

### BOOK REVIEW

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*Economic Change in the Lower Cauvery Delta: A Study of Palakuruchi and Venmani*, Edited by Madhura Swaminathan, V. Surjit and V.K. Ramachandran, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2023. Pp. xxvi+ 384. Rs.1500.00.

India has a long tradition of village studies, which has helped scholars and policymakers gain useful insights into the realities of rural society and economy, besides demystifying several mistaken notions about rural India. They have also provided evidence to theorise about the process of rural transformation and to predict the future trajectory of the villages in India. The book under review, with its focus on capturing the unfolding social and economic changes in two villages of the lower Cauvery delta in Tamil Nadu, is yet another valuable addition to the long list of village studies. The book is a part of the series on agrarian studies carried out by various scholars under the aegis of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS). It is an edited volume of seventeen chapters that essentially analyse the major socio-economic issues in two villages, Palakuruchi and Venmani (in Nagapatinam district), with unique backgrounds. Palakuruchi has been studied since 1916 by several scholars and provides scope for analysing the changes from a long-term perspective, while Venmani has been well known for one of the most heinous atrocities committed on Dalits by the caste Hindus in 1968 in which 44 Dalits of Keelavenmani hamlet were burnt alive leading to a major outcry and launching of social movements to ensure justice for the victims. The chapters in the book, penned by various scholars, draw upon primary data from census-type household surveys conducted in the two villages in 2019, along with using longitudinal evidence about Palakuruchi and relevant macro data. The chapters cover a wide range of socio-economic issues, giving a comprehensive view of the changes occurring in the two villages. The chapters are organised into five sections, which cover themes relating to the village setting and profile, irrigation and water, resources, earnings, and living standards. The last section even includes chapters that have attempted to assess the impact of a cyclone and Covid-19 on the life of the villagers. The introductory chapter presents an overview of the book, summarising the key findings from the diverse chapters. A common feature and a significant strength of most of the chapters is the attempt to analyse the respective subject fairly rigorously in relation to the prevailing social (caste) and economic (class) groups and by gender to depict the differentiated scenarios along with capturing the intersectionality of background characteristics. Before critically reflecting on the book and its overall contributions, it would be worthwhile to summarise the key findings about the two villages from various chapters.

The study villages, which have been part of the prosperous rice economy of the Cauvery delta, have been experiencing in recent decades a significant deterioration in the production conditions owing to a decline in the water availability (arising out of the

interstate water settlement) along with trends of aridification. The farming system is reduced mainly to a one-crop season with no major diversification. The farm households, though, have managed to sustain some of the gains of the green revolution through continued input intensification, but yield stagnation has set in along with severe variability of returns owing to technological fatigue, fragmentation of holdings, policy constraints, and frequent calamities. The generally deteriorating and varying production conditions and increasing costs have affected all sections, but the poorer peasants have borne the major brunt of being able to reap only lower and negative returns.

The second major finding, especially emerging from the historical analysis of Palakuruchi, is about the progressive changes seen in the agrarian relations significantly easing the conditions of ruthless exploitation and oppression of tenants and workers of lower castes by the dominant landlords of caste Hindu groups. Such a change, which is the cumulative result of factors like changed production conditions, occupational diversification, struggles of the oppressed classes, and social welfare measures, has lent a certain degree of protection and dignity to the hitherto suppressed classes. The result is the curtailment, if not total eradication, of various forms of exclusion, untouchability, bonded labour, and atrocities perpetrated on Dalits and lower castes by the dominant groups. Even as the caste hierarchies prevail, the lower castes/classes have been able to improve their conditions to an extent about access to land, occupational diversification, housing, and education. Many chapters identify such changes as profound given the highly unequal relations and acute sufferings of the suppressed groups in the past.

A significant outcome of the changed agrarian conditions and relations is the emergence of new class formations in the study villages, which generates newer dynamics in socio-economic relations. Apart from certain distinct groups like the business/trading class and salaried class, the villages are now composed of three major antagonistic classes, namely landlords/capitalist farmers, peasants, and workers. These diverse classes represent a significant shift in the stratification from the earlier predominantly bipolar classes consisting of landlords and tenants/workers. The landlords/capitalist farmers, though, constitute a tiny section yet command a significant share in the means of production, alongside hiring tenants and workers. With a sizeable composition, the peasantry is differentiated into three levels of economic status (rich, middle, and poor) and land ownership, with earnings tied to farm returns. Workers, a major segment in both the villages, and for whom wage earnings constitute a major source of income, are differentiated by their skills and nature of job. Barring the landlords/capitalist farmers, a common feature of peasants and workers, is their increased dependence on labour work, both farm and non-farm, for sustenance with a clear visible trend towards proletarianisation of these groups. The classes also depict certain overlaps with the prevailing caste hierarchies, with the bulk of the peasants and workers comprising those from backward and most backward castes and Dalits, and landlords/capitalist farmers hailing from upper and backward castes.

