

B O O K R E V I E W

Searching for Unity in the Diversity of Rural Karnataka

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Pattenden, Jonathan (2016), *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. xiv+200.

Jonathan Pattenden's *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach* sets out to analyse "class relations between the dominant and labouring classes in rural India, through a focus on three interrelated areas of analysis: labour relations, collective action, and the mediation of class relations by the state" (p. 3). Based on fieldwork spread over 12 years, the book provides a picture of the relations between different groups in 39 villages spread across three Karnataka districts: Dharwad, Raichur, and Mandya. The degree of detail of this picture makes it a very valuable addition to the body of research on rural Karnataka, a State which, as the author points out, has been studied less than the other southern States.

To be sure Pattenden is trying to do much more than just provide another empirical account of rural Karnataka. He would like his data to develop the class-relational approach to understanding rural India. This would require that the evidence move from a detailed description of his villages to a theoretical statement of how and why rural Karnataka is what it is. It is in this somewhat ambitious task that the book falls short.

To begin with, the book falls into the unfortunately growing body of Marxist literature on rural India that is ahistorical. Such a category would normally be seen as a contradiction in terms. But over time some Marxist researchers have tended to assume that history follows a standardised pattern, and most, if not all, differences must be attributed to current phenomena. This is evident in Pattenden's comparison of land reform in Dakshin Kannada and in the interior regions of Karnataka. He sees the success in Dakshin Kannada and the relative absence of land reform in the interior regions as primarily a matter of the power of the major landowning

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castes. He does not recognise that the history, and possibly ecology, of Dakshin Kannada threw up a tenancy-dominated agrarian system that was the ideal target of a land-to-the-tenant programme. In contrast, the history and ecology of southern Karnataka ensured that the region had very low levels of tenancy, thereby making the entire tenancy reform exercise irrelevant. And while tenancy may have been a little more prevalent in north Karnataka, much of this was dominant class tenancy, with its own implications for the use of tenancy reform legislation.

The divergent historical paths are just a part of the larger diversity between the different regions in Karnataka. The great detail in Pattenden's work ensures that he captures the differences even between the generally dry districts of north Karnataka. He is very sensitive to the differences he finds between Raichur and Dharwad, but without a sense of local history he is unable to explain *why* the systems are different. And since just one of his 39 villages is from the southern part of the State, the very different agrarian system of the old Mysore region does not enter the discussion in any meaningful way.

Without an understanding of how and why an agrarian system came to be what it is, the book limits itself to a description of *how* these systems operate. While the importance of such detailed descriptions is not to be underestimated, it rules out the possibility of forming a common theoretical understanding that could explain diverse realities. The author is then left with the task of making the concepts he is committed to malleable enough to address the diversity he faces.

His basic concept of class is itself changed to include elements that are not usually associated with the term: "... class has been understood as a multifaceted one that is inflected by a variety of forms of difference such as gender and caste" (p. 163). Broadening the concept of class brings with it the challenge of even greater diversity. There are a larger number of relations that now have to be covered as class relations, leading to diversity even within labour. The author falls back on Bernstein's "classes of labour" to capture some of this diversity. But such sponge-like concepts have their limitations, in that by covering everything, they are unable to focus on the unique features of a class. Bernstein's way out of this difficulty was to focus on the core antagonism between capital and labour. When used in rural Karnataka, however, this return to a relatively narrow focus once again leaves out much of the diversity even within the individual villages that the book studies.

Pattenden tries to overcome this return to narrowness by using other concepts, such as that of gatekeeping. But here again diversity forces him to define different levels of gatekeepers. He then tries to link the gatekeepers to class relations. This plethora of concepts points to the complexity and diversity even within individual villages, but it does not do much more than describe the current reality. And the most detailed descriptions, while important, cannot be a substitute for an explanation of diversity.

The task of coming up with a method that would consistently explain the origins of this diversity, and act as an effective means of understanding it, may not be an easy one and the progress the book makes towards this end is halting, if that. But it would be churlish to ignore the rich empirical detail Pattenden brings to our understanding of rural Raichur and Dharwad, in the neglected northern regions of a State that is itself grossly under-researched.