

**G. Rodgers (ed)** *Population Growth and Poverty in Rural South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1989.

Rapid population growth and high levels of poverty continue to be outstanding features of the South Asian region. It is often acknowledged, both implicitly and explicitly, that these two features have close linkages especially in the case of South Asia. This book addresses this very issue through five case studies of Rural Bihar, Rural Pakistan, India, Rural Bangladesh, and Nepal.

The book makes an interesting contribution to the literature on population in South Asia. In particular, it has a strong empirical base. However, most of the enquiries, as is quite understandable, are limited by the type of data typically collected in cross-sectional sample surveys. Their limitations are pointed out by the authors themselves. Each chapter makes a significant contribution in its own area and the country-specific results are interesting.

In Chapter 2, Rodgers, Gupta, Sharma and Sharma, examine, as their title says, "Demographic Patterns and Poverty among Households in Rural Bihar". The associations between family planning, fertility, child mortality, and income-related measures are studied: the relationship between economic variables and fertility is found to be weak; mortality and poverty are more directly related; and the conclusion, therefore, is that there is no evidence to warrant the conclusion that reducing poverty (even if a desirable objective in itself) would reduce fertility.

Chapter 3, on "Poverty, Class Structure and Household Demographic Patterns in Rural Pakistan" by Mohammad Irfan, uses national sample data to reach the conclusion that fertility behaviour of the poor is not significantly different from the largely homogeneous fertility patterns prevailing in Pakistan. Infant child mortality is, however, higher amongst those groups whose incomes were inadequate. The author suggests that "Demographic blinkers may thus be unproductive in the analysis of poverty. A class-neutral population control policy seems unlikely to succeed". (Page 117). The underlying argument is that households do have certain levels of fertility as a deliberate survival strategy against poverty.

Chapter 4, by Krishnaji, on "The Size and Structure of Agricultural Labour Households in India", looks at macro data for India. He finds that the poorest in the rural economy do have relatively smaller families regardless of the levels of fertility. However, he concedes that data limitations may have affected his conclusions. Agricultural labour households, distinctly smaller in household size, also have lower child-women ratios, higher female-to-male ratios, and a slightly higher proportion of adults. Once more, however, fertility differences are found to be less important than mortality differences.

Chapter 5, by Rafiqul Huda Chaudhry, on "Population Pressure and its Effects on Changes in Agrarian Structure and Productivity in Rural Bangladesh", is based on

macro statistics for Bangladesh concentrating on more recent data for the 60s and 70s. The author looks at changes in landholdings and finds that large landholdings are found to be on the decline. Household size differs sharply between landless and smallest landholding groups. One reason for a smaller family size among the former is that the majority of them are newly formed households. The author infers that landlessness and small-size landholding households are temporary states, and that land is eventually acquired later in the life cycle. Thus, a larger family size is an important strategy towards upward mobility.

The last chapter, by David Seddon, on "Population and Poverty in Nepal", points out the importance of the caste system as a "complex pattern of patron-client relations whereby landowners are linked to landless, wealthy to poor and powerful to politically significant". Following a politico-economic analytical approach, with little empirical input to the topic, the author reaches the conclusion that any policies should be directed towards the changing political structures and dynamics of the mountain kingdom rather than to family planning or population programme policies which will not address the much-needed grassroots transformation of the economy and society of Nepal.

The most useful chapter in the book is the "Overview" by Gerry Rodgers, which brings together common strands of each of the chapters under major headings, such as the responses of fertility, mortality, migration and household structure to poverty. The broad conclusion is that promoting family planning as a policy is unlikely to have a very significant impact on reducing fertility if having large families is part of a deliberate strategy to reduce household poverty. He underscores the need for setting population policy in a broader social framework.

The edited book leaves the reader with the feeling that they have just touched the tip of the iceberg, and there is a continuing thirst for further elaboration of many interlinkages which are fleetingly touched upon in the analyses presented. For instance, the relationship between fertility and income, which is one of the numerous interlinkages explored in each of the chapters, is in itself a complex phenomenon dependent on the method of study, on measures of income, and on the unit of study (household, village, stage, etc.). Further, poverty itself is not a straightforwardly definable state, and is very much a relative measure. Some of the empirical work is not fully placed in the social and economic contexts of each of the South Asian countries. Thus, a more comprehensive study of the overall economy and its relationship over time and, cross-sectionally, with demographic phenomenon [such as the studies done by Robert Cassen (1978)] would be a highly recommended next step for most of the countries of this region.

**Zeba A. Sathar**

Pakistan Institute of  
Development Economics,  
Islamabad.

**REFERENCE**

Cassen, R. (1978) *India: Population, Economy and Society*. London: MacMillan Press.