

BOOK REVIEW

Peasant Mobility: The Odds of Life in Rural Bangladesh by Willem van Schendel, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1981, xii+371 pp.

I

Taking a general view of rural studies in Bangladesh since the sixties, one notes two main trends. One, which can be represented by P. J. Bertocci's "cyclical kulakism" thesis, attaches importance to the fluidity of class differentiation in Bangladesh rural communities, the methodology used being a focusing of attention on the mobility of individual peasant households. The other, which has become pronounced since the seventies, can be represented by the view that the formation of a rich peasant class and peasant differentiation are an irreversible trend that is taking place in Comilla District and other advanced agricultural areas as a result of introduction of high-yielding varieties and Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).¹

It would appear that the latter trend is the mainstream in recent rural studies. Even Bertocci has, in a recent paper, acknowledged the reasonableness of criticism of his thesis, posing the problem as follows as a restatement of his research orientation: "I have been criticised by Wood on the quite reasonable grounds that I had failed to take account of the possibilities for entrenchment of the 'rich peasants' via diversification of their investments. The fact really is that we do not as yet have a detailed study on either the micro- or macro-level which would sketch out for us the balance between net gainers and net losers over time in the ongoing process of land transfer."²

Van Schendel, the author of the book under review, can be said to have a viewpoint in line with this statement of the problem by Bertocci, for in this book his approach to Bangladesh villages is from the angle of the effect of mobility of individual peasant households on stratification within the peasantry.

What he bases his argument on is T. Shanin's model for the interrelationship between peasant household mobility and the class formation of the peasantry, revising it in an attempt to determine whether the various kinds of mobility of peasant households result in polarization or levelling of the peasantry.

By its nature, this kind of research requires long-term data concerning the peasant households in question. Van Schendel has solved this problem by taking up past monographs that provide detailed data on peasant households and making a follow-up survey of approximately 760 peasant households in the districts of Rangpur, Bogra, and Comilla (those in Rangpur being surveyed for the first time).

The following four economic statuses based on the peasants' own subjective appraisal serve as the criteria of mobility:

Category A—households unable to provide for themselves for twelve months per year;

¹ See papers in the Centre for Social Studies' *Journal of Social Studies*, particularly P. J. Bertocci, "Structural Fragmentation and Peasant Classes in Bangladesh," *Journal of Social Studies*, 1979, No. 5, which deals with the state of this research.

² Bertocci, "Structural Fragmentation," p. 56.

Category B—households just managing to provide for themselves for twelve months per year;

Category C—households able to create a surplus of one to three months per year;

Category D—households able to create a surplus of over three months per year.

He also has found records at the district collectorates which he has used for past data of a kind that has been lacking in previous studies and that has therefore heightened the values of his book.

II

The study of mobility of peasant households over a period of forty to sixty years as in the case of this book is no easy task if the study is to be positive. On the basis of such study, Van Schendel points out that although no dramatic change can be seen in class structure as a whole, 80 to 90 per cent of the households in question have shown some change in terms of the above-mentioned economic statuses (p. 286). He concludes that this indicates that one cannot define a relationship of cause and effect between the mobility of peasant families and polarization or levelling that is always valid (p. 283). Furthermore, he says that this phenomenon is also connected with the fact that historically under colonialism free development of peasant differentiation was impeded (pp. 274–76).

However, he attaches importance to the role of the state in Bangladesh since its independence as a force that has been strengthening dominant village groups and promoting polarization (p. 278).

I do not think that these conclusions of Van Schendel's represent anything new in research on socioeconomic history of Bengal. For instance, his pointing out of structural stagnation amounts to the same standpoint as Ray in recent controversy over economic history of Bengal.³

The greatest merit of this book would appear to lie rather in its success in demonstrating the high level of mobility of individual peasant households and the stability of class structure in Bengali villages in a consistent manner on the basis of a difficult positive study. This study by Van Schendel can be said to have demonstrated to us the fact that it is certainly possible to couple rural studies with historical research.

III

Nevertheless, this book has some defects in terms of methodology and presentation, three instances of which I will mention.

The first instance concerns the author's contention that by classifying the peasantry into four categories (A–D) he has presented an effective method to replace class analysis (p. 39). It would appear that he considered the "subjectivity" of such classification to be better than the "objectivity" of class analysis, but he has overlooked the fact that the superiority of class analysis lies in analysis of the strata in terms of their relation to one another. The difference between the methods cannot be simplified as merely being the difference between subjectivity and objectivity. A

³ Rajat Ray and Ratna Ray, "The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal under the British Imperium: A Study of Quasi-stable Equilibrium in Underdeveloped Societies in a Changing World," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 1973).

similar statement of the problem that is often encountered is the contrasting of Marxist analysis and Weberian analysis, and Van Schendel, too, is guilty of such unscientificness.

Another defect of the book, and one that is related to the first one, is the fact that there is no analysis of economic relations or political change on the village or regional level for any of the villages included in the study. Since the focus is on analysis of the mobility of peasant households, the households are treated in an isolated fashion without any attention being given to economic relations between them. In this respect the book has a different method of presentation than that of the traditional village research monograph. In the case of Bangladesh as well, village economic analysis falls short of being adequate if one neglects consideration of problems that lie on the borderline between sociology and economics, such as rapidly diminishing use of pasture-land, drainage and irrigation, and as problems closely related to them, maintenance and administration of natural or artificial embankments, and procurement of agricultural workers and tenants, who can be used as "troops" in confrontations within the village. In this respect, the traditional method of village research of analysis of the family, relatives, community groups, local market spheres, etc. is still a long way from losing its effectiveness and certainly has not been fully studied.⁴

The third defect of the book that I would like to mention here has to do with the relationship between Van Schendel's analysis and Shanin's analysis, on which the former is based. Van Schendel adopted Shanin's research as a means of analyzing the mobility of peasant households, but what was important to Shanin was determination of the state of the kulaks in Russia. If one considers Shanin's research on this level, the extent to which Van Schendel's four-category classification is unhistorical is very clear. It could be said that this book does not attempt economic analysis, and that would be the end of the matter, but if one intends to contrast the mobility of peasant households as viewed from a historical perspective to peasant differentiation or class analysis, one simply cannot avoid going into the economic exchange relationships between peasant households. Hopefully, the author will realize this in his future work.

In spite of such defects in relation to its methodology and presentation, this book can be considered to represent an important contribution to researchers specializing in other regions as a challenge concerning a common problem of rural studies in developing countries.

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⁴ P. J. Bertocci, "Microregion, Market Area and Muslim Community in Rural Bangladesh," *Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July 1975).