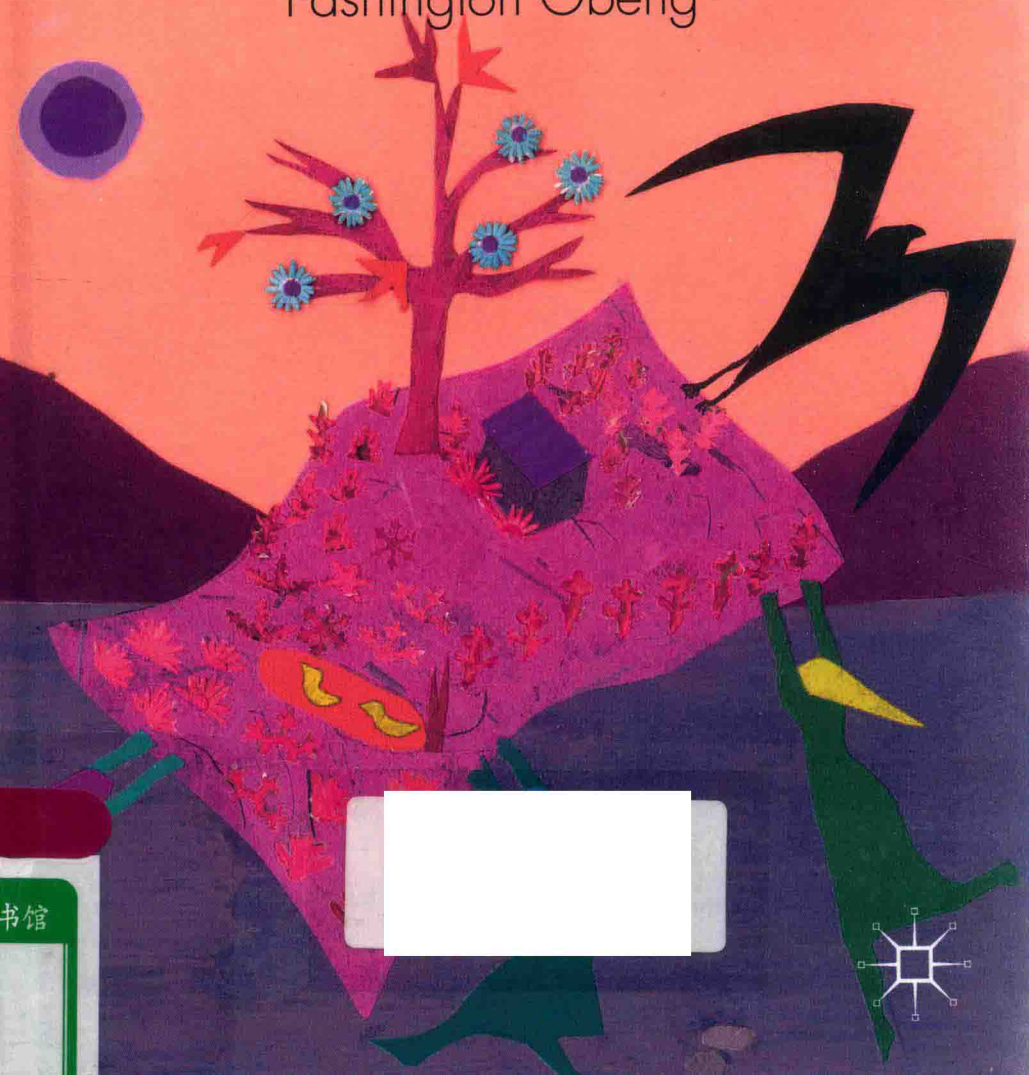


GENDER, DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

RURAL WOMEN'S POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

UNDERSTANDING *SHAKTI*

Pashington Obeng



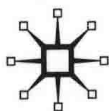
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Understanding *Shakti*

Pashington Obeng

Associate Professor, Wellesley College, MA, United States

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Rural Women's Power in South Asia

Gender, Development and Social Change

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Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained

Pashington Obeng

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Understanding *Shakti*

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For Amelle Naana Amma Obeng

Preface

As we drove from Trojillo to Santa Fe in Honduras on 15 July 2007, our Garifuna companion Stefan Vasques, on seeing a group of elderly women sitting under a tree, said, "There sit the ancestors, the *agubidas*." Garifunas are also called Black Caribs who live in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in Central America. Later, I learned that elderly women are sometimes called ancestors among the Garifuna communities of Honduras. On arriving in Santa Fe, we saw some children playing on the streets. Suddenly Stefan alerted my cousin Tete and me to how the children ran away from where they were playing because they had seen their grandmothers. The grandmothers expected the children to be at home and not playing outside. This incident made me appreciate Kerns' (1997) analysis of Belizean elderly women and their status and influence among the Garifuna of Belize. Kerns addresses how marginalized women are able to shape their personal and collective realities in the face of racism, patriarchy, and ageism. It is not only in Belize that apparently marginalized women create strategies to advance themselves despite the odds.

