

G. Etienne. *Food and Poverty: India's Half-won Battle.* New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1988. 272 pp. Rupees (Indian) 175.00 (Hardbound Edition).

A very large segment of the population in India has not been affected by the process of post-independence economic development. According to one estimate, in 1983, around 300 million people, or 40 percent of the total population, were living below the poverty line, while more than 100 million people were living in severe destitute conditions. Infant mortality, which is an important indicator of under-nourishment, is more than three times the rate in Sri Lanka and China.

This is not a satisfactory state of affairs but it represents a significant improvement over time. While population has increased from 355 million in 1949-50 to 775 million in 1985-86, foodgrain output has almost tripled to 151 million tonnes during the same period. Most of the other agricultural crops have followed a similar pattern of growth, implying an increase in the per capita availability of domestically-produced agricultural products over time. The main source of agricultural growth since the Sixties has been the increasing use of modern inputs, which have contributed to higher yields and to multi-cropping patterns.

However, while the green revolution diminished poverty, it adversely affected the distribution of land, leading to the concentration of resources in fertile areas and benefiting more the richer farmers. Furthermore, the growth of population combined with slow urbanization has increased the population pressure on land. The land-man ratio has been declining over time and the increase in employment opportunities outside agriculture, both in urban and rural areas, which is vital for reducing poverty, has not been significant enough to alter the employment pattern. This suggests that it would be impossible to wipe out poverty in the foreseeable future by altering prices or raising production alone, despite evidence that the price index and the production of agricultural products have a direct influence on poverty.

The problem of poverty in India needs to be tackled directly rather than indirectly, by following a growth-oriented economic policy. In the latter approach, poverty is viewed as a corollary to low per capita income and the market as the most efficient mechanism to foster economic growth. On this important issue, the author of this book has a specific point of view. He advocates a direct attack on poverty but also has much to say about the "leakages and other shortcomings" of the way such programmes have been implemented in the past. The conclusion is drawn on the basis of analysis and detailed surveys of Indian villages representing the following three broad area categories: advanced districts of the north-west and the south-east; poor but potentially rich areas; and peninsular India, where agricultural growth is limited by physical and geographical constraints.

However, the book is not about the causes of inter-regional disparities in agricultural development. Rather, it focuses on the impact of economic growth on rural

poverty in the various regions, taking into account the socio-political and techno-economic factors; and it provides interesting details about the impact of agricultural development at the micro level.

The author argues that inter-regional differentials in the rates of agricultural development have contributed to the magnitude of poverty in different parts of the country. There is less rural poverty in areas of high agricultural growth rates, but substantial in places of agricultural stagnation. In the areas of high growth rate of agricultural development, agricultural wages – which are two to three times more than those in the areas of slow agricultural growth – and employment opportunities have been increasing fast enough to benefit the rural poor. In the other areas, the plight of the poor has not changed significantly.

In all areas there is a growing tendency towards the division of holdings because of population pressure. And, as the size of holdings has been shrinking, there is an increase in the number of landless labourers. Lack of proper infrastructural facilities is limiting the growth of the agricultural sector. The problems related to the shortage of electricity and the proper maintenance and utilization of drainage and irrigation systems have grown in magnitude and complexity. In the poorer areas, there is a lot of potential for growth and development based on soil conservation, watershed management, afforestation of wastelands, intercropping, or farm water conservation, etc. However, in the advanced areas, the future growth in production is possible only on the basis of productivity increases, efficient utilization of inputs, and adoption of modern methods of cultivation.

This is an interesting and informative book, which gives a detailed account of the Indian rural scene at the grassroots level, and has useful suggestions for alleviating poverty.

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