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The Politics of New Farmers' Movements

Democracy, Development and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India by Ashutosh Varshney

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BOOK REVIEW

The Politics of New Farmers' Movements

Ashutosh Varshney, Democracy, Development and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India Cambridge University press, New York, 1995, pp. XI + 214

The emergence of what are called New Farmers' Movements (NFM) since the early eighties generated heated discussions in this country and abroad. The opinions on these movements and issues generated by them are not only divergent but also polarized. On one side are the supporters of NFM who see them as setting right the urban bias in the country's development process and even as harbingers of democratization in the country (and countryside). While on the other side are the critics who see the movements as partisan, dominated by rich peasants, strengthening the hold of dominant land-owning elite and even as showing a tendency to collude with communalism (and so are even called 'fascist'!).

These debates characteristically emphasized on the ideology or ideologies of movements, their social bases and their consequences on agrarian structures. But all these discussions omitted one crucial dimension that is the interface between democratic (party and non-party) politics, politics of state institutions and the movements. The book by Ashutosh Varshney succeeds in precisely focussing on the above said interface. The book particularly illuminates the dark area of politics, that is the politics that go on within the state apparatus vis-a-vis the demands of the movement such as NFM. That is what makes this book worthy of consideration even though in the second half of this decade these movements seem to have subsided giving way to issues and politics based on identity. Precisely this episodic character of NFM is also a topic discussed in this book, as also why these movements give way over time to other kinds of politics?

Even though the book addresses the above questions in great detail, the book, as the author himself mentions, is about macro-economic policy towards the agrarian sector. The discussion is about how the policies came to be framed, under what internal, external influences and under what limitations. Finally, the consequences of the agricultural policies and how the agrarian sector responded to the policies are discussed. The book discusses economic policy towards agriculture, the politics within the state apparatus, the farmers'

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movements while at the same time discussing the interface between them.

The book is divided into eight chapters. First, the theoretical postulates are put forward. Emergence of rural power is a lately developing phenomenon in industrial countries. How in India rural power (in the form of NFMs) emerged in the relatively early stages of industrialization? The answer provided is that while in the West democracy followed industrialization, in India democracy preceded industrialization. This is what allows various movements to occupy a prominent place in national politics. The book deals extensively with the possibilities of repression, accommodation containment of the movements. It is made clear that while democracy allowed the movements to come to the forefront there were other factors such as the shift in state strategy towards agriculture which helped them.

The shift from Nehru's institutional strategy (which contained three elements: (a) land reforms (b) co-operatives (c) local self government institutions) to technocratic strategy (price incentives–new technology–subsidies based strategy) is discussed in great detail. The book carefully discusses the origins of Indian green revolution policy. The rest of the book elaborates how the price incentives–technology–subsidies policy came to stay totally replacing the institutional strategy. This policy shift is seen to have begun during the prime ministership of Lal Bahadur Shastri. The policy shift is seen as primarily because of indigenous initiatives. The advice of foreign agencies in favour of policy shift is seen as having come only later post factum.

The shift from institutional strategy to technocratic strategy has preceded the emergence and growth of rural power and the former is not a consequence of the latter. That is to say rural power did not bring about the shift in strategy. The emergence of Charan Singh in national politics is seen as the beginning of the emergence of rural power. Rural power is seen to have emerged in both ways, that is (a) in 'politics above', that is in terms of number of agriculturists represented in parliament and in political parties and (b) in 'politics below', that is in terms of price related agitations and movements. Thus this book registers a steady growth of rural power in national politics starting from the early seventies to the present. Varshney also deals in great detail with the arguments that characterize NFMs as essentially rich peasant movements and rejects the view that the movements benefit rich and middle peasants alone. Varshney argues that these movements also benefit small farmers where all the landed peasantry is drawn in to the market and in a situation where the distinction between peasant and farmer is increasingly getting blurred.

The book also deals extensively with the inter-ministerial, inter-bureaucratic and intra-bureaucratic politics. Particular attention is paid to the tussles between the Planning Commission, agriculture ministry and finance ministries. Varshney pays special attention to the politics

regarding the APC (which later came to be called the CACP) its constitution and reconstitution, etc. It is this attention to the politics within the state apparatus that makes this book a special contribution to the existing literature.

Finally, the NFMs politics are seen as self limiting. There is a limit to the extent that this politics can go. And the limit is set by the 'multiple selves' of the farmers themselves. Rural people can be mobilized with some difficulty for price–subsidy–loan waiver movements for some time, but whenever the electoral politics come it is the other cross cutting cleavages, in terms of castes, community, ethnicity, etc which come to the forefront. Thus rural politics is seen as self-limiting. There with rural power in national politics. On the whole Varshney gives a sympathetic account of the assertion of rural power in national politics. This book is well written and well presented. Varshney does a commendable job whenever it comes to the question of analyzing macro- and even micro-situations. A bibliography in the end would have definitely helped the reader. But in spite of that the book makes compulsory reading for all those interested in the relations between the state and the new farmers' movements.

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REFERENCE

'New farmers' movements in India', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* special issue Vol. 21, Nos 3/4, April/July 1994.