Women and Society: The Road to Change

Kolaskar, Ashok S. and Dash, Motilal (eds.)
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*Women and Society: The road to change* presents the personal narratives of 22 professionally successful women in India. This resulted in a collection of diverse chapters, ranging from biographies to analyses of the position of women in Indian society. Authors describe the opportunities they created or were given, or the activities they undertook themselves to improve gender equality for others. Some authors seek the solution in changing policies, with others providing inspirational guidance to younger generations (e.g. *Be the change you want to be*, Kiran Bedi, p. 52).

Throughout these narratives, the importance of having a mentor, dedication, perseverance, education, and the opportunity to live and work abroad for some time are mentioned repeatedly. Several chapters reflect on structural factors that are negatively associated with women’s position in Indian society. Examples are the role of religion, the view of women as commodity, the caste system, patriarchy, (gender bias in) infanticide, and the vast urban-rural divide. Some analyses may surprise (Western) readers. For instance, Rami Devi perceives the ‘inclusion of sex education in the school curricula’ as part of a ‘cultural erosion [...] fast driving our society to a chasm of disaster’ (p. 95) As none of the chapters provide references to literature or data to support claims, each of the factors discussed reflect authors’ personal insights and experiences.

The two editors introduce the reader to the authors of the essays that will follow, and the ‘social milieu’ (p. x) of India, as a background against which the essays are to be interpreted. The editors’ contribution is rather brief, however, which is unfortunate for two reasons.

First, no attempt was made to systematize the experiences and insights presented in the essays that make up this volume, nor to link these to current academic literature. As a result, the volume merely is a collection of virtually unrelated essays. It would have been relevant to offer a substantial analysis on what is common to the experiences of these women, and to what extent these experiences vary. For instance, the editors made an effort to ‘choose high achievers from different walks of life, such as science, education, social work, industry, business, administration, policy-making, and so on.’ (p. x). A systematic comparison between the experiences of women in these different sectors could have expanded what this volume contributes to the academic literature.

Secondly, it remained somewhat unclear what the exact goal of the volume is. On the one hand, the editors formulate the goal as ‘the essays in this volume will motivate large number [sic] of people to work hard towards achieving their goals and help others ...’ (p. xiv). To the extent that the goal of this volume was to inspire, it succeeds. To readers with an interest in gender equality, particularly in a society with a high degree of gender inequality, the intensity and diversity of the personal narratives can be inspiring. The importance of inspirational stories, as phrased by the author of one of the essays is that ‘Stories linger longer than logical explanations’ (Rajashree Birla, p. 53).

On the other hand, the suggested goal of this volume was to identify determinants of success. The conclusion that ‘the recipe for success [...] is hard, dedicated, focused work with self-confidence’ (p. xv) implies that hard, dedicated, focused work with self-confidence causes success. Similarly, the cover states that the essays ‘show how proper education [...] independent thinking, and the drive to innovate can bring about a sea change in the lives of women and impact the society at large’. This is an attractive causal hypothesis, and indeed all the successful women in this volume have shown these qualities.
However, quite possibly women who have not obtained professional success also worked hard, with dedication, focus and self-confidence. Successful outcomes cannot be explained by assessing successful outcomes only. A systematic comparison between successful and unsuccessful outcomes is required to be able to make any statements regarding what were the determinants of either of these outcomes. Instead, this volume was limited to successful women only.

To conclude, this volume brings together 22 personal essays on the position of women in Indian society. These essays are interesting by themselves, but to the extent that the goal of this volume was to identify a ‘recipe for success’, claims on this account remain uncorroborated.

Rense Nieuwenhuis
University Of Twente