

Book Reviews

Arun Agrawal. *Greener Pastures: Politics, Markets, and Community Among a Migrant Pastoral People.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998. 219 pages. Price not given.

Most literature on political economy, both in Economics and Political Science, has tended to ignore migrant communities. But these communities pose interesting questions for academics. Migrant communities tend to face hostile environments in which they have to survive. Not only do governments “encourage” them to settle down, they also get marginalised in the politics of the regions in which they tend to move (or “settle down”). Arun Agrawal addresses some of these interesting questions in his book.

Arun Agrawal is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale University. This work, which started in 1989 and then formed a part of his doctoral dissertation at Duke University, has taken a decade to come out as a book. Some parts of it have also appeared earlier as journal articles.

The book uses the story of *raika* shepherds, migrant pastoralists, who move with their sheep and camel in the semi-arid region of Western India. These people are based mainly in Rajasthan, and some in Gujrat, but their yearly travels take them into Gujrat in the South, and Punjab, Haryana, Western UP, and Madhya Pradesh in the North and North-East. Prior to partition, *raikas* used to travel in Sindh and Western Punjab as well, coming up to Multan, but these routes have been blocked by the creation of international borders since 1947.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first the author asks the important question: Why do *raikas* migrate? Why do, every year, for months on end, large numbers of these people leave their homes and wander in environments that can be hostile to them? Not all *raikas* are poor, and not all poor people from these villages move. The migration is more particular to these people. And even within them, not all *raikas* move either. Here the role of local politics and the state needs to be discussed as well.

In the second part of the book Agrawal asks the question: Why do *raikas* migrate collectively, forming groups of flocks that travel together? The answer has to do both with economies of scale in movement as well as strategic moves when faced with state officials and local settled populations.

The third part looks into issues of community formation in a migrant population and the explicit mechanisms through which groups address principal-agent issues, free-rider problems, and other issues arising from group dynamics.

The *raikas* are shepherds. They are also lower-caste people who do not have large landholdings. To maintain their incomes, in addition to cultivating their land, they raise cattle. Selling the cattle, selling wool as well as animal droppings as fertiliser, *raikas* generate their income. Village commons as well as their own fields are not enough to provide them with the foliage that they need to feed their flocks. Hence they travel across the countryside in search of foliage. Since Rajasthan is also a semi-arid region, the *raikas* have to travel for extended periods. It is only in the monsoon that they stay at home to cultivate their fields. In the rainy period, they have enough foliage around to feed their animals.

But moving from the village marginalises *raikas* in their own area as well. This weakens their political position. Most states also do not like pastoral people. There have been too many attempts to “sedentarise” migratory people in the name of development. The idea is that the state can then tax people, provide them various services, and in turn control them better. So the *raikas* have found the state and federal government to be hostile too.

Over the years *raikas* have been marginalised even more. The drive to privatise land, enclose the commons in the name of privatisation or conservation, and multi-cropping have decreased the land available for grazing. This has made families with even smaller flocks move. But it has also increased the isolation of these people. Of course, at the local level, the drive to privatise or enclose land has sometimes been motivated by political desire to marginalise *raikas*, who are strong in numbers and have started to challenge the upper-caste minorities in local politics.

Agrawal also shows that given the semi-arid region, and the availability of foliage after a crop has been cut and before the next one is sown, moving across the region with the animals, which can feed off the stumps and deposit droppings on the land, might be the optimal response to the conditions, and might be a good way of fighting poverty for people with little land. It is also good for the land that the animals traverse, and can lead to better sustainability results.

Raikas enjoy significant economies of scale when moving in groups. Negotiating better prices for animal droppings, wool, sheep, feed, grazing rights, food, medicines, and rights of passage are all helped by being in a large group. The dependence on markets for these groups is large, and the study shows that these pastoral people are very adept at using market mechanisms like bargaining skills in negotiating quantity discounts. Groups also offer safety from attacks from robbers and local landlords, and it is also easier to negotiate lower bribes with state and local officials when in a group. Groups also allow people to share “local knowledge” and this makes life easier for shepherds. But, of course, not all decisions are group-oriented. Agrawal brings it out beautifully that decisions pertaining to individual flocks are always taken by individual owners, demonstrating that shepherds are aware of optimising over transaction costs.

But group interactions raise their own problems. Flock leaders have to be given requisite powers to make decisions for the group, but they have to be kept in check so that these powers are not abused (principal-agent issues). Group members have to be sure that others will do their jobs and will not free-ride. Since duties like guarding, grazing of animals, negotiating safe passage, cooking, and looking after animals have to be shared, negligence can be costly. The groups handle this by forming strong community ties within the groups and using the same groups year after year to go on their annual migration. Long-term ties create the incentives that thwart the rewards from short-term opportunism (reputation and co-operation in repeated games).

The story of the *raikas* is interesting in and of itself. But what this book does is much more. By being aware of the theoretical questions that are raised by the way the *raikas* live and survive, the book provides a very rich understanding of the life of migrant communities. Agrawal is also aware of the theoretical developments that have occurred in economics (game theory, transaction cost theory, institutional economics, and information economics) in recent decades so that he is able to make us understand the choices of these people in the light of the insights derived from all of these fields. The same applies to other fields like anthropology, political science, and sociology. In this regard, the book is an extremely self-conscious one, giving a very absorbing combination of formal theory, ethnography, and analytics. Observations are grounded in theory and those that do not fit are explored fully.

The book is certainly an important contribution to the study of migrant populations. But it has much wider implications. It also provides a very interesting way of applying the developments on the side of theory to field-level observations, and for using theory to understand everyday actions. An important book for social scientists for sure, its importance for economists is highlighted by this excellent blend of insights from economic theory and the everyday, which is a further important lesson for economists.

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