

## Book Review

### **The Changing Village in India – Insights from Longitudinal Research**

**Himanshu, Praveen Jha and Gerry Rodgers (Eds.)**

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This book is a collection of 17 essays, including an Introduction that highlights upon the methodological issues and shortcomings in drawing inferences from village studies. The essays present insights and draw inferences on ‘change’ over the last 30-40 years. Most of the essays as such do not present fresh findings from field visits; instead, they draw upon studies conducted by the authors themselves and/or by others in the past. The studies pertain mainly to: Tamil Nadu (the Slater studies and others – four papers), Uttar Pradesh – five papers, three on Palanpur village), and Bihar (four papers). There are other studies as well, one from Haryana, one from Maharashtra, and one from Bangladesh – the only study from outside India. Interestingly, none of the studies touches upon the village studies conducted by ICRISAT through the 1970s until into the new millennium, despite that these are comprehensive and spread across more than one state, though the Introduction and one chapter make a passing reference to these. Next, completely untouched and un-referred to are some 500 village stud-

ies conducted under the aegis of the Registrar General, Government of India (during 1961-1968).

The strength of village studies in South Asia lies in capturing inter-group/class /caste interactions and changes in the same, which in a way define the society, economy, people’s livelihoods, inequality and its perpetuation, and the like in this part of the world. Almost all the studies have addressed these aspects in one or another manner. The key message that the book brings out is that rural India has changed and economically progressed and that the (pre-industrial) caste relations intertwined with the economic processes (and people’s livelihoods) too have altered for the better. However, the segmentation of the village society based on caste continues to persist to the extent that it still forms the basis of distribution of gains, and political and economic power. Thus while all communities in the villages studied have gained from external economic forces (e.g. agricultural technologies, NERAGA, migration), the gains have been differential to the ex-

tent that some studies show increase in inequality; also the caste-based differentiation has not blurred.

Chapter 2 on Slater studies in Tamil Nadu (TN), written by John Harris, sets the tone of book. These studies were initiated more than a century back by a British academic, Mr. Gilbert Slater, and then followed up in the 1930s, 1950s, and further in the 1970s. They are pioneering but when seen from today's context they had collected data on fairly straightforward issues like population, landholding, occupation, state of agriculture, and trade, which in the current day, to an extent could be studied from secondary survey data or census data. The second study on TN (Chapter 10, by John Harris and J Jeyarajan) draws inferences from village studies carried out in TN in the recent past to conclude that economic growth had benefitted the poor (there is trickle down) and government schemes have also helped unlike in the northern states, but the caste factor continues to be a bane, albeit less than what it was earlier. The third study on TN (Chapter 12, by Judith Heyer) identifies the role of the Gounder Community, a middle caste, in shaping industrial development in western TN. Finally, a paper by Barbara Harris-White (Chapter 12), presents the story of Arni town – its industrialisation and urbanisation riding on agricultural growth in the adjacent countryside. It's a classic case of a rural economy feeding urban growth (*a la* Michael Lipton or John Mellor), though some might refer to this process as 'rural exploitation or urban bias'.

Chapter 4 (by Shapan Adnan, on Bangladesh) is a fundamental contribution discussing methodological issues in regard to village studies. It addresses problems like representativeness, comparison in a temporal context, assessment of dyadic or polyadic relations, and interactions between individuals and households, among others. It makes a differentiation between quantitative studies and detailed ethnographic studies. It says while quantitative village studies collect data on incomes, assets, family structure, caste, and so on—information which is more than what most large surveys provide—it is less than what detailed ethnographic studies collect. How important are the ethnographic studies, given the high cost of collecting data and that the relationships captured herein alter quickly in a changing society, is a matter worth pondering. Nevertheless, this reviewer finds Chapter 4 to be among the most readable in the 17 essays.

