



BOOK REVIEW

How Lives Change

Judith Heyer*

Himanshu, Lanjouw, Peter, and Stern, Nicholas (2018), *How Lives Change, Palanpur, India, and Development Economics*, Oxford University Press, 528 pages, Rs 795.

How Lives Change is one of the latest of a number of publications reporting the findings of a long term study of Palanpur, a small village in a relatively poorly developed part of Uttar Pradesh in north India. The study has involved a large number of individual researchers over a long period of time and it is distinctive for the care and commitment with which data have been collected and reported. The first of the studies was in 1957–58 and there were subsequent studies in 1962–63, 1974–75, 1983–84, 2008–10, and 2015. The researchers have produced a large number of publications providing detailed information on the evolution of the Palanpur population and village economy.

Three major books have emerged from the study so far. *How Lives Change* covers findings up to and including 2008–10 and 2015, Bliss and Stern (1982) cover findings up to 1974–75, and Lanjouw and Stern (1998) up to 1983–84.¹ *How Lives Change* focuses more on the later decades than the earlier. It reports a slow, ongoing improvement in the lives of the inhabitants of the village since 1957–58 despite the fact that this was a relatively backward village in a relatively poor region of north India. The main reasons for the continuing improvement in the early decades were land reform and the green revolution, and in the later decades the introduction of new activities such as marble polishing and mentha processing, and an expanded set of services in the village as well as engagement in the wider economy through commuting and migration. The state played a relatively weak role throughout. The emphasis in the book is on how individuals in the village managed to improve their positions.

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¹ Bliss and Stern (1982); Lanjouw and Stern (1998).

The book states that the village is more closely integrated with the surrounding economy (p. 423), but not enough attention is paid to the development of infrastructure and markets *et al.* and the development of the wider regional economy into which Palanpur became increasingly integrated. Despite the region's relatively poor performance there was still a lot going on that could have been elaborated upon.

The book includes a substantial amount of material on inequality which is shown to have decreased in the period (1970s and 1980s) in which agricultural development was central, and increased thereafter. The extent to which inequality was a driver as well as an outcome of the development process is not however explored. The same is true of human development. There is a substantial amount of material in a separate chapter on education, health and nutrition, but it is not sufficiently integrated into the general analysis in the book. We are told that Uttar Pradesh had one of the poorest human development outcomes in the country (p. 400) and that Palanpur was no exception here.

One of the more striking aspects of the study is its portrayal of the poor status of women and how little that had improved over time. A separate chapter describes the continuing inequalities within the household, reflected in domestic violence, and in the village, which remained an unequal space for women (p. 400).

The book contains interesting material on growth in agriculture which was a primary source of income in the first decade and a secondary source of income subsequently. Agricultural growth was the result of land reform, technical change and mechanisation in the context of increasing population, releasing labour for non-farm work and giving rise to increased income and its associated demand for non-agricultural as well as agricultural output. The book also has a lot to say on non-agricultural development as non-farm activities combined increasingly with farm activities in households that were pluriactive. By 2008–09, non-farm activities were accounting for 60 per cent of village employment (p. 245), and 60 per cent of village income (p. 251). There was more commuting than migration, and self-employment was more important than wage or salary employment. Employment and self-employment in the non-farm village and wider economy was predominantly low skill and informal, partly because there were limited opportunities for anything else, and partly because the village population was a low skill population.

Considerable attention is paid in the book to institutions, economic (tenancy, labour contracts, etc.) and social (caste in particular). There are valuable caste breakdowns of data throughout and accounts of different caste trajectories, members of some caste groups being better able to take advantage of new opportunities than others. Caste institutions are shown to have played a strong role first in the agrarian economy in which they shaped agrarian relations and then as the village became

more integrated into the regional economy when networks, connections and trust played important roles in relation to non-agricultural activities.

A weakness of the book is that while it claims to make a contribution to the theory of economic development, the economic development theory to which it claims to be contributing is very selective. Moreover, it is not possible to make more than a very limited contribution on the basis of the experience of people in one particular village. Nor is it possible to make a major contribution to the theory of economic development by focusing on individuals rather than on larger structures and processes.

The main theoretical conclusion in the book is that the rise of off-farm employment, mainly informal, and based on pluriactivity and commuting, is very different from the Lewis story of migration to towns, and movement of workers from one sector to another. Also noted is the fact that small towns play as important a part as large. There is a large literature on all this that is not acknowledged in the book. The authors pay a good deal of attention to the informal sector, and its positive as well as negative aspects, before making what seems a complacent assumption that as the general level of income grows the informal sector will become higher quality. There is also a large literature on Kuznets, and on the possibility that inequality will increase and not decrease in future, contrary to what the authors optimistically suggest. Finally, the authors stress the importance of institutions at the local level while failing to acknowledge the relatively large body of literature that has been emerging on these.

The concluding chapters on the future, and on lessons for policy, would benefit from drawing on the findings of village studies in other parts of India. There is much to be learnt from comparisons between villages relying on long distance migration rather than short distance migration or commuting, villages with access to significant amounts of wage employment as well as self-employment, and villages in which human development is much more advanced than in Palanpur. There is a brief discussion of other village studies (pp. 286–8) but it is very selective and does not relate well to the main arguments in the book.

There are mixed messages on agriculture. At one point (p. 450) it is stated that Palanpur is becoming a residential site. At other points it is stated that agriculture continues to play an important role. There is limited discussion of the future of agriculture as the technology on which Palanpur's agriculture is based becomes unsustainable.

The book ends by advocating further research on Palanpur. Detailed village studies can make more powerful contributions if they are put in context and if they draw on the general literature on village studies in other parts of India as well as the scholarly literature on the major issues that come up. Further research on the wider economy, both nearby and distant, with which villages are increasingly integrated, is needed to understand changes in the village economy.

REFERENCES

Bliss, Christopher, and Stern, Nicholas (1982), *Palanpur: The Economy of an Indian Village*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lanjouw, Peter, and Stern, Nicholas (1998), *Economic Development in Palanpur over Five Decades*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.