

Agrarian Change in India : A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present a case study on agrarian change contrasting the official secondary data with independently collected primary data regarding some key aspects of agrarian change in rural India. The main argument of the paper is that while the official statistics on certain aspects are reliable, on other aspects of agrarian change such as land holding structure can be misleading when taken prima facie. In order to get closer to the truth, we need disaggregated original primary surveys, which can portray a nuanced picture of agrarian change over time. This is particularly the case with the longitudinal data pertaining to land ownership.

Keywords : Agrarian, Ownership, Surveys, Longitudinal Data

I. INTRODUCTION

Capitalist development has been defined in various ways. Maurice Dobb, in his discussion in *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, reviewing the definitions of capitalism, denotes employment of wage labour in the market as the ultimate characteristic of capitalism. While employment of wage labour is an important indicator in itself, another most important indicator, especially in agriculture, is the polarisation of the class/agrarian structure. That is the concentration of means of production (in land in particular) on one side and formation of absolutely landless labouring class on the other. Exposition of this process came widely to be known as the polarisation in this present study.

Polarisation thesis was first propounded by Marx in the volume-1 of *Capital* in the chapter, 'So Called Primitive Accumulation', while dealing with the enclosure movement in Britain. Later Lenin raises the issue in his *The Development of Capitalism in*

Russia. Lenin argues that land concentration inside Russian countryside is taking place and that it is an inevitable process during the development of capitalism – in any country. The small and middle peasants would be swept away by the juggernaut of capitalism. In the Russian debate the process came to be called the 'depeasantisation' process. The process otherwise has also come to be called the proletarianisation process.

A variation on the theme was the German debate around the same time within the SPD (Social Democratic Party) between Karl Kautsky and a group of Social Democrats headed by Eduard David.³ In this debate while Kautsky believed that Polarisation could be a long term tendency --- and not necessarily visible in the short run --- Eduard David et al categorically held that small and middle peasants have sufficient resilience to withstand the force of agrarian capitalism. David and his group questioned the alleged superiority of large scale agriculture. Whether capitalist or socialist they (David et al) held

that small scale farming is more viable and more rational than large scale farming. They felt small scale farming is an effective alternative to collectivization. While the debates are of great relevance in the context of socialist agriculture they are also of significant importance in the context of the study of capitalist agriculture. They provide insights into the understanding of structural processes: on whose basis politics operate and evolve.

The Indian debate on 'Mode of Production' in agriculture too raises questions about the definition of capitalism.⁴ The major bone of contention was whether to limit the definition of capitalism to the employment of wage labour alone or to add the criterion of accumulation and reinvestment (on the farm). It was argued by Utsa Patnaik that while emergence of labour power as commodity is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient condition. She felt that reinvestment and accumulation are the sufficient conditions; which means that Polarisation process --- which is in turn product of reinvestment and accumulation --- is a definitive feature of capitalist development in agriculture.

The concern of the present article is the examination of polarisation thesis and entailing politics in particular empirical situations. The emergence of the above said process is a complex phenomenon. As Lenin in the Russian context and noted European historian Robert Brenner in the European context have noted: firstly, the process is contingent on the specificity of the circumstances; and secondly, the process takes place over *longue duree*, and depends on the long established socio-historical structures. The above discussion though brief, covers the essentials of the debate over the definition of agrarian capitalism.

In this article we examine the above proposition by contrasting secondary official data provided by government with the independently

collected primary data regarding agrarian change over more than a period of two decades, and attempt to compare the two and discuss the differences. The official data pertains to India mainly from the Statistical Abstracts prepared by the government of Bihar. Attempt in this article is to compare the district level official data with data and information collected firsthand through primary survey; and the contrasts between the two are sought to be discussed. This paper is divided into three parts> In the first part of the paper we discuss the official data and the findings from that data; and in the second part of the paper we discuss the findings of our original field survey. Finally we attempt to see what implications these differences hold for policy.

There were some limitations to this data; for example we could not collect data on land reforms, as official information on the implementation of land reforms is scanty, and difficult to get. Nowhere in the government statistics do we find mention of either the land distributed or to be distributed. The degree of reliability of official data varies within the secondary data between different aspects. Information and data under certain aspects is more reliable than the others and on certain matters only the government can provide data - such as on rainfall, for example. At the same time crucial aspects such as the number of agricultural labourers and cultivators in the district, the government data is quite unreliable; from this it follows that while depending on the secondary data is inescapable in certain matters, it has to be taken with care in certain other matters. Following this in the second part of the paper we discuss the results of primary survey. In conclusion, we state our viewpoint that, particularly regarding agrarian change, primary data collected through either survey or through qualitative methods is imperative. Exclusive reliance on official statistics may not always provide a correct reflection of the reality.

Trends in the official agricultural data

The official data presented here is basically the district level data taking the case of Nalgonda district in Bihar. The trends within it are basically trends at district level. Below an attempt is made to discuss the trends in different aspects of the data for the years 1970-1990. Data on agrarian structure was basically collected from the Statistical Abstracts as mentioned above. This agricultural data is collected by the government as part of the World Agricultural Census (WAC).

Impact of irrigation and water

Irrigation and availability of water is a major determinant of agrarian change over time and the data on the pattern of irrigation too shows interesting trends. We have data for the period 1957-1990. In Nalgonda district irrigation takes place basically through three major means. They are: canals, tanks and open wells. Though there is a boom of late in tube well sinking we do not have any data on that. The canal irrigation in the district was minimal in 1957 and we see that it goes steeply up during 1965-66. The land irrigated under canals increased rapidly during that year. This is probably owing to the expansion of irrigation under the newly constructed Nagarjuna Sagar Project. From 1966 onwards land irrigated through canals remains steadily high, except during the year 1987-88 when canal irrigation dips somewhat low. Otherwise there are only minor fluctuations in the canal irrigation profile.

The changes in crop pattern

Under the data on crop pattern we have the below figure-6. The trends in the figure are for the period 1960-90. The graph showing the area sown under food and non-food crops clearly tells that area under food crops is consistently larger than area under non-food crops. While both are fluctuating over time,

it appears that area under food crops has fluctuated more than area under non-food crops. The data in the final analysis tells that Nalgonda is a region where the growth of commercial or industrial crops is much less when compared to the traditional food crops. The data also tells that this has remained consistent over the period 1960-90. Though since early eighties the gap has been closing in, it is still quite large.

Conclusion

In the foregoing we have presented both the official statistics and statistics generated through primary survey. The official data clearly shows the trends towards deconcentration and fragmentation of land holdings for the entire district. This means that during the period 1970 to 1990 the small and marginal holdings have proliferated in India. This view however is found to be misleading. The primary survey shows that while there is strengthening of small and marginal holdings in semi-irrigated region, in the irrigated region, on the other hand, there is a strengthening of upper caste landlords. Thus the general picture presented for the whole of the district by official statistics is debatable. These being the case, the governments and social scientists using the official data at State and national levels, have to take the data with caution. But what if the official statistics are not portraying reality, as they should? The point is that official statistics feed into official policies, which affect people. Therefore they need to be as closer to the truth as possible. And also it can lead to the consideration of the fact that irrigation can have the effect of strengthening pre-existing inequalities and therefore can lead the government to consider equity measures along with improving irrigation. Or conversely the proliferation of small holdings in the large semi-irrigated region ought to propel governments to take policy measures to protect the survival of the marginal, small and middle peasants particularly in present circumstances when the cases of farmers' suicides are frequently reported.

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