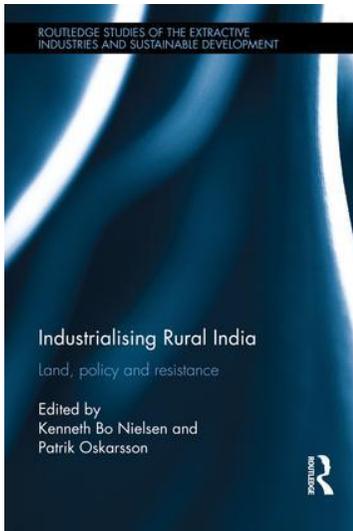


## BOOK REVIEW

# Industrialisation in India: the Many Worlds of Discord and Resistance

Radhika Krishnan \*

Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Patrik Oskarsson (eds.). 2017. *Industrialising Rural India: Land, Policy and Resistance*, London and New York: Routledge, ISBN: 1138936715, 9781138936713; pp. 200, INR 3458



The inter-linkage of rural livelihoods, local economies and natural resources has been a popular subject of academic research. Scholars have pointed out, for instance, the far-reaching impact of extensive forest transformations and agrarian change on rural communities. They have similarly spoken of the role of ‘common property resources’ – including vast grazing areas and forested regions officially designated as ‘degraded’ – in sustaining rural livelihoods, especially in dry tropical areas of India. It has been pointed out that biophysical as well as economic stresses are somewhat countered in multiple ways through the socially-

mediated usage of public land and products available in the forest space.

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Existing research has also delineated the social and economic impacts of the loss of these crucial ecological spaces.

The journey from the field and the forest to the factory is thus rarely free from multiple contestations, especially when new capital-intensive technological regimes are introduced in a predominantly agrarian, or forest dependent subsistence economy. Historians and sociologists have given us several authoritative accounts of shifting technological landscapes in India, accounts which have usefully delineated tensions over land and livelihoods, resource (mis)use and alienation, nature and culture, power, decision-making and bureaucracy. *Industrialising Rural India*, an edited volume, is situated within this well-etched out academic backdrop. What Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Patrik Oskarsson seek to do, as editors, is to provide readers with historical, cultural and deeply political insights into the vexed processes of land acquisition and policy-making in India today.

This volume has been divided thematically into three sections on public policy and its evolution, governance and resistance. In the section on policy evolution viz-a-viz development in India, Jørgen Dige Pedersen and Stein Sundstøl Eriksen offer us a historical perspective on the broad contours of public policy. Together, their essays attempt to introduce the reader to the evolution of State policy on industrialisation from the early post-independence decades of the 1950s and the 1960s, through the tumultuous decade of economic liberalisation, its aftermath, and to the present. Pedersen tries to explain the evolution of increased political traction enjoyed today by movements resisting the State's land governance frameworks. For Eriksen, Indian economic policy is a somewhat odd admixture of neoliberalism and statism. This is a policy paradigm that fails to put in place effective social security cushions to soften the impact of primitive accumulation and industrialisation, he argues. Kenneth Nielsen and Sarasij Majumder on the other hand present for us a fascinating exploration of ambiguous (and even contradictory) aspirations of the Indian peasantry. In their study of the much-documented agitation in Singur, in West Bengal, against a car manufacturing unit, they tell us that the desire for and deep attachment to land (seen equally as material as well as social/cultural capital and embodiment of status and security) is matched, oddly enough, with the aspiration for respectable non-agricultural employment. This, the authors argue, could account for the ambiguous nature of resistance movements and the “contradictory and contextual” political rhetoric on industrialisation (p. 79).

The following section on governance (of both nature and society) then takes this thread of ambiguity forward in interesting ways. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt speaks of the varied cultural and political universes embedded in the

process of extracting coal in India. Her carefully delineated categories of “national”, “neo-liberal”, “statecraft” and “subsistence” coal alert us to the fact that coal has both material *and* aspirational qualities. Its myriad lives, characterised by distinctly different norms, values and actors, are shaped, she argues, through geographies and human interactions, through “biophysical heterogeneity, technology and social institutions” (p. 88). Bengt Karlsson also attempts an anthropological account of the life of coal, wherein he sketches the contours of “tribal” mining in Meghalaya. Exploitative, poorly regulated and privatised as this enterprise is shown to be in this account, coal mining is seen as the means through which a new indigenous elite emerges as a key social force. And like Lahiri-Dutt, Karlsson portrays the fuzzy boundaries between the “legal” and the “illegal”, as coal lends itself to the creation of political power. Oskarsson and Siddharth Sareen, in their respective pieces, bring in a different perspective to the debate on governance in relation to mineral extraction. They highlight the nature of governance in mineral-rich areas: buffeted by high-pitched, rhetorical arguments of pro- and anti-mining groups, characterised by chaos and symbolised by a loss of local control over resources.

The final section offers an interesting ring-side view of resistance ‘from the trenches’. Prakruti Ramesh is particularly insightful in her reading of the anti-Vedanta protests in Niyamgiri and the *Adivasi* tryst with modernity and the attendant governance paradigms. Ramesh’s ethnographic study draws from and adds to existing academic work that underlines the ‘dark side’ of indigeneity as she documents particular inventions of tradition and performances of indigeneity which seek to safeguard the identity of the Dongria Kondhs as a “primitive”, forest- and land-loving community. This volume is a useful synthesis of academic work dealing with the challenges of industrialisation in rural India. The historical perspective, the articulation of the intriguing ambiguous aspirations of ‘New India’ and the equally compelling accounts of the social and cultural worlds of mineral resources are complemented by anthropological narratives of the complex world of mineral extraction, governance and resistance.

The volume has perhaps consciously steered clear from analysing ideological and tactical differences (if any) on the question of industrial policy between the major political blocks in India. An essay on the varying political compulsions of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance would have added a crucial element to this compilation. The reader would benefit, for instance, from an analysis of how different political parties establish their legitimacy amongst diverse political constituencies. In the same vein, a deeper insight

into the confluence (or not) between the electoral successes and industrial policy, into intricate negotiations and tensions that occur within the corridors of power would have enriched this volume. That being said, this volume is recommended reading for everyone interested in Indian political economy and ecology.