Review Article

Some Recent Books on Indian Agriculture
Walter C Neale


IT is sad that the group of books under review here is a poor lot. The absence of good literature on the subject should not justify the publishers in setting these books before the public in their present form, although thorough revisions of the last two could turn them into good books. Your reviewer will start with the poorest book and climb the ladder to the only good one.

A Sad Mistake

It is too bad that economists of the reputation of Messrs Bellerby and Mujumdar have written and published this book. It is a bad book — bad because the authors ventured into moral philosophy where they reveal their lack of expertise, and into matters of rural reconstruction about which there is already a far more sophisticated literature.

The first chapter on "Agricultural Economic Theory and Policy" —originally published in the Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics — is a good essay, a worthwhile contribution to the literature on "economic dualism". Thereafter the book deteriorates. Implicit in the argument is the assumption that soon India will face the problem of what to do with its increasing wealth and leisure, and this premise, combined with a naive view of philosophy and human attitudes and "institutions" leads them ultimately to the statement on p 143:

"The first stage in the programme (firing imagination and causing a widespread movement towards forms of life which allow of conscious fulfilment) might be to invite a Committee of Indian Philosophers to suggest an answer to the question:

Through what forms of economic and spare time activity and contemplation can the Indian people in town and country become most comprehensively fulfilled and be aware of it?"

This passage occurs amidst quotations from Vice President Radhakrishnan pleas for "amateurism" as a means of fulfilment, and heavy riding of the authors' hobby horse — arousing rural India through radios in each village.

The earlier part of the book contains much less secular revivalism, but betrays an ignorance of the literature on rural development in India. Chapter VI outlines a scheme of "standard target forms" for agriculture and lists eight ways to get the target forms accepted. These eight steps (p 100) are a good length behind normal techniques of extension work in their sophistication; but sadder still is the absence of any indication that the authors are aware of the problems of extension work in rural India, as revealed in the P E O reports: and the independent evaluations of Community Projects by Dube, Coldwell, and the Balwantrai Committee. Action and analysis are eight years past the need for pleas for recognition of the problem or schemes which do not allot duties and suggest, very specific techniques for an already functioning departmental hierarchy.

While the chapters on the agricultural situation, the population problem, and administration are not bad, they are outdated and add nothing to common knowledge. One might read — and assign to students — Chapter I, but should stop there.

This reviewer has frequently been embarrassed by the tendency of his fellow-Americans to draw up schemes for the total reconstruction and development of the Indian economy and Indian society. Now that they have been joined by an Englishman and an Indian his blushes need be less scarlet.

For some reason — perhaps because India is being newly discovered by Western economists, perhaps, because there are economists in the Planning Commission, perhaps because foreign economists are treated with such courtesy, very likely because there is so much ignorance of Indian history and society — India has become a kind of plaything for academicians, so that advice is given not merely on matters in which the adviser is technically competent, but on the whole tone and structure of society. This kind of advice would never be given to governments or organisations in the foreign economist's home country, but is given freely and unselfconsciously to India.

Agricultural Economic Theory and the Indian Economy is one of the worst examples of this genre.

Not Good Enough

Madhava Das's revision of E M Hough's book and its abridged edition fail to be anything, which is a pity since Eleanor Hough's original edition was a useful and worthwhile venture at the time. The book has now grown by accretion without selection. The books could be an encyclopedia of co-operatives, but are not. Alternatively, they could be a history or a comparative analysis of co-operation in the different States, but are not. Rather they are an agglomeration of miscellaneous facts.

A book needs a theme, the focus of a clear question. Neither the
Mr. AL FOIL TALKS TO A "POWER PACKED" MAGNATE

"And profits, Sir" concluded the smiling Al Foil, straddling the telephone "is just what foil ensures."

"Foil plays such an important part in the Electrical Industry, as a conductor. Do you know there's foil in your fan condenser? Foil's to be found wherever superior dielectric properties are required by relieving stresses... and for screening cables and coils against electrical interference too.

"Aluminium Foil is the lightweight economical answer to a big job... whether as insulation against damp, heat and insect damage or preventing leakage... and that means profits."

