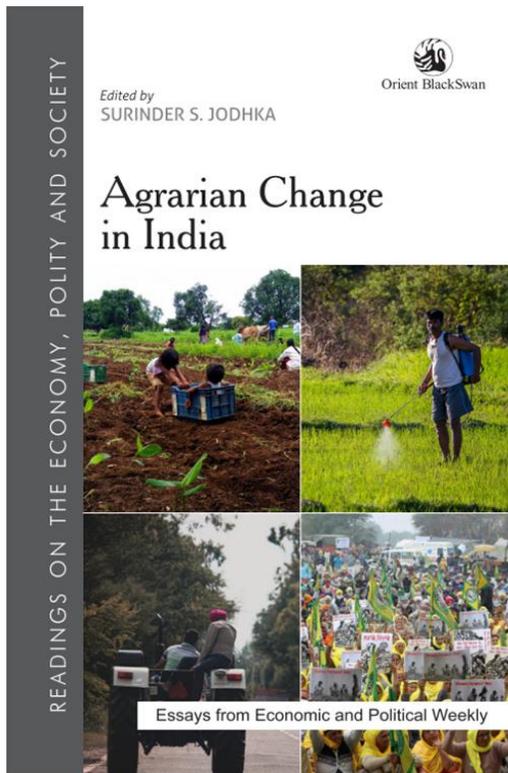


BOOK REVIEW

Political Economy of Farming in India: Chronicling 50 Years of Scholarship and Transformation

Budhaditya Das*

Jodhka, Surinder S, ed. 2022. *Agrarian Change in India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.



“We do not want a solar power generation plant here. Our animals and nature will be destroyed. We eat *rotis* made of bajra and drink *gbi*; we are content. This will finish if the plant is constructed here.” An old farmer told us angrily during a recent phase of fieldwork in western Rajasthan. On another day, another village resident explained why some people seemed willing to give their land away to renewable energy projects: “a farmer who earns one lakh rupees annually from his land calculates that he could earn two lakh rupees if he leases his land to the company.” The dilemmas, opportunities, and choices

* Assistant Professor, School of Human Ecology, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. das.budhaditya@gmail.com

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ISSN: 2581–6152 (print); 2581–6101 (web).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37773/eec.v6i2.1017>

of millions of farmers across India's vast rural landscape have always been intertwined with our nation's vision of progress, future, and modernity. Contrary to many expectations, agriculture refuses to fade from the national imaginary, even 75 years after Independence. *Agrarian Change in India* is a book that chronicles the journey of this occupation and its connections with the state, markets, and society in a changing world. The volume is a collection of 23 essays that have previously been published in the *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW) over 50 years from 1965 to 2019. EPW holds a special position within the social sciences in India, not only for being a repository of some of the finest writings and thinking on political economy but also for nurturing sophisticated scholarship on South Asia.

The essays are divided into five sections: (1) conceptual frames; (2) holding size and land reforms; (3) the Green Revolution and market edifice; (4) relational structures and transitions, and (5) emergent agrarians. Land forms both the base and beginning of agriculture and is the central element of several chapters. Economic and proprietary relations around land have been the principal basis for stratification in rural society. Chapters authored by Pranab Bardhan, Ronald Herring, Sucha Singh Gill, and Sheila Bhalla, among others, examine the patterns of land ownership and land reforms introduced by the postcolonial state within the broader frames of justice, equity, productivity, and the well-being of cultivators. Somewhat paradoxically, scholarly debates on Indian agriculture have built upon the insights of the remarkable philosopher of industrial capitalism, Karl Marx. The “mode of production debate” that unfolded in the pages of EPW in the 1970s and 80s remains a staple for every student of India's rural economy. The fate of farming and the farmers within (and beyond) capitalism—or what came to be known as the agrarian question—is the focus of several chapters by celebrated scholars (Daniel Thorner, Sam Moyo, Ashok Rudra, Alice Thorner, and Barbara Harriss-White, among others).

Markets are another focus area of the volume, in keeping with their centrality to agrarian life. Input, output, credit, and labour markets govern farm-level decision-making and determine profits and prospects for economic mobility for farming households. State attempts to regulate or intervene in markets—whether in the form of fertilizer subsidies, export and import tariffs, *krishi mandis* (farmer markets), or rural employment schemes—are driven by the agrarian political economy, global market forces, as well as a range of economic ideologies. Chapters by Ramesh Chand, Richa Kumar, Mekhala Krishnamurthy, and AR Vasavi focus on market policies, the Green Revolution, and their implications for farmer well-being in both regional contexts and at the national level. Finally, the

volume draws our attention towards farming communities and social groups engaged in agriculture and the heterogenous regional dynamics that shape the economic trajectories of these communities. Power, prosperity, poverty, and precarity are unevenly distributed within Indian agriculture, as shown by chapters on the farmer-capitalists of coastal Andhra Pradesh (Carol Upadhyya); Jat farmers of Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh (Surinder Jodhka, Jens Lerche, Anita Gill); farm entrepreneurs in Gujarat (Mario Rutten); and migrant, women, and Dalit labourers in Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh.

In its scope and coverage, *Agrarian Change in India* is comprehensive, and yet it leaves the reader still desiring a lot more. One wishes that more chapters engaged with questions of ecology, gender, and science and technology. Climate and ecological crises are now affecting farming livelihoods in an unprecedented manner, with climate risks increasingly inseparable from the systemic risks of agrarian capitalism (Matthan 2023). New technologies such as drones, digital transactions, remote sensing, and genetic modification have also emerged on the agrarian horizon. There is no dedicated chapter on water management, even though canal irrigation, river valley projects, and groundwater extraction are crucial drivers of agrarian change (Shah, Vijayshankar, and Harris 2021). Moreover, agrarian change in “marginal” ecosystems and ecologically difficult areas, such as arid zones, uplands, mountains, and forest areas (Bakshi, Chawla, and Shah 2015), remains an understudied phenomenon as the academic focus remains on fertile plains, river valleys, and irrigated tracts. As demonstrated in the earlier vignette from Rajasthan, agrarian change also intersects with the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and political conflicts over land and dispossession in contemporary India (Levien 2015). Articles from EPW that focus on some of these themes would have been welcome additions to the volume.

These omissions, however, do not detract from the overall value and significance of the volume. Surinder Jodhka’s introduction provides a comprehensive and insightful discussion on the field of agrarian studies and is particularly helpful in tracing key moments in India’s agrarian history over 200 years. *Agrarian Change in India* is an indispensable volume for anyone who wishes to understand Indian agriculture and familiarize themselves with the scholarly debates and theoretical developments in this field of study.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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