Satendra Kumar. Badalta Gaon, Badalta Dehat: Nayi Samajikta ka Uday (बदलता गाँव बदलता देहात नयी सामाजिकता का उदय [Changing Villages and Rural Society])

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REFERENCES


1 With Badalta Gaon, Badalta Dehat (Changing Villages and Rural Society), Oxford University Press has dared to publish a book in Hindi which provides valuable insights and takes on dominant power structures in present India. This work, based on ethnography, is a serious attempt to understand rural India in general and rural Uttar Pradesh (UP) in particular. Kumar is sensitive to the plight of Muslims, and is a keen observer of environmental deterioration. The main argument of the book is that if you want to understand India’s villages, you must look at the changing economic, political and social aspects of them. Kumar uses the lens of “change” to understand villages. The book, laced with defining grounded theory and fresh ethnographic data, clearly illustrates the fruitfulness of his fieldwork over more than a decade, from 2003 to 2015 and beyond (p.75).

2 The ethnography deals with a monographic study of a village in Meerut district in Western UP. It includes residents of two religious backgrounds—Hinduism and Islam—and various castes like Brahmin, Bania, Gujar, Yadav, Saini, Gadaria/ Pal, Dhewar/Kashyap, Lohar, Badhai, Kumhar, Nai, Dhobi, Fakir, Jatav and Valmiki. Kumar has
skilfully looked at the village through the lenses of both caste and class and explains
the overlap between the two. The village is composed of cultivators, tenants, service
castes, craftpeople, labourers and landless labourers. The majority of villagers (85%)
are small and marginal farmers, meaning they own land of less than three acres,
however, Kumar, in the first chapter, highlights the diversity of livelihoods, beyond
mere agriculture. Due to the lack of substantial land tracts among the backward castes,
population explosion over time, and decrease in soil fertility due to increased use of
fertilisers, most villagers (90% almost) now depend on non-agricultural income along
with agriculture. Dairy, small shops, fertiliser and seed shops, cement and sand
suppliers, transport agencies, along with work in urban areas as daily wage, contractual
or government jobs are some important sources of income which villagers supplant
with the agriculture output as subsistence. The chapter, towards the end, makes special
note of the extinction of vultures due to the use of a medicine, namely diclofenac,
which is used for treating livestock. When vultures consume the carcass of a dead
animal, diclofenac enters their bloodstream and causes death. Many fertilisers and
chemicals which are banned in the West are sold by MNCs in India and are causing
havoc to both flora and fauna. Elderly villagers talk about decreasing fertility of the
soil, some even do not consume their own vegetables fearing the effects of fertiliser and
lament on how vultures have vanished into oblivion.

3 In the second chapter Kumar acquaints us with the vividness of a panchayat level
election held in the village between late 2015 and early 2016. Although there are three
dominant castes in Western UP, Jats, Gujjars and Yadavs, the village is dominated by
Gujjars. They have the 3 M’s—muscle, money and mind. Kumar narrates how poor
backward castes and even scheduled castes prefer a Gujjar over a Muslim or a Saini (a
backward class) as pradhan (official village leader) as they often entice voters using
ingenious methods including distributions of liquor or money, demonstrations of
power or use of anti-Muslim propaganda. Kumar details the paradoxical ways in which
poor Muslim villagers are looked upon as rich and powerful agents of Pakistan and
Saudi Arabia. Rumours are stoked that all the villagers must protect themselves against
Muslims as they are trying to re-capture India, that Muslims eve-tease Hindu women,
and that Muslims will openly start eating beef (p.43). The irony is that even Gadaria
(lower castes) and Jatav and Balmiki (ex-untouchables) despite being looked down upon
by dominant castes, vote for them in the name of saving their lives, religion (Hinduism)
and women from Muslims. The chapter intends to describe the everyday operation of
elections at the local level on which, the author contends, other studies on India’s
democracy do not focus. However, Kumar could have elaborated a little more on the
rise of Hindutva and its relationship with the politics of the lower castes.

4 The third chapter talks about Western UP’s rampant unemployment. It deliberates over
a number of associated issues: the growth of private schools attended mostly by
children from dominant castes (Yadavs and Gujjars); government schools’ slowly
diminishing enrolment (p.53) increasingly limited to children from poor, primarily
Dalit, families (p.54); increasing inequality thanks to disparate quality of education;
preponderance of degrees and severe lack of corresponding work opportunities;
increasing contractualization of labour; evident corruption in the educational system
(p.64) and indications of bribery in government job selection processes. Everything is
gloomy, and reflects what I have seen in my own fieldwork elsewhere in UP. In spite of
this negative impression on the state of education, Kumar has deftly recounted how
education is changing the aspirations of women to have a greater say in their familial
spaces. We see that educated girls are seeking better educated and financially secure prospective grooms as well, which was unimaginable just a generation ago.

