Resurrecting Scholarship on Agrarian Transformations

ALPA SHAH, BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE

What we are seeing in India is not the classic agrarian transition. Poor Indians with homes in rural areas are no longer simple peasants or rural wage labourers. They are also dependent on migrant wage labour, on working in the rural non-farm economy and on petty commodity production and trade in the capitalist economy. This calls for revisiting the relevance of categories such as “poor peasant”, “middle peasant”, “rich peasant” by exploring the significance of the links that almost every single rural household seems to have (for its reproduction) with the wider economy beyond the village confines.

How has the Indian agrarian economy transformed over the last three decades? The 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of scholarly research on the agrarian economy in India. The classical agrarian question set the terms of the debate: How can the rural peasant economy make the transition to capitalism and also be squeezed to provide the resources needed for industrial, urban economic development and what are the obstacles? The questions of whether Indian agriculture is capitalist, to what degree, how unevenly it has developed, how recent it is and the related questions of whether the dominant mode of production is not capitalist but pre-capitalist or semi-feudal were subject to extensive discussion – some of the liveliest debates on the subject internationally were found in these very pages of the Economic & Political Weekly. However, with the rise of the critique of village studies, the problems of categorising “modes of production”, and the push for scholarship to move to urban studies and address the urgent problems of liberalisation, in-depth research and reflection on the agrarian economy declined.

Meanwhile, understanding the agrarian economy remains central to the strategy and tactics of all of the major left parties in India today. One of the crucial questions for the Indian left is the very basic political one that concerned Engels at the end of the 19th century – the question of what kind of alliances need to be formed in a country with a large peasantry? Whether for instance the struggle ought to be between the agricultural labourers and the big landowners; whether the peasantry should align with the landless labourers and the capitalist farmers against feudal landlords; or whether Indian left parties ought to forget about “land to the tiller” altogether and resurrect a struggle against capitalism rejecting any exclusive alliances with the rich peasants or capitalist farmers. In this last regard, in 2004 the newly unified Communist Party of India (Maoist) reaffirmed their analysis that the contemporary Indian economy is semi-colonial and semi-feudal. They thereby maintained the place of the peasantry as the main force of their revolutionary party of the proletariat and strategised the content of the revolution as the peasant war to seize land and replace feudal authority with “people’s authority”.

Global Capital and the Agrarian Question

Leaving aside the compelling political importance of scholarly analysis of the agrarian economy, partly as a result of liberalisation policies, there have also been fundamental shifts in the relationship between the rural and the urban, and agriculture and industry which, until recently, have fallen off the scholarly agenda of India. Meanwhile, in Africa, Latin America and south-east Asia, agrarian transformation continued to have keen observers. Highlighting the massive changes in the global economy, Henry Bernstein (1996) argues that access to global capital may allow developing capitalist economies to generate surplus for industrial growth independently of the development of agriculture. He even asks whether under neo-liberal globalisation, what he calls the “agrarian question of capital” is relevant any longer.

Neo-liberal reforms in India, at a rate second to that only of China, have indeed targeted sectors and incentivised industries catering for the urban middle classes and export markets. International finance capital has become a source for private sector investment in India. From the mid-1980s there has been a significantly weakened linkage between agricultural growth and industry as a whole. Non-agricultural sectors have grown rapidly, and the agrarian economy has certainly been neglected by the policy reformers, hell-bent on ushering in a supermarket society with its highly capital intensive supply chains. Lagging behind the rest of the economy in terms of growth rates and productivity, agriculture contributes less than 18% of India’s GDP today.

However, paradoxically, the majority of Indians are dependent on the rural economy and in complex ways. Reflecting global
patterns, 60% of Indians live off agriculture as farmers and farm labourers. The World Development Report 2008 on “Agriculture for Development” stresses the fact that three-quarters of the world’s poor live in the countryside, engaging in farming as their principal activity in conditions that do not foster a secure or sustainable livelihood (World Bank 2007). And processes of peasant differentiation may still be grinding away. Despite the claims for the “vanishing village” (Gupta 2005) and people’s aspirations to move away from farming, India does not appear to be witnessing a great civilisational shift from country to the town.

