
BOOK REVIEW

Arun Ghosh, *West Bengal Land-scapes: Nov. 1983—Feb. 1986—A Travel Diary*, K. P. Bagchi & Co., Calcutta, Rs. 200.

The book under review is a remarkable one. Arun Ghosh who has long been involved in economic research and economic administration was the Vice-Chairman of the West Bengal State Planning Board from late 1983 to early 1986. He, as he himself states in the Introduction, "had never lived in West Bengal "and did" not really know the people of West Bengal" (p.1). Yet, when invited by the Government of West Bengal to take charge of the State Planning Board, he agreed to accept the invitation. He considered the task challenging. Though the land in the state was, by and large, considered to be bountiful, agriculture was backward. A major task was to bring about a transformation in West Bengal's agricultural and rural economy. Another major task was to evolve decentralised planning "by introducing the concept of local level planning by the Panchayat bodies in order to solve the specific problems of each area, and also build up a spirit of self-help and self-reliance" (pp.1-2).

The author recalls in this connexion the experiment at decentralised planning in Maharashtra and Gujarat in the seventies, where the district plans drawn up by the panchayats were, initially, a considerable success. But the devolution of real authority was not to the liking of the entrenched interests in the power structure in the States—the bureaucrats, the MLAs and MPs and perhaps even the State Cabinet. They saw in this development an erosion of their power and authority. In consequence, the author considers that over time, the form had remained, but not the substance. Despite talk

of decentralised planning, plans at the district level gradually came to be directed and approved from above—by the State Cabinet, and executed by the district administrators.

The author considers that while there are certainly many areas of economic activity which call for planning and action at the central level and also areas which call for planning and implementation at the State level, there are strong reasons for decentralised planning. In his view, the thrust of decentralised planning should be both planning and implementation of local areas development programme with active involvement of local people in the light of their own understanding of their needs and priorities as well as of the way of implementation. The author considered that West Bengal with its background of land reforms, though admittedly incomplete, and a functioning Panchayat system since 1977 was likely to provide a favourable environment for experiment with decentralised planning.

After accepting the charge, the author tried to understand the problems of rural development and grassroot planning in West Bengal. He travelled widely, particularly in the countryside, met ordinary villagers and discussed problems of local level development and planning with panchayats, district planning organisations and administrative authorities. The book presents a fascinating account of his travels, of the life and conditions of the rural people, of the deep-seated problems facing the people, of the complex problems of reaching the benefits of planned development to the people, of the internal conflicts and tensions within the government, of the procedure of drawing block-level and district-level plans, and of the various prob-

lems involved in the process of introducing decentralised planning through the Panchayats. In the Epilogue the author comments on some of the obstacles in the way of decentralised planning at political, governmental and administrative levels.

Apart from a Prologue and an Epilogue, the book is divided into twenty chapters. Each of these chapters deals with separate visits to a district or an area, gives an account of the problems faced by the district or the area and discusses various issues relating to planning at the district, block and village levels. He has written about his rich experiences in the form of a travel diary,

the chapters arranged in a chronological order. The choice of the form of a travelogue has been deliberate. The book deals with issues of planning. But the author has stated in his Introduction that as the task of planning for economic development involves ordinary people, the presentation should be intelligible to them and not to experts only. The result of his endeavour is an eminently readable as a highly instructive and insightful account and analysis.

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