

Abstract:

The thesis entitled ‘Gendered Spirits and Reproductive Capacity: Understanding Illnesses among Women in Rural Uttar Pradesh’ examines how women understand, experience, and navigate illnesses during childbirth, from conception to the post-partum period. This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Raebareli and Pratapgarh districts for which data was collected through in-depth interviews with women, their families, midwives, local healers, community health workers, and medical and paramedical staff. This study investigates how supernatural illnesses among women and children are understood differently across castes and communities. With this, it further explores the symptoms women associate with these illnesses, the factors that influence their identification, and the roles played by elderly women, other family members and neighbours in recognising and making sense of their reproductive illness. Following the identification, it explores the preventive measures, healing practices and spaces in the villages and eventually traces women’s movements across domestic, community, and clinical spaces, from the home and courtyard to the crossroads, local healers’ sites, and public health centres. Through childbirth ritualistic practices, it examines how women’s reproductive illnesses are understood, transferred, and treated. Moreover, through the concept of bioavailability, this study explores when, how, where, and by whom these rituals are performed, and what role they play in women’s experiences of illness, vulnerability, and healing. Lastly, this thesis examines what happens when the healing practices and rituals known to women across generations become ineffective. This question is answered through how women seek new sources of relief and care when such situation arises. Building on the concept of intersectionality and adapting it to the rural context of Uttar Pradesh, the thesis explores how gender, kinship, caste, religion, and authority simultaneously shape women’s experiences of illness and healing during childbirth.