Chapter Four speaks about the important changes that mobile phones and motorcycles have brought about in the UP hinterlands. Kumar observes that the elderly and women use basic mobile phones while earning men and youth prefer smartphones. Social media like Facebook and WhatsApp have dramatically increased the connectivity of villagers with the rest of India. The author narrates a romantic story of how a simple youth of the village married an American white woman having tried his luck with random Facebook friend requests. However, on the negative side, we find a story of a group of teenagers kidnapping an eight-year-old neighbour for a ransom and killing him when the ploy failed. When interrogated by police, they said they got the idea from a film they watched over their mobile phones. Villagers are also able to use the internet to troubleshoot pesticide and fertiliser issues and seek veterinary advice with much ease. Motorcycles have increased the ability of villagers to attend social gatherings in distant villages, nearby towns, and government offices.

The whole of northern India has been facing an increasing religiosity among the "lower castes." There has been sudden upsurge in the number of gurus (Hindu spiritual leaders), satsangs (a gathering for a spiritual discourse) and deras (monasteries). Kumar recounts that devotion levels are such that even women have discounted charges like rape against gurus including Asaram Babu and Ram Rahim as political ploys (pp.104-5). At one point, Kumar describes how Jat and Gujar musclemen reinvent their domination over poorer castes like Dalits by organising satsangs (group meetings) (pp.105-7) and writes that this process is akin to re-establishing the breaking patron-client relationships, albeit in a different format. Satsangs (group meetings) provide a physical space for the organiser or host where lower caste participants like Jatav, Saini and Dhewar can be groomed as informants, providing updates to those in power about day-to-day happenings of the village or labourers in the field (p.106). In a similar vein, unemployed youths are wooed through Kanwariya (a ritual where men walk long distance to fetch holy water of Ganga river). They enjoy the opportunity of a few day’s respite from the usual anxiety of joblessness throughout the year. The Hindu right has been partly able to appropriate these raw emotions of the youth, and today Kanwaroys sometimes cause trouble on roadways which even turns violent.

The book overall shows us that rural society is changing fast and it is this change that must be the focus of rural sociology. It would be wrong to label this work as “yet another village study.” It does, however, incorporate a healthy mix of the village study classics—works of MN Srinivas (1976), Andre Béteille (1971), FG Bailey (1957), AC Mayer (1960), BS Cohn (1987) etc.—as well as, studies of the state of Uttar Pradesh like the works of Craig Jeffrey (2010), Roger Jeffrey and Jens Lerche (2003), Sudha Pai (2002), etc. The only thing which Kumar could have done is to actively engage with these works and make his book more academic; they remain in the bibliography quite passively.

Kumar makes it clear that it would be wrong to assume that villages are dying. In his opinion, villages are becoming urbanised and urban areas are getting ruralised too. What we have is neither ‘villages’ nor ‘cities’ in their pristine form as conceptualised in Western academia. Kumar calls for decolonising the categories—villages and cities—and advocates for a hybrid one. His work is equally a call to question such neat and
clean conceptualisation. This book makes a valuable contribution to the existing village studies, and refreshes our understanding about rural India.

What could have been added is the appalling condition of healthcare and school education and a little more elaboration on how rising Hindutva is inimical to the social mobility of women, Dalits and backward classes alike. Kumar could have used the works like Fascinating Hindutva (2009) by Badri Narayan to delve deeper on 'Hindutvisation' of Bahujans, and could have elaborated more on neoliberalism as a process reinforcing this ‘de-liberalisation’ of the rural mind set a point hinted at by Ravi Srivastava (2017) recently. One longs for some more detailing on various castes which might be resisting or negotiating with the bigger social changes happening at the national level (Jaoul, 2012; Lee, 2015). One rarely sees good quality sociological work in Hindi since the 1980s and Kumar’s contribution is important in this regard. At a time when Hindi media has become the chief propaganda machine of the Hindu right, the book stands out in its orientation. It must find space in the bookshelves of experts on Uttar Pradesh, village studies, rural sociology, and anyone interested in understanding social change in rural India.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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