

Dynamics of Rural Class Relations

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Jonathan Pattenden's *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-relational Approach* is an important book, drawing on his long-term fieldwork in the South Indian state of Karnataka, on the nature of class relations in rural India and its implications for rural labour. The book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the focus of the work, which is to understand poverty in rural Karnataka through class analysis. It also goes into the conditions of working people and the extent of rural poverty in Karnataka and India, and provides a description of the fieldwork locations and the methods of field research employed by the author.

The author's theoretical framework, which he describes as "a class-relational approach", is set out in Chapter 2. As a part of this effort, the author also provides a critique of alternative non-class approaches to the study of poverty which inform policy discussions as well as the

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work of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu and Amartya Sen.

Chapter 3 takes up the theme of labour, state and civil society in rural India. It seeks to explore the literature on rural poverty and related issues in order to delineate "certain key trends and debates."

The next chapter, titled "Changing Dynamics of Exploitation in Rural South India", goes into the modes of exploitation of rural labour from the villages studied in detail by the author in 2013 and 2014, in different settings. It looks at migrant labour from villages in Raichur working in faraway Bengaluru mostly on construction sites. It also examines the conditions of labour in Dharwad district where the workers from study villages commute to work in nearby towns.

Chapter 5 explores the issue of class relations as mediated by state and society at the local level. It provides a healthy antidote to the more romantic views of local governments—elected local bodies—by demonstrating how local government institutions "have become an increasingly important basis of rural dominant class control over the labouring class" (p 89).

This analysis is followed up in the next chapter by a study of the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in the study villages. It brings out the contested nature of the MGNREGS implementation, with the dominant classes adopting different strategies and tactics in different local contexts to try to ensure that MGNREGS does not empower the rural labourers to the detriment of the dominant classes.

Chapter 7 takes up the theme of how under a neo-liberal policy regime civil society also becomes "neoliberalised." It demonstrates that both forms of civil society organisations (CSOs)—non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs)—help "maintain the status quo or exacerbate inequality, and are linked to processes

of accumulation” (p 150). Chapter 8 provides a case study of Jagruti Mahila Sangathan (JMS), an organisation of Scheduled Caste (sc) female agricultural labourers in the district of Raichur. Unlike with earlier chapters which were rightly sceptical of the potential of csos to counter the modes of domination and exploitation to which rural labour is subjected, the author offers a more positive assessment of this particular organisation, arguing that the type of collective action engaged in by JMS is quite distinct from those of the neo-liberal csos discussed in the preceding chapter of the book.

The final chapter provides a summary overview of the main arguments of the book. It argues that “labour in rural India remains relatively weak, fragmented in a variety of ways, and largely restricted to small-scale forms of collective action focused on the state” (p 165). At the same time, it tries to strike an optimistic note on the challenges facing the rural labour by suggesting that class-based collective action by small-scale organisations can be upscaled and linked to broader fronts of working people, and if this happened, “degrees of material deprivation which remains high across

much of India would be less severe than they are today” (p 165).

Nature of Employment

The fieldwork on which the book is based was done over a much longer period, from 2002 when it began in a village in Dharwad district. The initial research expanded over the period 2002–14 to 39 villages in three districts: Dharwad (23), Raichur (15) and Mandya (1). The set of villages in Dharwad and in Raichur differ significantly from each other. The nature of employment also differs significantly. The labourers from Raichur district, in the absence of urban centres within the district not far from their villages that could provide jobs, migrate to Bengaluru to work in construction, whereas the labourers from Dharwad villages commute to work in nearby urban centres for non-agricultural employment.

Pattenden’s book is of considerable value, both for the body of rich empirical material that has been collected and analysed skilfully, and for the attempt to present a coherent narrative using the framework of class relations which brings out the ways in which the “dominant class”—defined by Pattenden as

being “surplus producers” whose land is cultivated by hired labour and who are more likely to diversify accumulation strategies out of agriculture (Table 2.1, p 35)—pursues the processes of accumulation of capital by domination and exploitation of “classes of labour” defined essentially as “net sellers of labour.” Much of the description in the book is vivid and provides a very realistic picture of processes on the ground. The book also shows that the state does not “retreat” in a neo-liberal regime, but provides robust support to capital, local and global. Its demonstration that the flow of government funds for rural development and welfare occurs through channels that the dominant class is able to control and benefit from, even in instances of rural spending on welfare schemes and entitlements of rural labouring classes is useful, even if unsurprising. The book’s critical assessment of local government institutions and its debunking of social policy as marketed by the World Bank and sundry liberal well-wishers are important.

