

9-2022

### **Minds Circumscribed by Fear. A Review of Garrisoned Minds: Women and Armed Conflicts in South Asia, Edited by Lazmi Murthy and Mitu Varma**

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Srivastava, Kushal (2022) "Minds Circumscribed by Fear. A Review of Garrisoned Minds: Women and Armed Conflicts in South Asia, Edited by Lazmi Murthy and Mitu Varma," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2022.07.03.03>

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## MINDS CIRCUMSCRIBED BY FEAR

### A REVIEW

#### ***GARRISONED MINDS: WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA, EDITED BY LAZMI MURTHY AND MITU VARMA, SPEAKING TIGER BOOKS, 2016***

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**G***rarrisoned Minds: Women and Armed Conflicts in South Asia*, edited by Laxmi Murthy and Mitu Varma collate the experiences of twelve authors who describe on-the-ground realities of women in armed conflicts areas of South Asia. The volume aims to enlighten researchers, academicians, and students about what armed conflicts do to a society with special reference to women, their status, and role in the given scenario.

The book is divided into four parts based on the locations that were ventured into by different authors. Each contribution starts with an introduction to the situation in that location. The authors, who are journalists, report their stories from Pakistan, Nepal, and India (Kashmir and North East).

Pakistan bore the brunt of the war in neighbouring Afghanistan and it became a battlefield for intra-Islam war. The day Talibanis entered Pakistan it marked an era of violence and repression. The authors through their own observations and experiences have described what Pakistan went through in that time period. The authors depict how Taliban rule abused women, including forcibly marrying young girls and prohibiting Pakistani women from stepping out of the house alone even for education or health emergencies. Such restrictions that occurred on a daily basis increased cases of mental trauma, deaths during childbirths, maternal deaths, miscarriages, psychological disorders, and emotional stress amongst women of this region. Shelter camps were not all-weather friendly and there was a scarcity of basic amenities like water, food, clothes, toilets, and there was no privacy. Even international organizations like the Amnesty International observed that “*millions are locked in the perpetual lawlessness in those areas of Pakistan*” (p. 50). Music and dance were suppressed. Communities like the Hazara were subjected to atrocities. It was a land where women didn't

*dare to dream* (p. 52). Hazara are minority of Balochistan and have faced vulnerability. They have been migrating to different places to escape genocide and seek asylum. Girls from this community face the brunt at the hands of militants.

Nepal has faced political instability and witnessed conflict between the army and the Maoist groups. The authors report on the circumstances prevailing in Nepal in the public domain. The local people of Nepal chose to oppose the government army and joined the ranks of the Maoist groups. They believed that gripping a gun would give them strength to overcome the fear of the government security forces (p. 125). Women sometimes chose to abort their babies in order to stay in the Maoist army and continue with the “job,” no matter how weak and exhausted the abortion made them. Women chose to join the Maoists to escape traditional prohibitions and conservative culture and be treated equally with men. They were able to receive benefits once they joined the revolt. However, negative experiences came from the Maoists. Women who began traveling with males of the Maoists groups were often called “characterless” and their morals questioned (p. 144). Interestingly, mothers were given special treatment and facilities by the Maoists. The women’s wing of the Maoists actively took part in ensuring that the local communities were free of social evils such as dowry, child marriage, forced marriages of any kind, and domestic violence.

The Kashmir region of India has for a very long period of time been the site of aggression and war due to territorial, religious, ethnic, and regional identity conflicts. Authors depict the political instability among the citizens regarding the Line of Control (LoC) (p. 165). The Line of Control divides the state and it evolved during the historic Shimla talks between India and Pakistan that took place after the creation of Bangladesh. Kashmir is directly affected by relations between India and Pakistan. Security laws that are in effect in the region not only target the militants but also aim to control citizens. Militarization also facilitated criminal activities through physical torture, burning of neighbourhood houses, killings, rapes, and counter-insurgencies. Inhumane crimes like rape were not properly tried and victims and their trauma ignored. There are Ikhwanis who have resigned from their militant jobs and changed sides to expose the reality of militants. They were aided by the security agencies in exchange for countering militant operations in Indian-administered Kashmir region. (p. 177). However, this action brought no better circumstances for them. They were given false promises and lured into promised jobs but were killed on a daily basis. The chances of being attacked by the militants increased and they got a meagre remuneration for their work. The wives of the Ikhwanis were looked down on by their own neighbourhood, and if their husband got killed, they were rejected and left with no other option but to spend life in isolation. Financial help for children of Ikhwanis was withdrawn immediately after their death. There have been nights without an end, families of militants were assaulted on a daily basis and armies entered the houses of suspects and assaulted their wives. Adding to the civil and justice situation, the prosecution rate of the perpetrators is low and the compensation to the victims never fulfilled, and they for wait a better and brighter future.