VENESTA FOILS LTD
RAMNATH S'S PARGANAS, WEST BENGAL

Branches: BOMBAY, CALCUTTA, MADRAS, NEW DELHI

Selling Agents: WILLIAMSON MAGO & CO. LTD, CALCUTTA
large nor the abridged version which follows the larger work very closely has a unifying question. The fact that all facts mentioned do have to do with co-operation does not knit the work together. The books are not readable either because so many figures are used: a reader can absorb only a few figures from the text. If many are presented, they should appear in tabular form, but in the abridged version (p 75) 16 figures appear, not including dates. There is certainly need for an analysis of where and how and why co-operatives have grown or failed in India, and about tested measures to encourage them, but we still wait for it.

As an encyclopedia, it is not useful since most of the data refers to the years 1947-48 and 1956-57. If figures for later years are not available (although the abridged version came out a year later), at least the material for the intervening years could be published in tabular form.

**Unapplied Economics**

Shri Srivastava's book misses being good by failing to use analysis (and commonsense) in applying economic theory and a large body of comparative material to marketing in India. Professors Ashby and Raeburn, quoted on the fly-leaf, have given the work a strong recommendation, and it is a good thesis. But what is needed is show growing competence as an economist does not constitute a publishable book. The obvious topics are taken chapter by chapter, and within each chapter there are resumes of the experiences of India and other countries, usually the U S, Canada, U K and Sweden.

What more is wanted? An analysis of which foreign experiences are relevant to India and why. Only when such an analysis is made can one recommend — not a necessary element in scientific work — because one can recommend only after establishing a strong expectation that the suggested policies will have the hoped for effects. It is the absence of this element which hurts the book: a thorough rewriting to tie the comparative materials to analysis would make Shri Srivastava's volume a useful, perhaps the leading work, on Indian marketing.

Furthermore, Srivastava's book illustrates how some attitudes have become habitual. On page 123 we are told that paddy losses during storage are 1 per cent, wheat losses 3 per cent, and that "losses in the case of perishable crops are even more staggering". But what is "staggering" about losses of 1 or 3 or even 5 per cent? What are comparable losses elsewhere? Again, same page: "Damage by 'weevils and other pests is also enormous. No comprehensive estimate for these losses is available". Commonsense asks the question: how does Srivastava know they are "enormous" if they are unmeasured? (I take it that is what he means by the lack of a comprehensive estimate). And how large is "enormous"? This kind of writing is not analysis but merely an expression of common, unthought-out attitudes.

On pages 127-29 Srivastava pleads for more cold storage facilities, arguing that without them 15 to 20 per cent of fruit and vegetable crops are now spoiled. There is, however, no economic analysis of the issue raised. What is the value of the spoiled crop? What is the cost of cold storage for the crop? And here, of course, one means the costs, given the size of marketed lotta, distribution of output over the countryside, and the transport network. It seems not unlikely to this reviewer that there is little cold storage because it is uneconomic, and likely that grains are "poorly" stored because it is not worthwhile to rat and weevil proof small godowns. A proper study of agricultural marketing would analyse the actual costs and benefits in India and neither assume nor assert them.

As often occurs in economics books recommending policy, no attention is paid to the problems of administration and technical competence. Granted that grading would be beneficial, how does one recruit and or train the personnel? And once employed, how does one keep the graders honest? After all, the present arthiyas do grade when they buy: the problem is that their grading is suspect, perhaps dishonest, certainly not uniform. Would, for instance, graders at Rs 100 per month be better? If the answer is yes, then how and why? On these and similar questions Srivastava has nothing to say.

The volume by M S Randhawa and Prem Nath is the first in a series designed to "promotes better understanding of the problems of the farmers of various States" since "the need of a book which could give information about the climate, soils, crops, the farming communities, their villages and homes and their culture was badly felt" (p 9). As those who make a profession of worrying about Indian agriculture know, the purpose is admirable; the need clear. The question, then, is whether Messrs M S Randhawa and Prem Nath of the I C A R have produced a book which persuades us that the series will fulfil its purpose. The answer is "perhaps, but probably not."