The book’s attention to detail, in terms of spelling out and seeking to understand the distinct features of class relations as well as processes and mechanisms of

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accumulation in each of its sites of study, is commendable. For a book with so much detail, it does read well, though I must confess that it took me more than one reading before I could connect the disparate themes dealt with in each chapter.

Peasantry Made Invisible

Having summarised the book sketchily and stated its merits as I see it, I must now turn to some issues that the book's analytical framework raises as well as the understanding of the dynamics of rural class relations that the book is based on. First of all, it is not clear that the umbrella term "classes of labour" helps analyse a rural economy/society in which the peasantry continue to be present in large numbers, both absolutely and as a share of the rural working population. Peasant households—whose working members form a significant part of those working for wages in the villages studied—form a key social force in the countryside. Of course, the peasantry is differentiated, and the process of differentiation has continued under the neo-liberal regime though possibly at a slower pace than earlier at least during some sub-periods since 1991 in India (and Karnataka). But, the peasantry has not disappeared! The use of the term "classes of labour" tends to render the peasantry invisible. This has important implications for any strategy to change the balance of class forces.

A large majority of peasants fall in the official category of "small and marginal." They are actively engaged in commodity production. There is a whole set of issues facing this section that have historically been taken up by the peasant movements in India. It is of course also true that in the period of neo-liberal reforms, a substantial section of the peasant households with such holdings face the crisis of being unable to reproduce themselves through crop agriculture alone. Members of these households are also in many instances rural manual labourers working for wages in and outside of agriculture, in and outside the village. Nevertheless, this section of the agrarian population continues to cultivate and needs progressive mobilisation both against the state whose policies are impacting

negatively on farm viability and against industrial and agribusiness capital.

It is also the case that in at least some parts of India, land monopoly results in severe exploitation of tenants by big and powerful landlords. Land monopoly and the issue of comprehensive land reforms that put an end to the monopoly of landed property cannot be lost sight of. Apart from their economic significance, both the struggle for and achievement of such land reforms have important political and social implications in the Indian context, especially in relation to caste and gender. Only a strong alliance of the poor peasants and agricultural/rural manual labourers can help change the balance of class forces in the long run in favour of working people. Replacing the terms "peasantry" and "rural wage labour" with the term "classes of labour" does not advance either analysis or struggle for transformation.

Pattenden states,

The distinction between classes of labour and the dominant class is based primarily on the net buying and selling of labour power ...and whether households are surplus or deficit producers. (p 23)

However, when non-agricultural employment has become an important feature of the countryside, and when buying and selling of labour power cuts substantially across classes, and the rural–urban economic interactions have widened and deepened, the criteria become rather more problematic. The author defines the "dominant class" thus:

The term "dominant class" refers to net buyers of labour who tend to produce a surplus, and includes (i) those who produce exclusively through hired labour; and (ii) those who produce predominantly with hired labour but also work on the land themselves. (pp 23–25)

He adds that the term "dominant class" is a proxy for the capitalist class. In an increasingly complex rural economy, whose interactions with the urban economy have increased significantly, and in a setting where non-agricultural activities have become important in rural areas, these are inadequate and problematic.

It is a fact, as shown by the studies carried out by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) (<https://www.agrarianstudies.org/>), that the most rapidly growing

section of the rural population in the many villages that have been studied is the category of manual labour households whose income comes primarily from manual labour performed for wages. The term "classes of labour" has an obvious appeal in such a context, and provides a strong temptation to subsume the poor and middle peasantry and other petty producers under this label. In the view of the present reviewer, however, such subsuming is not useful and is in fact counterproductive to a careful and differentiated analysis of rural classes for arriving at a strategy for a progressive transformation of rural class relations.

What the studies by FAS also show is that while there is an ongoing process of proletarianisation among peasant (and other petty producer) households swelling the numbers of rural wage labourers, most peasant households continue to derive some, often significant portion of their incomes from self employment in agriculture and animal husbandry. Likewise, studies carried out by a team (of which the reviewer was a member) also indicate that the new "dominant class" in the countryside is best identified not solely in terms of net hiring of labour power, but in terms of interconnected modes of dominance aiding surplus appropriation. Land, while no longer the sole facilitator of such dominance, continues to be important as a marker of dominance. Ownership and control of multiple "enterprises," straddling agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, education, healthcare, entertainment, services, including leasing out of farm machinery, de facto control/substantial influence over local bodies and cooperative societies, strong influence in the bureaucracy, etc, define dominance.

The observations in the preceding paragraphs notwithstanding, Pattenden's book is an excellent addition to the literature on the political economy of rural transformation in India. One looks forward to his further work in this field.

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