

The reviews in Internationales Asienforum try to give a brief evaluation of recent German publications.

RUTH ERLBECK: Frauen in Indien. (Frauen in der Dritten Welt, Bd. 2)
Münster: Verlag Frauenpolitik, 1978. 160 pages, DM 11.40.

In the discussion about consequences of capitalistic penetration of under-developed countries the influences of capitalism on the social status of women have been largely neglected up to now. Lately more and more studies are appearing - often written by women engaged in the European feminist movement - which examine the changes of the social status of women relative to changes in the relations of production and pose the question of the function of women in overcoming under-development in dependent capitalist countries. A good example of this kind of study is Ruth Erlbeck's book "Frauen in Indien", which appeared quite recently. Her main thesis is that the continuing "development" of India, its increasing capitalization, causes a progressive pauperization of lower class women. This statement is proved in detail throughout the book.

Starting with a short historical analysis of the Asiatic mode of production and its destruction by British colonialism, it is shown that the social status of women deteriorated steadily under British rule. For women colonialism didn't bring any advances, on the contrary: the capitalistic mode of production introduced by colonialism, above all the private property of land, the establishment of industry, the intensification of commerce and the modernization of agriculture, favoured mostly men, while women were pushed back to the traditional sector and their economic position was considerably weakened. This is the conclusion Erlbeck draws in the main part of her book. There she examines the present occupational situation of Indian women with regard to their traditional image, which is still strongly influenced by the caste system.

In keeping with it most of the women employed work as farm labourers or do jobs on construction sites, in factories and in small-scale-industries. The majority of working women belong to the lower classes and are forced to work for economic reasons. Because they have to do housework in addition and without any pay, these women are extremely exploited. Working women of the lower classes do indeed have a certain social status if they contribute to the livelihood of the family by earning some money. But as a result of these process of capitalistic modernization during which the "modern" and the "traditional" sector are more and more diverging, the social gap between men and women is steadily becoming larger. The tendency is for women to be driven out of the market production and banished to unpaid work in the subsistence sector or in the household. So they lose even their small social reputation.

According to Erlbeck the progressive pauperization of the lower classes in peripheral capitalism is particularly evident in the case of women, because they are responsible for the daily food consumption of the family. Although this promotes the establishment of class-consciousness, it is probably detrimental to the perception of specifically female interests. As far as this problem is concerned Erlbeck's analysis of different attempts to change the situation of Indian women seems to be the most interesting part of her book.

As a contrast to the women's organisations of the Community Development Program, which reinforced woman in her role as housewife and mother and to the women's committees run by the political parties, which either denied any specific problems of women or tried to solve them with rather ridiculous reforms, Erlbeck also deals with active female resistance movements which have become known mainly since the seventies. This movement demonstrates its ideas by militant actions and fights against increases in prices, corruption and the dowry system. It expresses the own interests of the women concerned and is orientated to their demands. This is why this kind of movement has had some success up to now.

Recognizing the importance of reproduction for the formation of women's consciousness Erlbeck finally criticizes the marxist theories, according to which the only possible way for women to become emancipated is to work. Erlbeck then develops a prospect of liberation based on the sphere of reproduction.

"Since social reality of all patriarchal societies primarily defines women by their function of bearing children and capitalism especially refers to women's function of reproduction, women's liberation can only be successful, if women gain the only control of their reproductive function. The organisation of women in the sphere of reproduction is perhaps a chance for the liberation of women, because they have the possibility in this domain to practise alternative forms of struggle and cooperation (reduction of hierarchical structures, impersonality, omission of all private things)." (p. 123 f.)

This point of view, not only discussed by women of numerous countries, but also practised more and more, seems to go far beyond the marxist discussion. Also in terms of actual mobilization of the revolutionary potential it seems fairly successful.

The book has a distinct structure and is written in quite a readable style. Occasionally the scientific language and the sociological jargon are really bothering. But the attractive photographs help to reconcile one. The appendix of the book gives some useful tables with information concerning the employment and education of women, rates of illness and mortality etc. as well as detailed notes, which are so informative, that one sometimes wishes they were an integral part of the text.

On the whole: a book which shows personal commitment and gives detailed information about several aspects of the situation of Indian women.