A quarter century ago, Terence Byres (1986) – after Lenin – laid out that there is no standard, unilinear or inevitable path of the transition to capitalism, and this was so even in Europe. In the last three decades, India, one of the countries with the largest agrarian population in the world, has been experiencing processes of social change that are unfolding not only in very different ways to that of the classic paths but also with vast diversity across the country. A limited number of scholars have realised the serious need to research, understand and theorise these changes. Some, such as Chatterjee (2008) and Gupta (2005) have attempted to develop their ideas into general formulations. However, only a few scholars have the research data to investigate these changes in any great depth. Some of the latter, such as Jan Breman in south Gujarat, rely on their continued long-term engagement with people from a particular set of villages. Others have restudied rural areas that they or others worked on in the past (for instance Jodhka’s 2011 revisits to the Haryana villages where he pursued his doctoral research, Wilson’s 1999 visit to central Bihar villages explored earlier under the direction of Pradhan Prasad, Rodgers and Rodgers’ 2001 and 2011 revisits to the villages in Bihar, Harriss, Jeyaranjan and Nagaraj’s 2010 visits to the villages studied by Gilbert Slater in Tamil Nadu or Venugopal Rao Nellutla’s visits to the villages studied by the Communist Party of India (People’s War) in Andhra Pradesh), or have combined restudies with new village studies (for instance Rama-chandran, Rawal and Swaminathan’s (2010) studies in Andhra Pradesh). Others are researching agrarian transformations in new areas (Chakravarti in Bihar 2001, Harriss-White, Mishra and Upadhyay in Arunachal Pradesh 2009, or Shah in Jharkhand). A few have inspiring tried to aggregate the lessons from some of these case studies with general trends (Basu 2010, Basole 2010 and Das 2010, or Lerche 2011). This growing body of work raises a number of fundamental issues which need further exploration. A recent workshop at Oxford made a start in this direction.

First, the structure of agrarian property has clearly been transformed. The land reforms of the 1950s had varied impact as did the introduction of green revolution technology. However, land centralisation is not the dominant trend in India. India is now an agrarian society where 63% of its producers own holdings of less than one hectare – the structure of landholdings is...
pear-shaped. Moreover, National Sample Survey (nss) 2003-04 data analysis reveals that only a little over 5% of the producers own more than three hectares and just 0.52% own more than 10.

Lack of concentration of land and the persistence of small-scale cultivation have been interpreted by some as signs of semi-feudal relations but almost everywhere the logic of semi-feudalism no longer seems to be at work. In many areas mid-ranking castes, such as the Jats in Uttar Pradesh (up) or the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris in Bihar, who were not the main ex-landlord group, have now become the dominant farmers. In other regions such as parts of Tamil Nadu, while ex-landlords are still significantly powerful their role in village life has very much changed. Sharecropping arrangements in most places, even in areas such as Purnia district in Bihar, have been largely replaced by the use of wage labour in agricultural production. Thus in many parts of India, agricultural bondage and attached labour have significantly decreased, if not disappeared, while casual wage labour has increased.

Where apparently new arrangements of attachment have appeared, settings couched in sharecropping terminology, in regions of India where sharecropping has been rare, in places in Uttar Pradesh, Har yana, Arunachal Pradesh or even Tamil Nadu, closer investigation often reveals that they are quite different from the old ones and more a piece-rate system for agriculture. Since the time of unfree labour relations pervading the semi-feudal heartlands, we seem to be watching a widespread decrease and transformation in sharecropping. These uneven changes mean that the direct confrontation that small peasants faced with exploiting classes within villages that characterised semi-feudal relations rarely exist in the same way today. These transformations have massively affected social relations in rural areas. In regions from Punjab down to the south in Tamil Nadu, dalit landless labourers, for instance, are no longer dependent in the way they were 30 years ago on dominant landowners.

Tenancy has also declined. National Sample Survey Organisation (nss0) data in 2002-03 suggests that only 6.5% of the operated area was under tenancy. Where cases of tenancy are reported, it seems important to question the classic “feudal” model, because most landholdings now are no longer sufficient to provide for the reproduction of households. To what extent does farming income provide a major livelihood for households reported to engage in tenancy? In fact these households are more likely to run on the salaries of teachers, government servants, shopkeepers or traders than the income from the rent of the farm or its produce. Tenancy can be part and parcel of capitalist social relations where people who have risen up the class hierarchy no longer wish to till their land themselves. And though in many of the affluent states, like Punjab and Haryana, there is a tendency towards “reverse tenancy” in which smaller farmers lease out their land to larger, richer tenants, in other areas it is reported that people are losing their interest in village affairs and the significance of landownership as the basis of social status and political power has significantly diminished. The case for redistributive land reform certainly needs rethinking.

