

**Ross Mallick.** *Development, Ethnicity and Human Rights in South Asia.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998. Hardbound. Indian Rs 425.00. 375 pages.

South Asia, where almost half of the world poor live, has one of the worst records of human rights. It is happening even in India, which has the credit of being the most democratic of all the states in South Asia. In the background of these violations of human rights are the strong cultural values which have resulted in caste and class-like divisions in society. The elite in the region, with access to power and (scarce) resources, are so integrated within the system that they can easily prevent any benefits and resources from reaching the poor.

Human rights, which is a purely Western phenomenon, can influence the elite, but only superficially. To modify cultures for the implementation of human rights along with development is difficult to achieve. It is a fact that when the demands of the poor or minority groups remain unmet, they then have the motivation to destabilise the system. If the state counters it with repression, it will affect growth and investment. The main hindrance, therefore, is the state's corruption, the removal of which, although difficult, can lead to the provision of at least the basic needs of the poor.

In South Asia the trend is towards religious fundamentalism. Trivial religious or ethnic differences result in large social conflicts. The fact is that politicians help create the conflicts and *use* the minority groups. The repression of minority groups by the state or any communal violence also fuels hostility in the neighbouring country and sometimes quickly brings action against minorities in the neighbouring country, thus turning domestic problems into regional and international ones. This is happening even after decades of Partition, which was supposed to resolve these problems. Regional organisations, like the SAARC, also are unable to resolve these conflicts.

This book analyses the problems of the minority groups and the poor in the region with non-egalitarian cultural values and highly skewed economic distributions. The author has successfully endeavoured to address the difficulties in achieving equitable development in the presence of ethnic conflict and repression. Case studies are used to highlight the rights of the subordinate groups or minorities.

The case study on Sri Lanka has focussed on the Mahaweli irrigation project, large enough to absorb the maximum of national and international resources. A strong point is made about the role of foreign aid projects in developing an ethnic conflict. A chapter on Bangladesh revolves round the miseries of the two minority groups, *untouchable* Hindus and the tribal people of the Chitttagong Hill Tracts.

Comparing India and Pakistan from the very outset of their independence, in Chapter 7, Ross Mallick draws a very pessimistic picture of Pakistan. The country is in danger of losing the economic and technological battle with its neighbour and imploding on account of its internal ethnic and political disputes, with bleak chances

for its survival. The only hope is with the devolution of power to the provinces where the elite recognise ethnic and regionalistic forces as part of a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of Pakistan.

The author has also analysed the lower or segregated castes in India. These comprise 2.6 percent of all humanity but have no effective voice. The caste system is very strong in India. The dominant groups—rural elite and Westernised urban elite—are either against desegregation or are the least concerned with the problems of minority groups, who are deprived of their basic rights. The solution lies with state coercion or with the change in cultural values through education but this could take generations. Ross Mallick also highlights the problems of the aboriginal people—the tribals in India. An effort is continuously made by the government, as well as by the development agencies, to improve their status but this is negated by the corruption and inefficiency of the Indian bureaucracy. The tribals are also vulnerable to exploitation by the private sector, particularly by landlords and moneylenders.

An interesting point made throughout the book is the distortion of social reality in the academic literature, and the point is elaborated with the narration of examples from the available literature. The author is of the view that although a vast literature is available, but it is misleading and inaccurate because of the theoretical and ideological biases of the scholars, and also because the information on which it is based is not adequately diversified. The minorities or the poor cannot project or write for themselves as they lack education and resources. Their problems are portrayed as the researcher or academic sees them rather than the way they actually are and see themselves. Some of the academics do mention in their writings human rights violations but dare not to write about the reasons behind them. Also, when academics are involved in making money, they make it only by quoting successes. In this environment, the production of good scholarship becomes secondary.

The author has repeatedly emphasised the negative aspects of Western influence in the studies on South Asia. Exposing Western hypocrisy—even if the human rights abuses in South Asia get on their agenda, it is not likely to be sustainable—the interests of the West are shown as changeable and as having nothing to do with the needs of South Asia. He discusses the doubtful role of the (international) development agencies with human rights agenda in the region; they criticise the governments for the inequalities and abuses but practise the same themselves. To eradicate poverty is a common objective in the aid programmes, but only at face value. In real terms, hardly any aid reaches the poor.

Many local NGOs are also raising their voice in development activities but are more interested in funds. Since most of the funding originates from the West via international agencies, the guidelines or development agenda, therefore, is developed in the West with little or no village-level input. The local issues are projected by the development agencies in line with their own thinking, or in accordance with the

interests of the elite, which is generally abandoned after some time, as it almost invariably fails to produce the desired impact.

Other issues covered in the book include the creation and maintenance of ethnicity in the region, and the reasons for the failure of decentralisation in India. Ross Mallick sees the solution only in pure democracy, where the dominant elite groups accommodate the needs and aspirations of the deprived and marginalised groups. Unfortunately, given the strength of ethnicity in South Asia, it is extremely difficult to achieve this solution.

The book is interesting to read, in spite of its length and occasional repetition. Although it claims to cover the issues in South Asia, the main focus is on India. The reason might be the severity of the ethnic and human rights problems in India, in the presence of a long-standing democracy. Yet, no doubt, it makes an original contribution to the issues discussed. The author has made tremendous effort to collect facts and details about the region and present a bold analysis that shows that national elites, NGOs, international agencies, and academics all have their own group objectives and hidden interests to follow in what they seem to do for the disadvantaged. As such, they are the least bothered to expose the real situation through their channels. The book will be an excellent resource for those who have an interest in the inner politics and sociology of South Asia.

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