Also in North-East India political conflicts are different from the above-mentioned conflict. The State of Arunachal Pradesh has been facing conflicts with China and its neighbouring state of Assam. Assam too has faced conflicts for a very long over language and ethnicity. An anti-foreigner/immigration movement has hampered the entire state. Likewise, Tripura has also faced ethnicity-driven conflicts. Soon after Tripura merged and became a full-fledged state of India, an initiation of volunteers was witnessed that had the objective to combat the left parties and felicitate an alliance with the indigenous Tripuri groups that would be against the Bengali settlers. The

government also took several counter-insurgency campaigns. Moreover, Manipur too has witnessed ethnic clashes and inter-community agitations that have hindered the growth of the state. There have been several nationalist movements by Meitei, Kuki and Naga communities and in order to curb these movements there have been counter-insurgency measures by the army battalions leading to disturbance and atrocities like sexual assaults on the women of the region. In one instance Thangjam Manorama Devi, a 24 years old woman from Manipur's Imphal East district, was taken away from her house by the Assam Rifles, tortured, raped, and then killed (p. 232). To demand justice, the elder women stripped and walked naked calling out the army to rape them. States of Meghalaya and Mizoram have witnessed clashes within their own tribes and inter-state clashes. Further, the state of Nagaland has its own internal conflict with voices demanding a separate and independent region (p. 241). Militarisation in Northeast India has impacted and acted as a major hurdle to the holistic development of the women, society, and the entire region. It gave way for armed rebellion within the community. These rebellions or conflict have arisen due to the atrocities that have been there on hands of the authorities. These atrocities have been in the form of harassments and sexual assaults targeting the women of the society. Rapes and genital mutation of women and girls have become frequent during armed conflicts. Women are specially targeted because they are considered symbols of culture. However, women have risen as leaders against their long oppression and raised voices against the rampant use of alcohol and cannabis among men of the society, against torture or fake encounters that are staged to portray gun fights. Individuals are detained without following laws, rules, and due procedure. (p. 226).

Every woman has desires of her own that she wants to live up to and leave no stone unturned to work for a "perfect" and "holistic" future that she envisions. When an individual is prohibited to step out from their house for basic necessities like water, food, and education it is a violation of a basic human rights. Women of the societies discussed in this volume have witnessed atrocities for too long. While depicting the circumstances of Pakistan, Nepal, Kashmir, and North-East India, the authors have brought real suffering to the notice of all concerned stakeholders.

One of the major strengths of the authors' contributions is that they bring their experiences to public attention, and present clear and chronological statistical data about situations of armed conflict and their effect on women and girls. These data add to the author's factual writing about human atrocity. There is a huge difference between the arrest and the conviction of perpetrators given the lack of concrete evidence against them. It is worth saying that when the authors did their ground reporting in Kashmir, they observed that the local people were happy to see that someone came to report on their experiences and document their voices and grief.

However these depictions come with several gaps. The contributions lack specific data of arrests, convictions, and murders committed. Another major challenge for the authors was the circumstances of the region were so rigid that accessibility to women to learn realities was a herculean task.

Women are an initial target for victimisation. Through women the perpetrators try to impose fear in the society. Although women have been subjected to sexual atrocities, it is the women themselves who have acted as the torch bearers and have tried not to leave any stone unturned to raise voice against the perpetrators and act in furtherance to achieve real equality and justice for a better tomorrow.

To see this entire book in the contemporary parlance, a lot can be understood and grasped from the various contributions that have been made. Authors have justified

the objective of the book through their own understanding and thought processes. This book will felicitate the contemporary and prospective students and academician in understanding the reasons as why an armed rebellion takes places and what are its connected effects. This book is indeed a must read because of the fact that it makes an attempt in the right direction to bring to the public domain stories of women whose voices were never heard and got lost in the midst of militarization, armed conflict, and other incidental chaos.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Kushal Srivastava** is a legal research assistant at the School of Information Technology, Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Security at Rashtriya Raksha University in India. He has a master's degree in Criminal and Security Law with an inclination in the domain of research in general and facets like criminal laws, cyber laws, victim jurisprudence and constitutional law. The author has participated in several international and national seminars and conferences and published research articles in peer-reviewed journals.

### RECOMMENDED CITATION

Srivastava, Kushal. (2022). Mines circumscribed by fear. A review of *Garrisoned minds: women and armed conflicts in South Asia*, edited by Lazmi Murthy and Mitu Varma. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 7, Issue 3, Article 3.  
<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2022.07.03.03>