For each of the States described —this volume is really three books on three States, bound in one set of covers — the authors attempt to describe the geography, soils and climate, then the crops and farming practices, and lastly the farmers and their villages. The authors are better on the geography and biology of agriculture than on the sociology, where they are weak indeed.

The strength of the book is in description; the weakness, in interpretation. The lists of crops, rotations and practices in regard to ploughing, weeding, irrigation are informative and if the succeeding books follow a common design we should be able to compare one State with another. A reader who knew the agriculture of another State but not Punjab would find points of comparative interest without difficulty; the novice reader would learn what Punjab farmers grow, when, and to some extent how and why. And reader, too, could learn how the villages and houses are laid-out, the look of the room in which the farmers live and of the clothes in which they dress. But if one asks more of the book, there will be disappointment, and there are difficulties even in the descriptive passages.

Your reviewer is an alien economist turned specialist in Indian agriculture, with definite, horrendous gaps in his agronomic knowledge. To such a person a couple of chemical formulas are uninfor-
ative, and one suspects too superficial for the soil specialist. On another level of assumption, the English equivalents of names of implements used in the mountains are given, but not of those used in the plains. Yet would a reader from Bengal or Madras be likely to know the equivalents of Punjabi terms?

Shri Randhawa wrote a book on "Community Projects in Punjab" five years ago. When your reviewer read it he felt that it was not a book about Community Projects in Punjab, but rather about agriculture in Punjab and how to improve it. That book was more informative than the present one and covered much of the same material, but suffered as does this one from an absence of knowledge of social analysis.

The important questions raised by village layout and style of housing are "why is it laid out this way" and "what effect does this lay-out have on social relationships, on cast hierarchy, on the distribution of power within the village?" To these questions, Messrs Randhawa and Nath give no answers.

They also treat 'culture' in the spirit of a travelogue — pretty embroidery and lovely songs. A strong element of pastoral romanticism pervades the discussion of culture, and perhaps as a consequence there is no presentation of the ideas of the people —attitudes, prejudices, aims, fears. The reader does not find out what the farmers are like, much less why they are that way. When a man who knows Punjab as well as Shri Randhawa does fail here, one wonders if it is because no one knows the answers. Alternatively, one wonders if it is the usual, rather sad case of a man of intimate knowledge approaching a subject without the necessary tools.

The sociological naivette is especially marked on pp 97-98 where one is given the classic Jat description: "finest of the Punjab peasantry . . . In physique they are inferior to no race of peasants . . . handsome features . . . frugal and industrious. Though not intellectual, they have considerable shrewdness . . . unusual independence of character . . . litigious . . . natural stubborness . . . but honest, industrious and enterpris..." This is followed by a quotation (without citation of source) from Darling in the same vein, although Darling does call the Amritsar Jat "spendthrift and violent"!. But nowhere is it mentioned that the Jat is the hardest drinking peasant in India. Why? Is this less relevant than the other characteristics to 'an understanding of the men? And is any of this —thrift, thriftlessness handsome-ness, industriousness, drunkenness . . . more than a compendium of the prejudices of pro and anti-jats? Kipling's India apparently lives on at the I C A R.

Finally, there is evidence that this is a "cut-and-paste job". On p 138 one finds the statement that jowar "as human food is confined to the southern districts, and that, too, in the winter months". Twice before this same statement has irritated your reviewer because the same information will support the remark that "in the southern districts jowar is one of the two staples, maintaining the cultivator for half his life". Since Shri Randhawa has been author of this sentence twice before, it is at least his. However, this cannot be said for lifting passages from the early Settlement Report for Rohtak District.

As your reviewer reads over the last few paragraphs he feels he has been vicious, and is sorry to be so. Had the authors restricted themselves to farming, at the explanation at which they are indeed good, this would have been a favourable review.

It is sad to review a group of books and find so little pleasant to say about them. Had Shri Srivastava attempted to relate the principles of marketing — especially a cost-benefit analysis and an analysis of the administrative problems—and the experience of other countries to Indian problems in more detail than he has; if Messrs Randhawa and Prem Nath used more sociological sophistication or restricted themselves to "farming in" rather than "farmers of" India, then we would have two good books.