

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Waquar Ahmed, Amitabh Kundu and Richard Peet, *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*, New York: Routledge, 2010. ISBN 978-0-415-81146-0 (paper); ISBN 978-0-415-80188-1 (cloth)

Pavan K. Varma, a well known commentator on Indian society, once wrote that “Indian reality is transparent and opaque simultaneously” (2004: 4). *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis* impressively renders transparent the political economy of India since the implementation of free-market reforms known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The introduction contextualizes India's 1991 economic liberalization as part of a global neoliberal policy regime. The goal of the collection, edited by Waquar Ahmed, Amitabh Kundu and Richard Peet, is to illustrate how this policy regime is implemented in India at multiple scales, and show how it has impacted Indian society. The essays comprehensively address the most pressing issues confronting Indian society, such as privatization of services, antagonism between the urban middle class and poor, and the crisis in agriculture and Naxalite resistance.

Following Peet's analysis of neoliberalism as an ideologically-based policy regime that must be imposed by a state, the essays focus on the relationship between state and society. They show how actually existing neoliberalism results in uneven development and inequality. Six address various aspects of urbanization. Importantly, Kundu confronts the myth that India is experiencing hyper-urbanization, and shows that urban growth has been limited to the metropolises that have been able to attract foreign investment in infrastructural projects while small cities in peripheral regions have languished. Shipra Maitra explains how the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission - a central government initiative - creates a financial incentive for municipal governments to embrace the neoliberal policy regime, subsidizing urban infrastructure development if municipalities enter public-private partnerships and implement investor-friendly zoning policies.

Challenging the narrative of hyper-urbanization is important because it is commonly embraced by urban elites as a justification for dispossession. Urban elites reason that since they

are faced with an unceasing flow of migrants from rural areas who are at best a drain on services and at worst criminal, services must be privatized to ensure that users pay and space must be re-ordered to ensure safety. In the case of Ahmedabad, Ipsita Chatterjee shows how in the process of ‘rolling out the red carpet’ for international investors and transforming the riverfront into ‘world-class’ space, thousands of people were displaced. While this is a predictable outcome of gentrification, this chapter makes an important contribution by showing how state-subsidized housing estates on the city’s periphery were given exclusively to Hindus even though the displaced were predominantly Muslim. In other words, she shows how populations are spatially segregated along class, caste and communal lines, in accordance with the needs of capital.

The re-ordering of populations and space within Indian cities is driven by the desire to create ‘world-class’ cities. Swapna Banerjee-Guha’s chapter explains that this concept has become hegemonic within planning circles at the national scale, and then explores how the municipal government of Mumbai has sought to transform the city into a global financial center. She shows that this project was nothing short of a complete reconfiguration of the city’s economic base; capital was channeled out of productive industries like manufacturing, and into the built environment and high-end services that cater to a small minority of residents. Ahmed’s chapter on caste and class explains why this shift occurred. He shows how class relationships (both inter- and intra-) and caste hierarchies are in a constant state of flux, and shifting coalitions produce unique state-society relations at any given time. While this chapter focuses on these dynamics in the context of the electric power industry, the argument that the corporate sector is the preserve of high-caste and upper-class elites due to an absence of reservations for other groups can help explain why the neoliberal policy regime has found traction in India’s major cities where the professional managerial class lives, works, and spends its leisure time.

Two chapters in this volume show how environmentalism is combined with the neoliberal policy regime, and commonly a justification for dispossession. Rohit Negi traces the history of the ‘environmental turn’ in which the courts have responded to citizen lawsuits against the government that call for the state to strictly enforce environmental standards. He shows how these lawsuits employ a discourse that equates a clean environment with the ‘right to life’. These cases have addressed the removal of slums and small factories, but once the issues become framed as ‘environmental’ and are addressed by the courts, they are rendered technical and depoliticized. Bharti Chaturvadi and Vinay Gidwani’s contribution focuses on how the

privatization of the solid waste management sector devastated the informal waste recycling sector. They explain that although wastepickers recycled more than the private sector currently does, they were criminalized and prevented from operating in certain spaces once private firms were granted monopolies over waste.

Most of the authors understand the NEP in India as a hegemonic project imposed by international financial institutions, but there is no discussion of the domestic political struggles over liberalization in the 1980s (see Kohli 1989; Jenkins 2000; Sengupta 2009). These intense political contestations show that on the eve of economic liberalization, neoliberalism had a very small number of adherents. This raises a very important question in light of the widespread dispossession and increased inequality documented in the first six chapters: how has neoliberal ideology become so hegemonic in India since 1991? The chapters on the impacts of liberalization in rural areas and resistance provide some answers.

First, these chapters show that although the NEP causes widespread displacement and dispossession in rural areas, as well as increased inequality among people and regions, the state acts in complete disregard of the law rather than try to justify its actions on legal grounds. Rupal Oza focuses on special economic zones, which are in rural and urban areas, because, as she explains, the state basically allows private firms to dictate their chosen location. She shows that in many cases firms choose land that is already occupied, and in order to evict the occupants the state must disregard laws that were established to protect vulnerable populations from precisely such dispossessions. Additionally, market pressures have increased food insecurity. Suman Sahai shows how the production of biofuels for the global market produces a scarcity of agricultural land, and Utsa Patnaik focuses on policy that has encouraged the production of cash crops for export instead of foodgrains. She shows that 40 years of progress in foodgrain output per capita has been reversed since 1991.

Second, and perhaps as a result of the multiple ways that the NEP operates, resistance is localized. Dave Featherstone critiques the organized Left for opposing the neoliberal policy regime rhetorically while for the most part failing to aid local struggles against dispossession. He argues that most resistance movements are local place-based movements, and the main challenge they face is to form alliances with other movements that have very different conceptions of place and are informed by very different subaltern identities. India's most well-known resistance to the neoliberal policy regime, Naxalism, is the subject of the final chapter. Raju Das presents

Naxalism as an alternative model of development, and he offers the poignant insight that it has been limited by its inability to incorporate non-class based movements such as those based on caste and gender.

In conclusion, this volume offers a comprehensive analysis of the effects of India's NEP. It is highly readable and will truly benefit scholars of neoliberalism and globalization, both those with extensive knowledge of India and those whose main focus lies elsewhere.

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