

Book Review

Jonathan Pattenden (2016) *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN 978-0719089145. 216 pages. Hardcover £75.

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This book makes valuable contributions to the study of many aspects of development and change in contemporary rural India. It sets out to understand, in minute detail, labour relations and labour processes at sites of production, the manner in which the state mediates these relations, as well as collective actions emerging out of this milieu. This in turn enables the author to take well-argued positions based on fieldwork – that while workplace-based actions by labour have been decreasing significantly in recent decades, the state has emerged as a viable terrain of pro-labour struggle. However, collective action for the most part is identified as small-scale and more focused on accessing state resources than challenging capital and the status quo. Labour, he states, falls into the pragmatism of short-term gains.

The book is organised into nine chapters including an introduction and conclusion. The second chapter establishes the logic of using a class-relational approach to studies of poverty and development in general and, more specifically, in the context of this narrative. The third chapter engages with secondary literature on the changing dynamics of exploitation in rural South India in recent decades, against which the remaining chapters discuss fieldwork findings.

Pattenden argues for applying the class-relational approach to analyses of poverty, positing it against the mainstream neo-liberal approach to poverty since the 1990s. The latter has heavily influenced government policies for poverty reduction in many developing countries, including India. The class-relational approach is different from other approaches such as the residual approach (poverty as caused by exclusion from development processes) and the semi-relational approach (a stratification-based approach to class) because poverty is understood to be a product of the social relations of production, which helps one understand how it is produced and reproduced by capitalism. It does not divorce the process of exploitation from the material conditions of labour. Furthermore, it allows for a complex engagement with class which is seen to be affected by other forms of social relations such as caste and gender. Such an approach, as he states, looks at the underlying processes of dispossession, accumulation and exploitation.

The discussion of the fieldwork material (Chapter Three) is set up with a thorough engagement with secondary literature and statistics that highlight key changes in class relations in rural India in the past few decades. This includes the informalisation and segmentation of the labour force, state-based mediations of class relations through Local Government Institutions and social policy, the proliferation of membership-based organisations, both of the neo-liberal variety and those led by labour. It examines the role of the state in mediating class relations and argues that social policy is a critical arena of class struggle in rural India.

The fieldwork itself was conducted over twelve years in thirty-nine villages in rural Karnataka, which the author considers a comparatively under-researched state. Pattenden's respondents include agricultural labourers, labourers commuting and migrating for work in construction and industry, farmers, NGO workers and members of community-based organisations, government officials and social movement activists. He uses ethnography, census surveys, interactions, collections of government data, multiple and single-round interviews and moves around in villages, government offices, homes, farms and tea shops among others. The villages are distributed between the two sharply contrasting districts of Dharwad and Raichur. Dharwad has dryland villages, a more dynamic economy and higher human development indicators compared to Raichur, while Raichur has varying levels of canal irrigation and the highest poverty rate in Karnataka.

Pattenden looks at rural labour practising a variety of livelihood strategies, including those workers who are entirely based in villages, those who commute into nearby towns and cities, and those who migrate out but return to homes in villages periodically. He notes that common to them is under-employment, informal employment, high levels of fragmentation due to multiple factors, low pay in harsh working conditions, and low structural and political power. He maps patterns of accumulation in his fieldwork villages ranging from agriculture to agri-business, formal employment and state-related business. He also elaborates on literature showing how irrigation levels relate to patterns of accumulation, forms of class relations and patterns of relationships with the state by choosing fieldwork villages with a wide-range of irrigation patterns.

The book shows in great detail the manner in which the dominant classes are reproduced and how labour is controlled across agriculture and construction industries. The author finds that while processes of change have tended to maintain the position of the dominant classes, the status quo is constantly contested. Under certain circumstances factors that are usually considered to weaken class ties, such as caste and the growth of non-agricultural employment and circular migration, improve labour's socio-economic and political positions and also the possibilities for collective action.

Local government institutions are found to have become an important basis of rural dominant class control over the labouring class. However, the author argues that the state, largely pro-capital though never a mere reflection of capital, represents the most viable terrain for pro-labouring class action. This is largely due to decentralisation and the resulting financial heft of local government institutions and the proliferation of civil society organisations that, he says, has "thickened" the state-society interface. When, through social policy measures, local government takes on a part of the process of labouring-class reproduction, it loosens the dependence of labour on capital and potentially provides a political opportunity to labour. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), now renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), is considered a prime example of such a possibility by Pattenden. He notes that the form taken by social policy is important and that outcomes of social policy vary according to balances of class and caste power.

With respect to collective action, he uses strike statistics along with his fieldwork material to argue that workplace-based actions by labour have decreased from the 1980s onwards. He does allow that beyond the activity of formal organisations (of informal labour) there have been documented localised episodes of collective labouring-class action in rural and urban spaces. He acknowledges the industrial action in Gurgaon's car-manufacturing sector but does not believe that one can automatically deduce from it that workplace-based actions are going up. Small-scale, indirect actions that focus on local government institutions and their implementation of government programmes

like NREGS, National Health Mission, Public Distribution System and so on are usually the norm. This finding throws open the eternal question of what workers fight for or must fight for – workers’ rights or citizens’ rights, especially when demanding the latter is often “the only feasible form of action” (p. 50). Pattenden seems to see the merit of both positions, although his sympathies and political convictions clearly lie with struggles that directly challenge capital.

One wonders, though, how the growing conflicts over land and forest rights in rural India, which have erupted in West Bengal, Orissa, Uttarakhand and Gujarat among other places, would be read by the author against the fieldwork findings from Karnataka. There is a mention of a history of socially embedded labouring-class movements in eastern parts of the country in the book’s introduction, but this is not developed further. It would have been interesting to know the author’s thoughts on what it means for conflict of that nature to coexist with what he finds in Karnataka, and what such coexistence implies for pro-labouring class action and strategies of struggle. One understands that such a discussion is probably outside the scope of the book; nonetheless, since he builds outwards from his fieldwork sites towards a macro picture, some amount of engagement with this issue would have been relevant.

One admires the deft and deeply methodical way this book is written and the sheer labour it must have taken to handle twelve years of fieldwork data. Concepts and arguments are presented without the use of jargon and the book never presumes upon a reader’s prior familiarity with concept or subject matter. My only quibble is that Pattenden devotes negligible book space to the research process itself, and one is left wanting for a greater sense of the texture of the field and the respondents. For example, what does it mean to do research with a team and what did the researched feel about this research? What kinds of conversations did circular migrants bring back? How did the tone of conversations in tea shops compare with formal interviews? This is always very relevant for all forms of research but, one would argue, especially so for ethnographic and fieldwork-based research.

This book holds wide appeal. It should be especially relevant to anyone curious about labour relations and labour processes, rural agriculture and the presence of the state in rural India, irrespective of the angle of approach. It could also lend itself to a variety of very interesting follow-up projects such as, for instance, research on urban-based labour and labour relations, and collective actions in Karnataka that investigate the relationship between the two, identifying continuities and discontinuities between the rural and the urban. One looks forward to that.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

KOYEL LAHIRI is a PhD student at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. She is in the final stage of her PhD and is writing up her research on the politics of a national street vendor federation in India and factory workers in the Delhi National Capital Region. Titled “Politics of Organising Urban Work: A Study of Two Sites in India’s Transforming Economy”, her dissertation investigates the nature of labour, the question of who is a worker and the politics of organising. [Email: koyel.lahiri@gmail.com]