For instance, Gopal Siddi, African Indian and a 63-year-old widow in Chipgeri, was the lead ritual woman when she was possessed by her late husband's spirit to perform *puja* (religious rite) four months after her husband's death in a community of about a hundred people on 19 June 2009. Though a widow in a socially and economically depressed area of Karnataka, India, she used the occasion of a feast to honor her late husband's memory to deploy sacred capital to perform a ritual that benefited her household, community, and those who attended the feast. Besides the practical aspect of feeding people who were part of the feast, Gopal took on the role of a ritual specialist as she blessed all those who were present. She played a role that only a widowed senior woman could perform.

Janubai Gauri Kokre is a 38-year-old Gowli, an OBC (Other Backward Class, Category 1) woman from Jogeshwarhalla in North Karnataka. She is a social worker who uses a motorcycle to visit, empower, and convey battered women to police stations and hospitals. Though a rural Indian woman of the Gowli group, her newly gained power as a social worker in Karnataka enables her to perform roles that were not open to her, her peers, and her parents about 15 to 20 years ago. Gowlis are traditionally cow herders and milk sellers in parts of North Karnataka. Today as a result of the support of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that trained her to become a social worker and bought a motorcycle for her, Janubai's sphere of influence has enlarged beyond her traditional profession and "domestic" duties.

The incident in Santa Fe, Honduras; insights from Kerns' (1997) findings on Belizean women and Cliggett's (2005) work in Zambia; and insights from Batliwala (1996), Basu (1998), Kabeer (1999), and Subramaniam (2006) on social power in South Asia inspired me to raise questions that pushed me to examine rural women's power (that I term *shakti*) and influence in South Asia.

Not all women wield equal social and political *shakti* in their communities. Further, though through widowhood, divorce, senior women's status is perceived as disadvantaged, there are times when some women create or use resources to actualize themselves. Thus, there are rural women who do not simply reproduce their marginality as thoughtless, dispirited, and helpless people, but find ways of constructively using their disadvantage to advance themselves.

There is a growing body of literature on women, yet there is no critical study of the details of the cultural and historical contexts in which rural young and senior women exercise varying degrees of power and influence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. International and national policies in transnational discourses tend to reflect how the most vulnerable such as women are disenfranchised in their respective societies.

I locate my findings within a long tradition of categorization of people according to age groups, castes, and tribes, in order to explore sites of differences among women and how they respond differently to opportunities and constraints in present-day Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. This work focuses on women in their apparently marginalized positions in South Asian sociopolitical and economic hierarchies. Also, it illumines how rural women see themselves and rework their forms of power and status by manipulating social categories and power systems to negotiate and mediate notions of power and roles.

Theoretical framework of the study

This study examines how South Asia rural caste and tribal women who are a part of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani communities use notions of gender, tribe, caste, and age to publicly articulate new forms of power in South Asia. I investigate the public expression of forms of *shakti* among rural women between the ages of 20 and 60 and "senior" women of 60 years and above (1) to assess the sociohistorical impact on women's status and roles; (2) to analyze how the women understand and embrace new government and NGO opportunities, and information and technological advances to rework their roles through interpretations of their past; and (3) to use the findings to clarify and develop a conceptual framework of intersectionality for understanding varying constructions and articulation of women's power and influence in South Asia. This conceptual tool enables us to understand the influence of interlocking and overlapping spheres of economics, caste, social ideologies, sexual hierarchies, and politics and how they are subject to

(Bourque and Warren 1981: 211) rural women's manipulation in their everyday social interactions. *Shakti* uses a theoretical formulation that addresses "the voices and causes of differently situated women" (Shaheed 2010: 95) in rural South Asia. As I focus on the lived experiences of senior women, I am able to unearth the details of their settings and how they exercise varying degrees of power and influence (cf. Cliggette 2005: ix-x). The analysis illuminates the different constructions of being senior and how some seniors use resources to articulate their power and influence. The work expands our understanding of power beyond concepts that focus solely on how the dominant may exert control over marginalized people. For instance, patriarchy has received much attention for how it is used to subordinate women (Bourque and Warren 1981; Basu 1992; Paul 1992; Visaria and Visaria 1996; Jejeebhoy 2002). My approach to power extends the discourse on hierarchies to include sociocultural forces that create and reproduce power inequities in South Asia. It explores forms of power centers and patterns of relationships with their embedded "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). Further, the work explores how rural women create social spaces and formulate discourses based on their notions of matters of exclusion, economic and political participation, and access to resources (Bourque and Warren 1981).

