

of the peasant", and to "a moving agrarian frontier". In this connection, the author once again concentrates more on the memory of the population movements in the wake of the partition. Apart from the study of the condition of the peasants in Bangladesh, the author gradually attempts to highlight the importance of the social network in migration, and also emphasises the role of caste and other affinal ties in this context in Chapter 6. However, in Chapter 9, the author reminds us that, the social network theory can only explain a part of the entire situation of the migrants. His experiences in Malda, Islampur or in places of south Bengal lead him to conclude that, the social network approach tends to overlook the specific features of rural culture and power. In his opinion, this approach also overlooks the feature of resistance to power in determining conditions of seasonal migration.

In the penultimate chapter of his book, the author shows how with the immiseration among a section of population in the border districts, unemployment due to expansion of shrimp cultivation at the expense of rice cultivation, rising domestic

violence, polygamy and lumpenisation among the underclasses, more and more women, like Shefali, are pushed out on the streets. As a consequence, many of these women go to Dhaka in search of security, and many also cross the border in the same journey. It should be pointed out that usually the studies on migration tend to overlook these gender dimensions in migration although the women are very often among the worst sufferers of the phenomenon of migration.

A reader conditioned by the omnipresent statist perspective may not be "satisfied" with the book as it does not really offer any direct solution to the "problem of infiltration". But, a close look will reveal that the author in fact delves deep into the matter, and ultimately challenges the validity of the concept of nation state in the context of post-colonial south Asia. This book is a pleasant reading due to the racy style of writing followed by the author except for a few printing mistakes present in this publication. It is a major publication on the migrants, and on the south Asian studies with its distinct departure from the received images of migration.

wholly modified, as icons of a developmental state is to display a high degree of commitment to state intervention irrespective of its consequences or even the original intentions. Perhaps the author of the book allows for the fact that the post-independence Indian state launched the green revolution, a project concerned with the expansion of food production, which makes it 'developmental'. Presumably this would make the colonial state, which assiduously built roads and sewers, and encouraged the development of plantation agriculture, developmental too. Now some genuinely political individuals would demur at the utterly naive constructs of modern political economy as showcased here. And so would the nuts-and-bolts economists wanting to know of the role of the food policy of the government of India when told that it is 'part developmental' and 'part rent-seeking'.

There are two routes by which one might approach the issue of food policy. One is the obvious and relatively straightforward approach of studying the impact of the government's food policy on the variables of interest. This is what Mooij attempts. The second route would take the form of asking the question 'what would be the effect on the same set of variables of an alternative policy altogether?' Mooij does not do so of course. Arguably this is a much harder task. It is of the class of exercises in economics that had attracted the 'Lucas critique' in the first place. Recall that Robert Lucas had posed the question of how econometrics would deal with the issue of regime specific behavioural parameters when evaluating alternative economic arrangements defined as 'policy'. As far as I know, there has been no econometric evaluation of food policy as a whole, as opposed to some of its constituent parts such as price policy, in India.

Mooij's work disappoints in that it is unable to give us sufficient quantitative handle on even the set of questions encompassed by the first of the two routes to the study of policy that I have identified here. We are told that this is the consequence of the method – survey and interviews – that she has consciously adopted. Interestingly, consciously or unconsciously, Mooij does attempt something along the lines of the second route to the study of food policy when she raises the point of whether Kerala should be taken as a model for the economy as a whole. Even though she concludes in the negative, the essential lessons of the case are left undrawn, so to speak. The point,

## Prosperity versus Food Policy

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**Food Policy and the Indian State: The Public Distribution System in South India** by Jos Mooij: Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