Multiple Means of Livelihood

Second, the classic push away from agricultural work at home, in which the farmer or farm labourer moves away from the village to become a factory hand in the city, is not taking place as the dominant process of labour transformation in India. Neither is the classic “polar” differentiation of the peasant classes – the formation of a large rural proletariat and an agrarian capitalist class. The average income for farmers operating less than four hectares of land was shown by 2003 nss0 data to be negative. Farm incomes then are no longer sufficient to provide for the needs of most rural working people. However, growth in regular employment has been extremely slow (Bhaduri 2009) and most people are being pushed to work in the unregulated informal and unorganised sector which has almost no labour protection but accounts for 93% of the Indian workforce (Harris-White 2004). It also seems that rather than industry per se, this labour is being absorbed in other sectors such as construction, workshop manufacturing, large-scale capitalist farms of other regions, or services. The vulnerability, mobility and marginality of this informal sector labour may explain the persistence of small-scale cultivation. Multiple livelihood options are necessary for the reproduction of rural households. So the rural economy has developed in very complex ways. What are the means by which rural households reproduce themselves and what kinds of differentiation might result?

To answer these questions, recent studies of labour raise the importance of the circular migration of labour for work in India’s informal economy in India. In most areas the labouring poor leave the village to work but keep coming back in a pattern of migration that is not just about becoming “footloose labour” (Breman 1996) but remaining footloose. Some have estimated that there are 50 million Indians circulating as labour, others have suggested the figure is nearer 100 million. Casualisation is the primary feature of this labour and as Breman, Guérin and Prakash (2009) and others have shown, different degrees of bonded labour relations are a common condition of this capitalist work relation. While some need the advances which tie them to particular contractors in moments of crisis, others often submit to bondage simply in order to get employed. Breman points out that this neo-bondage (of varying degrees) is significantly different from the forms of agrarian bondage of the past as it comes without the guarantees of provisions of basic needs in slack seasons or when labourers were not able to work because of ill health, late pregnancy, old age, and other dependent phases of the life cycle. He finds conditions of the rural proletariat in places like Gujarat pauperising and precarious.

EPW Index

An author-title index for EPW has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2010. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the EPW web site. Visitors can download the index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.) EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.
There is an important regional and caste dynamic to this massive labour migration. Dalits and adivasis predominate and central and eastern India are noted to be reservoirs of seasonal casual labour migration for the rest of the Indian economy. Adivasis and dalits from Jharkhand, Orissa and Chhattisgarh, for instance, will commonly go to work as wage labour for six months to the brick factories of Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the agricultural plains of Punjab and Haryana and more recently to the construction companies and mills of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, but will come back to their home villages for the rainy season where many will have small plots of land to cultivate rice that may last them a few months. It seems that these patterns of migration are increasingly prevalent and although labour from Jharkhand may go to the factories of Bihar, Bihari low caste labour may in turn move to Delhi, Punjab or Gujurat.

Even if this migrant labour does not reinvest in agriculture back at home, migration has fostered the increased purchase of clothes, better food, healthcare and schooling, causing fundamental shifts in the agrarian economy. Rodgers and Rodgers’ (2001) restudy of villages in Purnia district, areas akin to those that were seen as bastions of semi-feudalism in the 1980s, stresses the fundamental importance of temporary migration on the marketising and monetising of the rural economy and the decline in the political exactions and social mechanisms of semi-feudalism. The great transformation to industrial society does not appear to be taking place in India, but rural areas are being fundamentally transformed through migrant labour. And it is possible that this complex dynamic of rural-urban connections through circular migration is here to stay in India.