As caste and tribal women, the South Asian society defines the communities to which the women belong as possessing habits, behavior patterns, beliefs, dress code, and practices that mark them as different from the normative dominant society. Their "ascriptive characteristics" (Cohen 1999: 38) are used to objectify such communities as others.

My study was made possible by research grants from the Mellon SIRT, through Wellesley College and the Faculty awards from the College, funds from Harvard University and Brandeis University where I served as the Madeleine Haas Russell Visiting Professor.

A project of this nature also benefited immensely from my research assistants and conversation partners such as Lauren Lorincz (MFVGF), Anna Alissa al Qatab alHusein Hitzmann, Gauri Subramani, Dhivya Perumal, Courtney Ackeifi, Natalie Maddox, Sharre Brooks, Terrika Duckett, Asha Sundararaman, Joy Clarke, Caroline Moore, Leah Hamilton, Kirstin Yarnish, Moriah Smith, Victoria Cheng, Brittany Long, the Kamios, Kelly Ford, Nena Radtke, Linda Lago-Kass, Bonnie Scott Jelinek, Jodi Baier, Dahlia Rawji, Bhagyashree R. Bhat, J&J Rossetti, Valerie von Rosenvinge, the Ackeifi family, the Ashiaghors, the Cobblahs, Chris and Fiona Almeida, John Williams, Clark Andrews, Eric Marriot, Dr. Prema Ama, Bani, Janak and family and the Ansahs. I thank Carl Novotny and Judy Swhanberg, the Epsteins, Debbie Thornton and Bill, Greta Sarginson, the Raverets, the Garlands, the Hoffmanns, the St. Clairs, the Wilsons, the Ottens, Fr. Francis, Fr. Arun, Sunil Siddi, Ramnath Siddi, Jairam Siddi, Mohan Siddi, the Lindseys, Nancy Glynn, Don Frederico, the Hills Church office staff and clergy, Susan Langer of Wellesley College,

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Series Editor's Preface

Rural Women's Power in South Asia: Understanding Shakti is an important contribution to the series in its challenge to western centric views of gender and development and understanding of social change. In focusing on the *Shakti* of rural women, Pashington Obeng redefines power from a generational, gender, and South Asian perspective in a detailed study of how feminine power is embodied in economy, society, and culture.

The book moves us far away from the dominant view of the violated, downtrodden, vulnerable "third world woman" to a nuanced look at how women of rural South Asia of different generations live with, transcend and subvert gender power relations. In a fascinating set of case studies Obeng shows how women use their gender, tribe, class, caste, and age to articulate their own specific forms of power as they negotiate the systems of oppression around them.

The book is a welcome contribution to the series as an invitation to gender and development scholarship and policy makers to think again how to understand complex and far from simple experiences of poor rural women in their daily economic and social interactions.

Wendy Harcourt
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Contents

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Preface</i> | ix |
| <i>Series Editor's Preface</i> | xiii |
| 1 Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Caste and tribal <i>shakti</i> (power) | 4 |
| 1.2 Literature review | 6 |
| 1.3 Relevance of the work | 11 |
| 1.4 Methodology | 13 |
| 1.5 Summary of chapters | 14 |
| 2 History and Identity | 16 |
| 2.1 Partition and castified structures in Pakistan | 16 |
| 2.2 Autonomy and minority groups in Bangladesh | 18 |
| 2.3 Religious and caste/tribe divisions in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh | 19 |
| 2.4 Scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in India | 20 |
| 3 Policies and Interventions | 44 |
| 3.1 The politics of quotas | 44 |
| 3.2 India: The <i>Panchayat</i> as a parastatal institution | 45 |
| 3.3 Rural women's political representation on <i>panchayats</i> | 49 |
| 3.4 The power of information | 50 |
| 3.5 SHGs, or <i>sanghas</i> | 51 |
| 3.6 NGOs | 53 |
| 3.7 British colonial classifications | 57 |
| 3.8 Inheritance | 60 |
| 3.9 Forest, land, and water resources | 63 |
| 3.10 Joint management and natural resources | 63 |
| 4 Governments, NGOs, <i>Sanghas</i>, and Female Entrepreneurs (20 to 60 Years of Age) | 67 |
| 4.1 Members of <i>Panchayats</i> | 68 |
| 4.2 A teacher | 87 |
| 4.3 A cook | 89 |
| 4.4 A healthcare worker (Accredited Social Health Activist, or ASHA) | 92 |
| 4.5 Muslim women fighting for their rights in Pakistan | 95 |
| 4.6 Home Guards in India | 97 |
| 4.7 The informal labor sector in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh | 103 |
| 4.8 Invisible roles: women's position in the labor force | 109 |

