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Book Reviews

Agricultural Growth, Rural Poverty and Environmental Degradation, S.S.P. Sharma,
Serials Publications, New Delhi, 2009. pp. xii+113. Rs. 395.00.

Agricultural growth, rural poverty and environmental degradation are highly interrelated. The goal of any development planning in agriculturally-dominant developing economies should be to reduce poverty among the masses through radical agricultural transformation without causing environmental degradation. However, in practice, governments of several developing countries have failed to realise this goal. The reasons are many and varied.

For increasing agricultural production, various agricultural development plans and programmes were formulated and implemented. The developmental efforts involved creation of irrigation, use of critical inputs such as fertilisers, high-yielding varieties, plant protection chemicals, improved agricultural machinery and implements, land improvement and supportive policies. As a result of these, agricultural transformation in the country as well as in the state of West Bengal has taken place over a period of time. Consequently, the production and productivity of almost all crops increased. However, in the process of agricultural transformation certain distortions in the agro-eco systems had taken place. Land was degraded due to soil erosion and development of salinity and alkalinity. Water table in the dryland areas has gone down. Water table in the irrigated areas has risen resulting in salinity problems. The leaching of fertilisers and agro-chemicals has changed the chemical composition of the soil as well as water. Thus, the basis of the life supporting systems of agriculture, particularly, land and water degraded to a marked extent. The high input farming not only degraded the environment but also resulted in low profits to the farmers. Even though a spectacular growth rate was achieved in agricultural production, it cannot be sustained for long, until and unless the water and land degradation is stopped forthwith and further improvement made on the same. The agricultural transformation has also degraded social environment. The variation in productivity between the irrigated areas and dry land areas has increased. Rich farmers having access to better resource endowments have largely benefited. The resource poor small farmers having fragile and meager resources could not benefit much from the agricultural transformation. Further, mechanisation has led to unemployment among the rural labour. Hence, the agricultural growth has not succeeded in alleviating poverty. On the other hand, it degraded the physical and social environment.

Thus, the problems were acute in poverty alleviation, agricultural growth and environment. Hence, these problems will have to be studied in-depth and critically. In the light of these, the problem chosen in this book is need based and justified.

In Chapter 1, problematic situation has been explained. The author clearly mentioned the objectives, study area, methodology and analytical framework. The book draws from theoretical work published in India and other countries and present the same in a systematic manner. Ironically the book does not refer to analytical studies done in India on poverty and agricultural growth.

The situation in West Bengal in the context of India has been presented in Chapter 2. This chapter is divided under four broad heads socio-economic and demographic characteristics; agricultural development and poverty; reforms, redistribution and poor, poverty and environment linkages; and conceptual analysis.

Chapter 3 of the book deals with sample district, Nadia of West Bengal. The agro-economic features of the study area provide a general idea of the sample block of the reader. This has been discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter tables and graphs for the same set of data should have been avoided to remove duplication. All estimates and results have been presented in terms of figures and numbers. Discussion on these estimates is missing. Further, no sound methodology is adopted for empirical exercise. The presentation is weak in analytical context. Most of the text, state the numbers presented in various tables and has not paid much attention to interpret and analyse the data.

There are certain other weaknesses in this book, which are mentioned below:

- The data used in the study could have been updated with the recent available figures.
- The study does not come out with a clear idea of what should be done to improve agricultural growth, reduce poverty and improve environmental degradation in the selected area.
- The book has conceptual weaknesses because of which its findings do not convey meaningful policy messages which were presented in Chapter 5.
- The book contains so many typographical or spelling mistakes that it creates the impression that no care was taken to read the proof of the manuscript.
- Most of the studies listed under text are not cited in the list of references.

The book does not provide any fresh insights into the state of agriculture, poverty and environment in the study area.

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Growing Rural-Urban Disparity in Bihar, Edited by S.S.P. Sharma and T. Vijay Kumar, Serials Publications, New Delhi, 2008. Pp.Lxviii + 220. Rs. 695.00.

Any study examining the extent and forms of rural-urban disparity assumes great significance in view of the growing divide between rural and urban areas in India. The book under review has an added interest as the state, Bihar continues to exhibit a high incidence of poverty and low level of human development even after more than half-a century of development planning. The study focuses on rural-urban disparities which are analysed with the help of secondary data and a primary survey conducted in three urban centres covering nine Mohallas and eighteen villages.

The book is divided into eleven chapters along with an elaborate introduction which analyses the magnitude and different forms of rural-urban disparities at the all-India level and across states and the changes witnessed over time. It discusses the issues of rural-urban disparity from a multi-dimensional perspective covering demographic features, income and consumption standards, poverty, available employment opportunities and social and physical attainments in terms of development in education, health and infrastructure etc. Chapter 1 discusses the relative status of Bihar in terms of poverty and other standards of human development at the all-India level. It shows how the state economy and its rural sector suffer from a number of deficiencies according to various socio-economic parameters and thus find themselves much below the all-India achievements. Chapter 2 deals with poverty and economic development in the state. The authors in this chapter discuss how the state has recorded a slow rate of economic development and its rural sector has remained stagnant due to structural and institutional bottlenecks. In the post-liberalisation era, both agriculture and industry exhibited deceleration in the growth rate and in the face of low level of literacy and low migration into urban areas, incidence of poverty in rural areas became quite severe. In Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 the authors analyse the disparities relating to demographic features, education and health standards and quality of life, particularly in respect of housing and basic amenities available between rural and urban areas. Issues of agriculture and rural development, employment and work participation rate and development programmes and the poor are examined in Chapters 7, 8 and 9. In these three chapters the authors explain how the performance in the field of agriculture has remained all along dismal and per capita expenditure on social services and rural development remains at a very low level. The work participation rate shows wide variation between rural and urban areas and across sexes. Various development programmes reveal a tardy progress; particularly, liberalisation has not benefited rural people resulting in the pace of poverty reduction becoming slow. Chapter 10 undertakes an in-depth study of the rural-urban disparities with the help of household data collected through primary survey. The findings arrived at from the analysis of field level data corroborate the disparities witnessed while analysing the secondary data in the earlier chapters. The final chapter offers a few policy recommendations

for reducing rural-urban disparity in the state. Policy suggestions mostly emphasise higher investment in agriculture and infrastructure – physical as well as social – to create more employment opportunities and reduce poverty in the state and in the countryside. Institutional restructuring is recommended for eliminating hindrances in the way of effective implementation of different development programmes. It is argued that a glaring disparity between rural and urban areas has affected the character of social life, the political process and has thus created a condition for growing violence in the state.

Though highly informative and rich in analysis, the study is somewhat weak in terms of policy suggestions aimed at reducing widening rural-urban divide. While analysing the field data the authors have employed tabular analysis without applying quantitative techniques. In the analysis and interpretation of field data, the use of quantitative techniques would have led to more meaningful inferences.

However, the study has been meticulously carried out and offers much information and valuable insight into Bihar economy and its rural-urban divide. The book is an useful addition to the existing literature on rural-urban disparity and thus shall be of great help to researchers working in this area and to the policy makers of Bihar in designing action programmes towards dealing with the contentious issues plaguing Bihar economy.

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