**The Non-Farm Economy**

Moreover, while seasonal casual migration is important, there is also a significant non-farm economy which has developed within rural areas. In 2004-05 this non-farm rural economy accounted for one-fifth of total employment and for 50 million jobs more than in the rural farm economy. This includes work in construction, “trade and hotels”, manufacturing, as well as transport and storage. According to NSSO data, the largest number of new jobs is actually increasing in the category of the self-employed. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector argues that 66% of the agricultural sector is in fact self-employed (166.2 million people). There is a vast section of the Indian population that is involved in petty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMEEKSHA TRUST BOOKS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>China after 1978: Craters on the Moon</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The breathtakingly rapid economic growth in China since 1978 has attracted world-wide attention. But the condition of more than 350 million workers is abysmal, especially that of the migrants among them. Why do the migrants put up with so much hardship in the urban factories? Has post-reform China forsaken the earlier goal of ‘socialist equality’? What has been the contribution of rural industries to regional development, alleviation of poverty and spatial inequality, and in relieving the grim employment situation? How has the meltdown in the global economy in the second half of 2008 affected the domestic economy? What of the current leaders’ call for a ‘harmonious society’? Does it signal an important ‘course correction’? A collection of essays from the Economic &amp; Political Weekly seeks to find tentative answers to these questions, and more.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rs 350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Windows of Opportunity</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A ruminative memoir by one who saw much happen, and not happen, at a time when everything seemed possible and promising in India. K S Krishnaswamy was a leading light in the Reserve Bank of India and the Planning Commission between the 1950s and 1970s. He offers a ringside view of the pulls and pressures within the administration and outside it, the hopes that sustained a majority in the bureaucracy and the lasting ties he formed with the many he came in contact with. Even more relevant is what he has to say about political agendas eroding the Reserve Bank’s autonomy and degrading the numerous democratic institutions since the late 1960s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pp xii + 190</td>
<td>ISBN 978-81-250-3964-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rs 440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Available from

**Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd**

www.orientblackswan.com

Mumbai Chennai New Delhi Kolkata Bangalore Bhubaneshwar Ernakulam Guwahati Jaipur Lucknow Patna Chandigarh Hyderabad

Contact: info@orientblackswan.com
commodity production (PCP) where households control their means of production for exchange as well as exploit their own labour. Labour lawyers and economists treat it as disguised wage work. But this is often a form of more or less independent productive activity for the market, reproduced through relationships mediated by the exchange of commodities, in spheres of manufacturing, trade and services in particular, almost all of which is in the informal economy. For instance, not just food from agricultural production, but hunting, fishing, milk production, brewing, weaving, pottery, carpentry, construction, small shop keeping and producing and selling food in a restaurant or tea stall.

Most petty commodity producers are extremely vulnerable, struggling to survive, sustaining themselves in conditions where they will not be able to grow and any surplus will be accidental. They are, as Harriss-White points out, easily susceptible to exploitation through exchange on several markets: property, raw materials, money and the finished product, other than that of the classic one of labour for wage work. Harriss-White (2010) argues that “India’s capitalist transition and ongoing transformations have created a complex social formation in which – despite rampant differentiation and the creation of advanced forms of corporate capital … together with a substantial working class – PCP is the most common form of production.” Moreover, she argues that “it is not transitional”. Like seasonal labour migration, perhaps PCP too is here to stay, an element of the Indian economy as modern as the corporation. And, as in the case of labour migration, we need urgently to research and understand the widespread significance of PCP in the transformation of rural economies of India and in processes of class differentiation.

Third, the paradoxical role of the Indian state ostensibly outside its own reach in the “informal economy” in both propping up the poor in village India in providing infrastructure, and as a potential driver of class differentiation must not be overlooked. In remote parts of India such as Arunachal Pradesh and Jharkhand, there is significant evidence that the state provision of commercial loans, of education and of reservations for government posts are triggering class differentiation amongst the peasantry despite the mediocre capital investment in agriculture. But more generally across the country the role of village-based anti-poverty programmes such as guaranteed employment in public work, delivery of free – or highly subsidised – food, have played significant roles in keeping the village household alive. Chatterjee (2008), drawing on the work of Sanyal (2007), makes this point in arguing that “there is a growing sense now that certain basic conditions of life must be provided to people everywhere and that if the national or local governments do not provide them, someone else must, whether it is other states or international agencies or non-governmental organisations”.