| | | |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 4.9 | Violence against women | 128 |
| 4.10 | Women's resistance | 131 |
| 5 | The <i>Shakti</i> of Senior Women (60 Years of Age and Older) | 133 |
| 5.1 | Retirement and nursing homes in India | 134 |
| 5.2 | Multiple articulations of senior status | 135 |
| 5.3 | Bangladesh | 137 |
| 5.4 | India | 138 |
| 5.5 | Sacred capital | 145 |
| 5.6 | Traditional birth attendants/midwives (<i>dais</i>) | 151 |
| 5.7 | Patchwork quilters: a collective enterprise in India | 156 |
| 6 | Conclusion | 163 |
| | <i>Bibliography</i> | 170 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 180 |

1

Introduction

Over the past two decades in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, economic expansion and rapid changes in industrial, agricultural, and information technology have led to a reconstitution of these countries' social hierarchies, a reconstitution that has also affected class, caste, and (particularly germane to this study) gendered divisions of labor in the rural communities of South Asia.

In this book, I explore how rural South Asian women of various ages use the social and material resources available to them to respond to, transcend, or subvert those hierarchies and the power structures that support them. I also examine, through a series of individual profiles and case studies, how such women use their gender, tribe, class, caste, and age to publicly articulate forms of power and negotiate with or challenge systems of oppression around them. The framework I use will benefit policy makers and social theorists because it takes the experiences of poor rural women in their daily social interactions seriously.

Scholarship on the highly pluralistic societies of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh tends to group citizens by their countries' major and minor religions. It often ignores or minimally addresses people's "contested role[s], status, and legal rights" (Lawrence 1994: 163).

In the present work, I explore some of these very issues, in particular the ways that rural women in South Asia craft and deploy their power at the intersections of, on the one hand, their countries' efforts to create equality for their respective citizens and, on the other, entrenched countervailing forces of caste, ageism, class, gender, and religion. In addition, the women profiled in this work are divided into two groups: those between the ages of 20 and 60 and those aged above 60 (referred to as "seniors" by India's Ministry of Labour and Employment).

Through research into India's democratizing efforts, their impact on rural women, and the women's differing responses to those measures and to similar efforts in Pakistan and Bangladesh, this comparative study on the deployment of South Asian women's power (called *shakti* in this book; see my explanation below) focuses on women's lived experiences and how

the women studied mobilize the new resources now available to them for personal advancement.

Shakti is the Sanskrit word for the embodiment of female divine creative power and the agent of change and nurturing (Harish and Harishankar 2003); *shakti* also connotes the power of the female deity of motherly strength and energy and the force to restore balance. A person who holds power is considered to be a *shaktiman* (Woodroffe 1918). In this work, I use the term *shakti* to mean "female power," and I investigate the various forms of *shakti* in the contemporary context of rural South Asia to

- (1) assess sociohistorical impacts on women's status and roles there,
- (2) analyze how women understand and embrace new governmental and nongovernmental (NGO) opportunities, as well as information and technological advances, to rework their roles, and
- (3) use these findings to clarify and develop a conceptual framework for understanding various constructions and articulations of the power and influence of rural women in the Global South.

I begin with a brief survey of relevant theories of power in order to explore rural women's lived experiences and notions of women's power (*shakti*) within the multiple centers of patriarchy and other social inequalities in South Asia. The study illuminates an array of rural women's negotiations to deploy local manifestations of female power within the broader context of South Asia.

Foucault (1977) argues that power is "diffuse" and "productive" and that it relies on social relations and diverse points of resistance. Giddens (1984), following Foucault, contends that power plays out in a complex social context in which human agency and social structures have intertwining relationships. The interconnection between agency and social relations requires that we understand how the powerless may resist their exploitation or acquiesce because they have internalized a distorted consciousness that favors a dominant individual or group (Lukes 2005). Bourdieu (1977) also contends that, though marginalized people may not wield formal power, they have the capacity to disempower those who hold traditional power and influence; in some cases, for example (he argues), the marginalized choose not to obey the powerful. Hence, he points to the power of the powerless who use forms of resistance.