The foregoing changes in the production conditions and agrarian relations are also reflected in the households' pattern of access to various resources, earnings, and living standards. Considerable changes are seen with regard to ownership of land, agricultural assets, livestock, and access to credit. As access to these resources has improved even for the lower classes, inequality has increased visibly in several ways manifested also in growing landlessness and marginalisation of holdings. Overall, the land remains concentrated with the traditional dominant communities even as some Dalit women have got ownership of small holdings owing to the efforts of a civil society organisation in both villages. Even the ownership pattern of other assets is no different, with inequality being driven by significant differences across economic classes. Access to credit is characterised by a newer kind of inequality, with the poor largely being able to access credit from regulated private channels, which tend to charge exorbitant interest rates.

As regards the returns from agriculture, the changed conditions have led to a differentiated impact, with large cultivators earning higher and positive returns due to relative yield and price advantages enjoyed thanks also to MSP-based procurement of paddy. The low returns from agriculture have forced a shift towards non-farm occupations outside the village, especially among poor peasants and workers. However, underemployment persists, with MGNREGA emerging as a critical source of employment for women. Some Dalits and most backward castes have been able to access better-paid jobs owing to education and reservations. However, given the differences in farm earnings and the distressed nature of diversification, the overall earnings remain low, with significant inequality across economic classes. Though the survey year had faced considerable loss in farm income due to flood and cyclone, even the adjusted income shows the prevalence of substantial poverty among lower classes. Certain positives observed, though with various limitations, are improvements in the education situation seen in universal enrollment and better access to higher education, even by lower caste groups, attributable to the significant expansion of education led by the state. However, the gender gaps persist, especially with regard to gains from education for educated women to attain any significant mobility. Housing and sanitation are another area where improvements are seen with increased access to pucca houses. But again, with considerable differences seen across social groups, the adequacy of housing in a holistic sense remains elusive for the poorer and oppressed sections.

Thus, the book based on the two village case studies brings out a comprehensive picture of the ongoing changes in the socio-economic conditions, reflecting some of the larger realities unfolding in the country. The findings confirm at least two major aspects of the ongoing rural transformation process. Even as the agricultural situation, as depicted in the book, provides a perspective to assess objectively the outcomes of the inter-state water-sharing arrangement, the study as such confirms the prevailing situation of agrarian distress afflicting vast section of the peasantry which has been at the root of the widespread farmers' suicides and agitations seen recently across the

country. Secondly, the book confirms that though the rural sector has been undergoing social and economic changes, but the changes are not deep enough to bring about a radical transformation in the situation for a vast majority of the rural households. Hence, despite varied improvements, the fundamental challenges of rural poverty, inequality, deprivation, and caste-based segregation continue to plague assuming even newer forms. Though progressive, the varied interventions of the state, civil society, and markets have been mainly reformist, in tune with a process of 'growth without structural transformation' that is constrained to address deeper rural questions and challenges.

While the book's findings will undoubtedly interest rural scholars and practitioners, the book has a few limitations. A major lacuna is the lack of an overarching theoretical framework to explain the longitudinal changes and persisting crises in their diverse dimensions. How do we characterise the whole change observed? Are the changes a part of the larger ongoing capitalist transformation? Are the crises the result of some contradictions inherent in the capitalist transition in developing countries and their rural areas? Where do these villages stand today? Has the resolution of the agrarian question reached an impasse? If so, what are the possible reasons for this, and what is the way forward for progressive rural transformation? In its effort to highlight the empirical findings, the book has not addressed these relevant theoretical questions when assessing long-term changes. The lack of a conclusion chapter synthesising and explicating findings from a theoretical perspective has also not helped put forth the findings in the larger context. Other analytical and empirical limitations include the missing analysis of the power structure and local governance (though political), and a focused study of issues related to women going beyond gender analytics. While the class-based presentation is a major strength, a broader classification attempted has diffused the analysis, failing to capture fully the emerging interests and antagonisms in the context of the prevailing political economy. How do apparently divergent caste and class-based evidence tie up for a more cohesive analysis and implication? Hope, the scholars will take forward their findings to address some of the above questions. Irrespective of these limitations, the book, as said, is a useful addition to the repository of village studies, which have become really scarce in recent days.

Professor,  
Institute of Rural Management (IRMA),  
Anand-388 001.

*H.S.Shylendra*