

Bob Currie, *The Politics of Hunger in India. A Study of Democracy, Governance and Kalahandi's Poverty*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press Ltd (and New York: St. Martin's Press Inc, and Chennai: MacMillan India Ltd.), 2000. 273 pp. Hardback.

When do hunger and famines exist and under which conditions do they disappear? The prevailing consensus, according to Bob Currie is influenced heavily by the work of Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze. It holds that “famines tend not to occur in electoral democracies in which there exists a relatively free press and a high degree of freedom of speech and association available to its citizens. (...) [G]overnments that need to seek re-election, and that face criticism (...) cannot afford to ignore starvation or to neglect famine” (p. 4).

The book under review challenges this assumption to some extent. It is a study of the Kalahandi region of the Orissa state in East India, which is characterised by recurrent droughts and food crises. The Kalahandi case seems to contradict the prevailing consensus. After all, India is a democratic country in which regular elections are held, and there is a free press which has published extensively about the problems of poverty and alleged starvation in Kalahandi. Against this background, the study sets out to explore what kind of political processes have generated and perpetuated hunger in this region and what sort of political institutions and political actions are best suited to combat these problems. In short, it raises the broad question: ‘to what extent does democracy matter in hunger alleviation?’ (p. 5)

These are very relevant questions, indeed, and in view of their importance it is surprising that there is not much more debate about them. In fact, these questions are only rarely addressed in the otherwise rich literature on food insecurity and poverty in India. The book is hence a very welcome contribution. It is one of the few studies focussing on the political context in which food security and anti-poverty policies are implemented.

The book consists of an introduction and 2 main parts. Part 1 (chapter 2 and 3) is a theoretical exploration of the relation between political processes and political culture on the one hand and public welfare on the other. It discusses the ideas of various political thinkers. In my view, the discussion is sometimes a bit too philosophical and remote from the empirical substance discussed in the second part of the book, but I should also say that these chapters contain a good critique of the assumptions underlying Dreze and Sen's public action model, and they raise a number of interesting issues, such as the relevance of state types and of political cultures for development and effective poverty reduction.

The second part of the book (chapter 4 to 8) discusses the politics of poverty and hunger in western Orissa. The historical roots of poverty, the principles and practice of relief administration and the various forms of public action that exist are analysed. These chapters are based on extensive fieldwork, but sometimes one would wish the author had made his fieldwork observations more explicit. There are extensive descriptions of how policies should work (i.e. what the official procedures are). There are also numerous quotes of what people have said in interviews of how things work in reality. But there is relatively little other evidence (then these quotes) of how the policy networks work in reality, how relief money is spent in reality, how the partnerships between NGOs and the government work in reality, etc.

The main questions posed in the book are not only relevant, they are also very ambitious, and the author succeeds only partially in answering them. The last chapter concludes with a number of characteristics regarding the political process that explain why the elected government did not respond adequately to the widely-publicised extreme distress in Kalahandi. Elections, according to Currie, mean that people have the power ‘to get rid’, but not the power ‘to get right’. Ruling parties change, but without producing significant improvements. In a similar fashion, the legal framework ensures the ‘power to report’, but the power to follow this up and enforce is often lacking. Furthermore, subsequent governments have developed various strategies to manage the ‘expectation-delivery gap’, such as blaming the preceding government, etc. These observations are all interesting and correct, but not the end of the story. Given the probing and philosophical nature of the questions posed in the first part of the book, one keeps wondering about the relationship between these characteristics and the wider political culture that has given rise to them. Is there not something missing, for instance, about the fact that the Indian society is structurally layered and that the better-off part of the society has no real empathy with those in distress. They “don’t even weigh in as real people”, as Arundhati Roy commented in relation to the tribal population that is displaced by the Narmada dams (*Frontline*, 19 January 2001). Also in Kalahandi, the people who suffer belong to tribal groups. Their lack of voice in the political mainstream, the ideology and discursive practices justifying this and the institutional mechanisms reproducing this political exclusion are not analysed in the book, while these issues are probably crucial to understand why the public action model does not hold in the case of Kalahandi.

Despite these critical comments, the book is highly recommendable. It provides an interesting critique of the public action model; it is one of the very few studies of the politics of welfare policies and it is an attempt to combine political theory with empirical fieldwork gathered at the local level. We need more of these kind of books.

Jos Mooij

Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Nizamiah Observatory Campus, Begumpet,
Hyderabad 500016, India.