Powerlessness, according to Gaventa (2006), is rooted in social inequality and failed or ineffective social solutions. In the same paper, Gaventa proposes a theory of power that I find fruitful for my discussion of how South Asian rural women deploy various forms of formal and informal power. Gaventa (2006: 23–33) points out that

[p]ower "over" refers to the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thought of the powerless. The power "to" is important for the capacity to

act; to exercise agency and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship or voice. *Power "within"* often refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a precondition for action. *Power "with"* refers to the synergy which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building.

I use Gaventa's categories of power to inform how I explore the ways in which power unfolds in people's social relationships and the extent to which women manifest their transformative power (Giddens 1984). For example, I draw attention to rural women's ability to choose, amidst obstacles, resources for consciousness-raising to unlock their capacity to empower themselves as well as those who benefit from the services they offer.

I also use Clegg's (1989) theory of power, which addresses the dispositional, episodic, and facilitative dimensions of power, to investigate the different grades of strength, determination, and capacity to achieve results, honor, dignity, and courage, as women put up resistance, in order to elucidate *shakti* as it is crafted and made manifest by the women profiled. According to Clegg (1989), there are three forms of power: the episodic, in which rules, forms, and resources are changed in social interactions; the dispositional, which entails the social construction of meaning attached to roles and membership in an institution; and the facilitative, which deals with how resources, networks, and the environment may be used to empower or disempower an agent.

In this work, I further use a theoretical formulation that addresses "the voices and causes of differently situated women" (Subramaniam 2009; Shaheed 2010: 95) in rural India. This conceptual tool enables us to understand the mutual influences of the interlocking and overlapping spheres of economics, caste, social ideologies, and sexual hierarchies and politics, and how they are subject to (Bourque and Warren 1981: 211) rural women's manipulation in their everyday social interactions.

I also draw insights from Oommen (1970) to address power as expressed by community leaders and segments of society called "power reservoirs" that shape decision-making processes, though not necessarily in the same ways as those who have formal public power. Based on Oommen's views, I investigate how rural women use their informal networks as a critical resource to advance their goals. I also explore forms of power centers and patterns of relationships, including embedded "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990), among rural women.

The present work also focuses on how women create social spaces and formulate discourses based on their notions of matters of exclusion, economic and political participation, and access to resources (Bourque and Warren 1981). The discussion on resistance benefits from Mbembe (2001: 110), in his *On the Postcolony*, where he argues that resistance be understood and

conceptualized as “the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity.” By implication, Mbembe argues that a person who resists articulates ways in which the dominant and the dominated vie for power within the same cultural space (Edmondson 2007: 6).

Although Mbembe contends that the dominated tend to avoid direct confrontation with their oppressor, it is also important to include Nyamnjoh's perspective of “domesticated agency, whereby the person is engaged in negotiation, concession, and conviviality over maximization of pursuits by individuals or particular groups in contexts of plurality and diversity” (Nyamnjoh 2002: 116). The above perspectives help us understand how counterhegemonic actors express multiple notions of agency as they engage others in diverse domains of influence.

I now turn to local understandings of female power (*shakti*) that open up new ideas for constructing and classifying notions and processes of power based on diverse social relations.

1.1 Caste and tribal *shakti* (power)

Shakti describes the primordial female principle that pervades the universe. This work uses the *shakti* notion to provide an alternative way of conceptualizing power, gender, and caste relations in South Asia. *Shakti* is understood as the force that animates the universe and therefore all living entities. In humans, *shakti* is the ability to act, be compassionate, and have the courage to end injustice. The divine female principle, *shakti*, is a source of energy for *shiva* (Rajan 1998). In Shaktism it is equated with Brahman, the highest spiritual reality that pervades all existence. Also, in Shaivism (with devotion focused on Shiva) and Vaishnavism (with devotion focused on Vishnu), *shakti* is the feminine energy of the male divinities. According to Woodroffe (1918), *shakti* and *shiva* are twin aspects of one and the same reality. *Shiva* is the masculine unchanging aspect of divinity, while *shakti* is the fluid and changing aspect. In the text *Devi Mahatmaya*, *shakti* is manifested in all women. Therefore, they have the power to both nurture the world and destroy evil forces. Thus, in the face of certain aspects of Brahminic traditions that are perceived as being oppressive in terms of caste and gender, it is the philosophical construct of the primordial female and nonpatriarchal traditions that has been deemed liberating throughout Indian religious history. *Shakti* can dwell in people; therefore every person's total freedom can be achieved when she or he develops and uses the female principle. The process of reaching this is described as the union between *shiva* and *shakti* (Rajan 1998). The unmanifest *shiva-shakti* is knowable only in the ecstasy of yoga.

In some contexts *shakti* is manifested in both destructive and creative ways to “sustain the universe” (Gold 1994: 26). It is a form of dynamic