The Palanpur studies in UP are presented in three papers (Chapter 5, by Himanshu and Nicholas Stern; Chapter 11, by Himanshu, Peter Langjouw, Rinku Murgai and Nicholas Stern; and Chapter 15, by Dipa Sinha, Dinesh Tiwari, Ruchira Bhattacharya and Ruth Kattumuri). Palanpur was first surveyed in the 1950s by the AERC but received fame following detailed studies by Christopher Bliss and Nicholas Stern in 1974-1975 (Palanpur: The Economy of an Indian Village, OUP). The village was later surveyed in the 1980s, 1990s as well as in the new millennium. The key findings of these studies are: (1) Socioeconomic changes have been brought about by

agricultural development, expansion of non-farm activities, and demographic changes; (2) Incomes have increased, but so has inequality; (3) Non-farm employment has decreased in absolute numbers in the new millennium for the first time, resulting in narrowing the labor productivity gap between the farm and non-farm sectors; (4) Fertility rate has decreased in line with the all-India trend; and (5) The quality of public services, be it schooling, health or public distribution system is abysmal (to being fully non-functional), and corruption high. The Palampur studies have all along been in the genre of quantitative surveys though caste, tenancy, and an intertwining on similar issues have been discussed; as a result, despite such heavy concentration of resources in one village the results are similar to what are found elsewhere or in macro trends. Also, attempts to bring in the Kuznets curve hypothesis to explain the rising inequality or calculating IMR for a small village, might be unrealistic since these are primarily meant for macro level analysis.

Next, Ravi Srivastava studies a village in Eastern UP (Chapter 8) to arrive at similar conclusions as others: that there have been some small positive economic changes (albeit differential), though caste segmentations persist. Chapters 3, by Patricia Jeffery on a village in UP, is a classical anthropological study aimed at studying gender-related issues in a temporal context. The author's sensitive handling of delicate (methodical) issues is notable, though for a South Asian reader the findings are a bit obvious. One finding, though, is alarming: that the village

folk have little trust (bordering suspicion) on the government or state.

The Bihar studies, all quantitative surveys, are presented in four papers (Chapter 6 by Gerry Rodgers, Sunil Mishra, and Alakh Sharma; Chapter 9 by Praveen and Avanindra Thakur; Chapter 13 by Janine Rodgers; and Chapter 14 by Amrita Datta). They are spread through Bihar permitting greater generalization. The different surveys cover the period 1970s until about 2010. The key findings of these studies are: (1) The so-called semi-feudal relations, which are characterised by practices such as labour attachment, have virtually vanished giving way to free labor, and share cropping has greatly reduced; (2) Landlessness has risen, but then the population has also risen while land hasn't; (3) There has been an increase in incomes and assets in all classes (one study shows that the poor /lower castes have gained more – casual labor wages have risen); (4) In some areas the input prices are deemed to be high (implicitly suggesting inefficiency); (5) Out-migration has risen all along permitting a regular flow of remittances; and (6) The cropping pattern in some areas has changed in response to markets. Finally, a point: in the style of presentation, there is some excessive descriptive element on the sample, its temporal comparability etc., making the reading slow. These issues could have been placed in appendices.

Chapter 7 (by Surinder S Jothka, on a Haryana village) presents data painstakingly collected on the dynamics of ru-

ral/agrarian change. While the author finds that the surveyed villages in Haryana have undergone significant changes, there are also problems of disappearance of the commons in addition to weakening of community linkages. It is not clear, however, whether weakening of the community links is as such undesirable, given that most traditional community links in rural South Asia rest on caste and gender inequity, both undesirable. Chapter 16 (by Ramkumar) presents temporal data on a village in East Maharashtra to find that through the 40 years until 2006-2007, there has been a rise in landlessness.

Overall two points need mention: First, while this is a collection of essays,

which have been published earlier elsewhere, put together that form a formidable corpus of literature extremely useful for scholars and planners alike. Second, seen from a methodological perspective, this set of studies offers a range of suggestions on how to conduct village studies of different kinds, what they have to offer, what their shortcomings are, and how and to what extent could temporal comparisons be made. They are an extremely useful set of readings.

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