

## **Book Review**

### **Agrarian Relations in Tripura**

**Arunima Deka<sup>1</sup>**

**Socio Economic Surveys of Three Villages in Tripura A Study of Agrarian Relation, (2019), Madhura Swaminathan and Ranjini Basu (eds.) Tulika Books, New Delhi, pp. 376. Rs. 600.**

‘Social Economic Surveys of Three Villages in Tripura A Study of Agrarian Relation’ edited by Madhura Swaminathan and Ranjini Basu is an important contribution both to the study of agrarian situation in the country and also contextualizing the situation in northeast India. While we find major studies on the agrarian situation from around the world in journals like *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *Oxford Agrarian Studies* etc there was lack of literature on the Northeast India. One of the reasons could be the peculiarity of the region itself in terms of its geographical contours where the nature of agricultural practices differed greatly from that of elsewhere in India making it a challenging subject of research. Nonetheless, as a part of the Project on Agrarian Relation in India (PARI) of the Foundation of Agrarian Studies, this book draws on the primary data collected for the study. Importantly the study draws data with in-depth household and village level questionnaires from three villages with distinguishing agrarian systems, jhum, upland and lowland cultivation.

The authors have divided the book into five sections, the context, agrarian structure, production and agrarian relations, aspects of income generation, standard of living and finally an overview. In locating the context of the book and the overall development situation in the state, the book opens with an interview between V. K. Ramachandran and Manik Sarkar, former Chief Minister of the state (1998-2018). Sarkar traces the history and achievement of the Left Front government in Tripura and also touches upon the situation after 2018 including hostility to the Left and also rise of one party authoritarian rule. He outlined the deplorable economic situation in rural areas where starvation, migration and even sale of children in some tribal areas have been reported attributing the reasons to the lack of democratic political space to the rise of such issues today.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, OKD Institute of Social Change and Development. Email: mailarunimadeka@gmail.com

The first section of the book 'the context' provides a detail introduction to the sample villages of Mainama of Dhalai district, Muhuripur of South Tripura district and Khakchang of North Tripura district, surveys in which were conducted during May-June 2016. The village profiles are detailed and in-depth also because of the fact that they were surveyed in 2005 for the Tripura Human Development Report 2007. This in a way provides the reader a picture of the changes that occurred in the nature of settlement, agricultural practices and changes, village infrastructure, population and demographic data, land use, irrigation and cropping pattern, employment and income for over a period of nearly a decade. The economy of Tripura is predominantly dependent on agriculture. Land reforms programmes therefore play a vital role in determining the relationship between the peasants and the state. Furthermore, the demographic transition of the state owing to Bengali migration lead to wider political struggles against alienation of tribal land, refugee issue, against the backdrop of which the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reform Act (TLRLR) 1960 was enacted. The third chapter of the book provides a detailed history of the land reforms in the state and the role played by the Left Front government in implementing them. The chapter also provides detail of cropping pattern, land distribution and data relating to percentage of population engaged with agricultural, horticulture and allied activities. This detailed chapter on the agrarian economy of the state is followed by a short but important chapter wherein V. K. Ramachandran and Madhura Swaminathan highlight the key achievements of the noted 'Tripura Model' which laid importance not just on ensuring lasting peace and repeal of the AFSPA but which 'involved investment in human development and people's participation in the implementation of socio-political and economic policy' (p.59).

The second section of the book provides a detailed picture of the agrarian structure, production and agrarian relations in the three sample villages based on survey data on socio economic classification of households, type of cultivators, cultivation practices etc. This section also has detailed chapters on each selected village, studying the land tenure and land use pattern, cropping pattern, crop yields, income, irrigation facilities, labour absorption in agriculture. These chapters discuss detailed agrarian production relations along with providing interesting details of peculiar prevalent practices like lottery system for land allotment in places where jhum cultivation is undertaken, contract leasing system etc. The discussion brings to light the differences in production system and land and labour relations in areas with different cultivation practices comprising of jhum, lowland and upland. This is followed by a detailed chapter on the employment scenarios of the state across cosec economic class. The authors of this chapter highlighted the critical employment scenario of the state where wage labour is the primary source of employment for majority of the households in the state. In this context the authors pointed out the role played by schemes like MGNREGS both in employing and providing cash earnings to the households. This scheme also played an important role in creating employment opportunities for women in a scenario where women's employment is

remarkably low. The following chapter highlights the scenario of banking sector in state wherein the author concludes that the features of underdevelopment are evident in the banking services of the state. The author suggested efforts to strengthen the outreach of banking particularly in underbanked /unbanked pockets and to make available bank credits, which according to the author is low owing to lack of demand for credit from households, for higher economic growth. However, the subsistence nature of agriculture and economic activities makes Tripura and the Northeast region a peculiar case where demands for cash were bound to be low.

The third section highlights aspects of income generation in the state. While estimating the poverty situation in the state and income diversification the authors took into count the data on crop production, agriculture and non agricultural wages, animal husbandry, rent from agricultural land, salary, remittances, etc. again emphasizing how geographical factors importantly determined household income, which was found to be lowest in area with jhum cultivation. The second chapter in this section provides us a picture of the homestead economy of the state which is found to play a major role in ensuring food and nutritional security to the households. The next chapter highlights rubber plantation in the state and the authors calls it a 'harbinger of change'. The authors shows us how rubber cultivation improved income of the people and brought down extremist activities, resettled tribal households who were earlier practicing jhum, gave people better access to health and education services. This chapter points out the success of rubber cultivation in states like Kerala where industries have grown around this sector similar success can be anticipated for Tripura too. However, the very shift from food to cash crop and that too, for rubber plantation, where the price of rubber is determined by international market makes those engaged with the sector highly vulnerable. The loss can be greater than the benefit accrued, by this shift to cash crops.

The fourth chapter highlights the standard of living in the state with data from the selected villages and provides readers with a picture of the features of asset ownership, availability of basic amenities and housing, literacy and schooling. The concluding section provides an overview of the three study villages highlighting major findings. The final chapter provides the reader a picture of the public support system for rural households in the state including income support through income generation schemes, or provisions like free school education etc. It also highlights implementation of government schemes like the Forest Right Act in the state, along with the status of the Public Distribution System, MGNREGS and the livelihood support extended by the government in the state, the 'progressive transformation' under the Left Front government of rural people.

The chapters in this volume have provided a detailed picture of the agrarian relation in the state. It has very well highlighted how in a country and a state which is predominantly dependent on agriculture as the main source of earning and employment of people, the agrarian issue becomes a political question. It is not just

about improving the standard of living of the people but also ensuring equitable distribution of land and resources, access and ownership of land, ensuring welfare schemes to benefit the people and overall the willingness of the state to address issues of poverty, landlessness, and employment. This is where the success of a Left Front government can be counted in ensuring a democratic space for participation of people irrespective of class, caste and belongingness. The agrarian issue cannot be bereft of the State, land and labour relation and this book has very successfully portrayed the dynamics of this relation. This book becomes all the more important in the context of the rising farmer protest against the newly proposed bills for reforms in the agriculture sector. The new trend to redefine the state society relation with dictates from monopoly capitalist houses attempts to turn agriculture into a mere commodity rather than a relation, a practice which defines relation between land and labour.

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