Not the Classic Agrarian Transition

Clearly what we are seeing in India is not the classic agrarian transition. If they ever were, poor Indians with homes in rural areas are no longer simple peasants or rural wage labourers, but people who have complex livelihoods involving both forms of work: tilling their small plots of land and now, dependent on migrant wage labour, on working in the rural non-farm economy and on petty commodity production and trade in the capitalist economy to reproduce their household. This is a circumstance which needs new conceptual tools. We have known for a long time now that villages are not republics but the importance of seasonal casual labour migration, of the rural non-farm economy and of petty commodity production, stresses a new need critically to revisit the relevance of categories such as “poor peasant”, “middle peasant”, “rich peasant” by exploring the significance of the links that almost every single rural household seems to have for its reproduction with the wider economy beyond the village confines. Scholars of agrarian transformations in India will need to think through the relevance of Bernstein (2008) and Lerche’s (2010) “classes of labour” to the segmentation of labour in India.

Lerche (2010) identifies the “classes of labour” on the basis of different types of employment and degrees of self-employment, ordered by levels of remuneration and protection, and also by a hierarchy of powerlessness. But scholars also need to consider whether India (or at least parts of it) is witnessing a transition from peasant production to petty production in which producers embody micro capital as well as labour and do not lose entire control of the means of production but are compulsively incorporated through circuits of exchange. They also need to think through the tentative suggestion of the Sanhati editors that it is the Indian state (not putative feudal lords) and its many faces which are increasingly holding back the transformations of capitalism (Das 2010). The state has an incoherent project, encouraging small-scale livelihoods, destroying them, protecting them, ignoring them, or allowing them to survive as an unintended consequence of other intentions altogether.

Changes are taking place in different ways and at dissimilar speeds across the country. Development within India means that there could be several different agrarian questions, driven by regionally disparate class constellations and development trajectories. Some agrarian regions of India have also been much better studied historically (for instance Punjab, Haryana, western UP, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu) than others (for instance the north-east or central and eastern India) and more theoretically informed empirical work is needed in these latter regions. Undoubtedly the various left parties are aware of these significant changes. Yet, what is remarkable is how slow they are to incorporate them into their own analysis of agrarian transformations. This raises the question to what extent the hesitations about questioning party analysis from within are to do with politics within the left – the likelihood that it becomes too risky to incorporate into party analysis understandings of transformation which would result in a
narrowing of the conceptual distance between competing political factions. It also raises the questions to what extent research undertaken by political parties risks being driven by particular party lines and political agendas, and how different scales of analysis inform party politics.

Macro level data alone cannot unveil the nuances and implications of local transformations that are vitally important for political tactics (Ramachandran, Rawal and Swaminathan 2010). They mask significant details. They are often collected under classificatory frameworks which may no longer be the most appropriate. Case studies emanating from the village level – though in no sense does this mean treating the village as a static, bounded unit – are crucial to reveal the complexities of transformations, raise new questions and analyse continuities and changes. But they should not be used for generalisations. A dialectical treatment of case studies and new larger-scale data sets, with both being used to ask new questions of each other, must be the foundation for the way forward with this new research agenda.

REFERENCES

CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram 695 011 KERALA
Tel 0471-244 8884; email: acad@cds.ac.in http://www.cds.edu

ADMISSION 2011
PhD Programme in Economics

Full-time residential programme affiliated to the Jawaharlal Nehru University commencing on January 02, 2012.

Study Proposals for admission to the PhD Programme are invited in the following areas:

- Agriculture and Natural Resources
- Industry, Trade and Technology
- Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Security
- Issues in Economic Growth and Development
- Gender and Development
- Labour and Employment
- Migration
- Population and Human Development

Eligibility:
MPhil with FGPA of at least 6.0 (high second class) and Master’s with ≥ 55% marks in Economics or related disciplines.
- Those awaiting results of qualifying examination also may apply.
- SC, ST & PH (≥ 40% disability) candidates are eligible irrespective of percentage of marks in the qualifying degree.

Financial assistance:
- ICSIR fellowship @ Rs. 16,000 per month.
- UGC JRF & RGNF can be availed of for the Programme.
- ICSIR’s 2-year salary protected scheme for University/College Teachers.

Application form, Guidelines, selection process and other details may be downloaded from www.cds.edu

APPLICATION DEADLINE: OCTOBER 31, 2011

SEPTEMBER 19, 2011

Director