FOR close to nine decades the British colonial administration in India had pursued a policy of neglect of the productivity of Indian agriculture even as it tried to maximise the collection of land revenue, originally the main source of public income. There was no food policy as such. As the intimations of a major war had loomed, the self-same administration clamped rationing upon the major 'urban conurbations' starting with Bombay in 1939. This was in recognition of both the possibility of a complete cut-off of imports and of the need to ensure a steady supply of food to the British war effort from the domestic sources. The eventual fall of Burma confirmed the first fear as swathes of eastern and southern India reeled under a supply shortfall. Now 'statutory rationing' found its way into the public policy discourse as also the 'producer levy' in the rice cultivating areas. We also have the wartime Essential Supplies Act which transmogrified into the Essential Commodities Act in independent India. The essential supplies act encapsulated a clear

objective and an underlying premise. The objective was to channel into the government's hands the required grain store. This in turn required that the state, in its role as trader, be empowered with draconian powers vis-a-vis the private. The underlying premise, as in all dealings of the colonial state with the Indian population, was that the native is a liar and a cheat requiring laws that pin him down to the straight and narrow. Naturally, so to speak, no quarter was to be given. As with most aspects of governmental activity, these laws were to pass peacefully into the hands of the post-independence Indian state. Next to nowhere was any of this motivated by concern for the well-being of the citizen. Moreover, it mostly had the effect of stamping out the forces of competition, leaving the economy mired in controls. One is reminded of Daniel Thorner's observation that the transition from British rule to independent India has been a fairly conservative process. In any case, to interpret these inherited arrangements as ~~democratic~~ but never

quite simply, is that Kerala represents an altogether poor model for a national food policy. That its PDS is widespread and subject less to subversion than elsewhere in India is a true but extremely partial story. With a secular decline in its rice production Kerala has become increasingly dependent upon imports. The particularity is that these imports are not supplied from a market where the price is allowed to vary. The public distribution system in Kerala is supplied through allotment from the central pool of foodgrain procured by the Food Corporation of India. This has the effect of taking away from the state government any sustainable control over the price of food. Is there scope for any food policy left now? Indeed, given the principle governing the fixation of agricultural procurement prices in India, Kerala's government has had to remain a mute witness to the rising issue price of rice. Upon reflection, once the issue price rises continuously it robs a rationing system of much of its meaning. After all, it can be of little consolation to the alleged beneficiaries that the issue price is always lower than the contemporary market price.

Studying Kerala should really take us closer to understanding the flaw in the food policy of the post-independence

Indian state. The state has been unable to hold down the price of grain in the economy. Within the context of near universal private enterprise in agriculture the only way in which this could have been feasible is if there had been a continuous increase in yields. Historically, this has not only not been unheard of, it is actually happening right now as it were. For instance, over the four decades starting 1950, the international real price of wheat has displayed a secular decline. In the developed economies, there has been what has been referred to as the 'third agricultural revolution' since 1950 when wheat yields have grown much faster than in the four decades preceding that date. Europe, the 'old' world if you please, now boasts the highest wheat yields in the world. It is easy to forget that this region had been reduced to a virtual wasteland after the second world war.

In comparative perspective, in India we have not planned for prosperity. A kind of 'food policy' appears to have emerged, and got fossilised, as the economy lurched from crisis to crisis. Jos Mooij is unable to show us this for she appears to be overawed by the grandness of the idea of the 'developmental state' and, altogether less pardonably, by the writings of some who have gone ahead of her. However,

tucked away in the Appendix to her book there is some revealing data presented. I refer to the convenient juxtaposition of the data on 'per capita distribution of foodgrains through the PDS' and the estimate of the population below the poverty line, both for the majority of states, the north-east remaining unrepresented. The data pertains to the years 1986-87 and 1987-88, respectively. It is sufficient to eyeball this data to grasp that there is little correlation between the amount of grain distributed per capita and the need premised on the corresponding estimate of poverty. Actually, the poorest states appeared to be least well served by the PDS. When the Spearman rank correlation coefficient is computed for this sample of states, I find that it works out to a mere +.04. To correct for the bias that may be being introduced due to the near perfect rank correlation in the cases of Punjab and Haryana – these low poverty states naturally record low distribution figures – the correlation coefficient was re-computed after having excluded these from the sample. The rank correlation coefficient now turns out to be -.52. We see that for the public distribution system the implementation is more than halfway towards not being present where it is most needed.