This is an ambitious book on India’s agricultural development, spanning a period of 250 years, from the time of the British East India Company to the present. The approach is novel – that of classical political economy, defined as a study of the nature of accumulation, the role of different classes, and the role of the state. The central objective of the book is to understand structural transformation and specifically the lopsided nature of rural transformation in India in the post-Independence period by studying the political economy of development.

The chapters of the book are grouped into the following six phases: colonial phase (1757 to 1947), pre-green revolution phase (1950-51 to 1965-66), the early green revolution phase (1966-67 to 1979-80), the late green revolution phase (1980-81 to 1989-90), the fourth phase of structural adjustment (1990-91 to 1999-2000), and the fifth and final phase of “peak globalisation” (2000-01 to 2016-17). There is also a sub-phase of the last period, comprising the decade of the financial crisis and after (2006-7 to 2016-17). This is a useful chronology.

In each phase, there is material not usually found in a standard textbook. For example, in the pre-green revolution phase, there is a good discussion of the role of US policy in formulating agricultural development in India, be it the Colombo Plan or the Ford Foundation Mission that led to the Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) and, of course, the PL-480 food aid programme. Similarly, in the section on the liberalisation phase, there are three chapters dealing with WTO issues and one on special economic zones.

The author concludes his discussion of the phase of liberalisation (Part 4 of the book) with a chapter titled “Agricultural Capitalism in India Could Not Establish ‘Either from Above or from Below’.” The main argument here is that polarization into two classes of capitalist farmers and wage workers has not occurred in India on account of many factors such as ceiling on size of land holdings, regulation of tenancy, and so on (p 329). The evidence presented in this chapter on class relations from a range of village studies is, however, dated (from the 1970s and early 1980s). In the last decade or so, there has been renewed interest in the study of class relations in rural India, based on in-depth village surveys conducted as part of the PARI project of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (see www.fas.org.in). Drawing on this empirical evidence, Ramachandran (2011) notes that “capitalism in agriculture has followed different trajectories in different farming systems and agrarian regimes” and goes on to argue against the view that “differentiation in the rural economy is no longer occurring and has been replaced by an ‘immiserisation’ of the peasantry.” (p 71). It is not very helpful, as he notes, to take a “mechanical and unilinear view of differentiation…. (where) the middle is squeezed, the scope for proletarianisation widens and a few accumulate capital.” Taking the case of Ananthavaram village
(Guntur district) in coastal Andhra Pradesh, he shows the “extension of the proletarianisation process to ever-widening sections of the peasantry, and high rates of commercialisation and accumulation of capital.” From today’s vantage point, the title of the chapter is inapt: agrarian capitalism is deepening in rural India though in varying degree and form in different agrarian contexts.

Parts 5 and 6 of the book provide a detailed discussion of agricultural credit, marketing, extension, procurement, and the public distribution system (PDS). While the overall framework is valuable, and there is extensive literature on each issue, the author’s perspective is at times not easily discernible. To take the example of the chapter on PDS, there is a discussion of suggestions for reforms to the PDS, be it through income targeting or a shift to food coupons or to cash allowances, which ends without a very clear conclusion. In my view, the debate on the PDS in the late 1990s and through the 2000s was impassioned, and the enactment of the National Food Security Act, 2013, a clear victory for those arguing against narrow targeting and cash transfers. For an understanding of the effects of polices of financial liberalization and financial inclusion on agricultural credit, I would also recommend Ramakumar and Chavan (2014) and references therein.

For students of agrarian India, there is a wealth of material in this book and much to learn from the political economy approach taken by Venkateswarlu.

REFERENCES


Economic Analysis Unit, Madhura Swaminathan
Indian Statistical Institute,
Bangalore - 560 059.