

BOOK REVIEW

Examining health rights through the lens of epistemic injustice

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Anuj Kapilashrami, Neil Quinn, Abhijit Das, *Advancing Health Rights and Tackling Inequalities: Interrogating Community Development and Participatory Praxis*. Bristol University Press; May 2025. 240 pages, INR 3231, ISBN: 978-1447361404

The authors of this book are both academics and practitioners, making it an enriching combination of theoretical understanding premised within praxis, and providing evocative case stories. Interestingly, the authors also re-examine the concepts of social participation, and community development in advancing the right to health and promoting health justice. The need for the book, as they state, also arose from examining health justice within the framework of the “global poly-crisis” in various systems like the economic, environmental, migration, and health systems, which led to irreversible changes, especially within the Covid-19 scenario. The failure of policy, governance and lack of accountability from those in power led to this crisis.

Positing the tensions of differing ideas of scholars, researchers and policy makers on various conflicting issues like international security versus peoples’ rights, growth versus post-growth, a selective versus a comprehensive approach to healthcare, the authors have used the concept of “epistemic injustice” to discuss the rise of a poly-crisis in regard to health and healthcare.

Neoliberalism and colonial medicine are the two specific sources indicated in explaining epistemic injustice.

The sidelining of social protection due to the rise of neoliberalism and increased privatisation led to the widening gap between rich and poor. The authors also point out how epistemic injustice has been extended by the dominance of the Western biomedical model, a key factor of colonisation globally. This, the authors emphasise, has led to the professional hegemony of medical doctors which presents a challenge for health activism. Simultaneously, they also analyse the changing landscape in health activism, while focusing on the concepts of community, inclusivity of participatory development, and the rise of identity-based movements.

The book is divided into three parts; the first part traces the history of community participation in public health from the primary care movement to Universal Health Coverage. This part examines the impact of power and participation on community engagement. The second part outlines the

pathways to health justice, delving deep into how sustainable social movements for the right to health were built by engaging with communities and addressing political, economic, and commercial forces that shape healthcare. Here, accountability for implementing the right to health is also highlighted through stories of practice. The third part focusses on practice and activism, provides tools for transformation and proposes use of the arts, media and participatory action research. Finally, the conclusion describes how collective action through robust community mobilisation acts as a countervailing force for healthy and just societies.

This book is recommended for development practitioners, teachers and students of development studies and policy governance, as it covers models and theories applied to public health, community work and participation. The approach that the authors have adopted encompasses “intersectionality and syndemicity” within a decolonial framework. The book is made more interesting by case studies that vividly present the evidence from which it derives its rich contents.

While questioning the colonial epistemic gaze, the book critically examines the dominance of the Eurocentric and Anglo-American frame and its dominant fault lines. Due to this frame, the participation histories of countries in the global South remain omitted from mainstream scholarship, which the authors point out could have been done deliberately. This also results in a lack of systematic documentation of community-led activism and social development in the global South. Significantly, the book critically examines community participation and its complexities which have developed over the years; indicating the three broad fields of scholarship that have contributed to it — political science, international development and public health and policy — helping to deepen our understanding of community participation.

The evolution of health rights and the political endorsement of community participation to realise health as a human right — with all the underlying determinants of the right to health — have been brought out clearly. Various normative frameworks that underline community participation in health are also examined across a multi-dimensional framework. The instrumental aspect and the transformative purposes of community participation have been outlined specifically in one chapter, although they flow through many other chapters as well. Additionally, the concept of

empowerment has been woven into the narrative, pointing out how people's agency and various dimensions of power, especially the power of joint action for collective solidarity, are used to bring about change.

The book illustrates, throughout, how these concepts and frameworks operate in practice for realising health justice and equity through community participation and collective struggles. The fundamental principle of community work that places humanity at the core of improving human life is bolstered by the relentless labour of community workers. However, as the authors also point out, this does not seem to figure much in the political debates, probably because global institutions like the World Bank commodify health rather than treat it as a right.

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