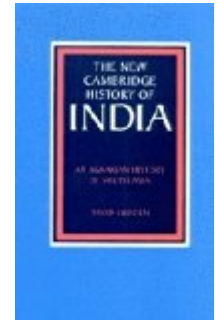


David Ludden. *An Agrarian History of South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xiii + 261 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-36424-9.



Reviewed by Marcia Frost

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David Ludden's *An Agrarian History of South Asia* is the fourth volume in *The New Cambridge History of India*, Part IV: *The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia*. Ludden is Professor of History and member of the graduate group in South Asia Regional Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and perhaps the foremost contemporary authority on the historical development of agrarian institutions of the South Asian subcontinent. While his primary inscriptional and documentary research has focused on the southern Indian region of the Tamils, his publications range widely across time, the sub-continent and disciplines to explore the development of societies that have been and largely remain intimately tied to the land.

In this volume Ludden brings together research from historians, economists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientist and, rural sociologists to create "a comprehensive framework" for an understanding of the forces which have created the contemporary "patchwork of agrarian regions" which extend from Afghanistan to Myanmar, and Nepal to Sri Lanka. Although agrarian

life in this large geographic area connecting arid west Asia to wet southeast Asia was in the past and continues today to be hugely diverse, Ludden seeks the common experiences that make South Asia a distinct region in world history and agrarian development.

There is little in this volume to satisfy a lust for numerical facts -- beyond a few estimates of the expansion of the area under cultivation in the 16th, 19th and 20th centuries there are none. What is here, however, is a rich, dense and wonderfully multi-disciplinary exploration of the evolution of agrarian society from the 3rd millennium BC to the present, and the way in which agrarian history has been perceived by historians, politicians and social reformers. Throughout there is an emphasis on the cultural context of agrarian life. Farming and agricultural institutions have a cultural context that cannot be ignored, and Ludden observes, "Modern mentalities may assign prayer, worship, myth, marriage and pilgrimage to the realm of religion; genetics, hydrology, engineering, medicine, meteorology, astrology, and alchemy to the realm of science; met-

al working, carpentry, spinning, weaving, and pot making to the realm of manufacturing; and trade, banking, war, herding, migration, politics, poetry, drama, adjudication, administration, and policing each to their separate realms of social activity. But all these are parts of agriculture. They contain essential agricultural activity" [p. 31].

Although the development of the text does in fact follow the historical periodicity to which we are accustomed, the chapter titles do not reveal this, but rather reinforce the importance of words, concepts and territoriality that Ludden explores. Chapter 1, "Agriculture," begins with a discussion of the historiography of the agrarian experience, and emphasizes that "rulers and farmers, state power and agrarian social forces interact historically and shape one another" [p. 6]. This is a common theme that runs throughout the text, as Ludden traces the increasing role the state, its power and rules exerted on agrarian institutions and development. In the subsection entitled "Seasons," the fundamental environmental resources and constraints of the subcontinent are described, and themes (which continue throughout the text) of conflict and competition, negotiation and exchange are introduced. In the final two sections of this chapter, "Maps and Landscape," we read of "interlaced trajectories, networks, circuits, zones and regions of mobility," and of territories -- all repeatedly reappearing throughout the text. Ludden's agrarian landscape is like a multi-layered GIS map with variables, institutions, peoples, etc. overlapping boundaries in both time and space.

Chapter 2, "Territory," explores the evolution of agriculture and agrarian institutions from the first evidence of farming ca. 7500 BC through the 13th century AD. These millennia saw the expansion of social -- not state -- power over the agropastoral peoples who spread east and south from the Indus River (in modern day Pakistan) across the Gangetic plains to Bengal/Bangladesh and down the peninsula to its very tip at Kanya Kumari. These centuries were (as were those that

followed) ones in which i) cultures met, mixed and competed, ii) land use intensified with new methods of metalworking and assuring water supplies, and new seeds and farming techniques, iii) pastoralists, nomads and forest cultivators were pushed to the margins, up the mountains and into the jungles, away from the routes of trade and conquest that linked more sedentary agrarian territories, and iv) both ritual and war played central roles in the negotiation and exchange that mediated conflict and competition. From the middle of the 1st millennium AD Brahmanical influence increased, kings enforced their religious duty (dharma) by upholding the right of first possession to those who cleared the land, patriarchal authority and social rankings into caste were extended and formed the basis of alliances and transaction networks, and conquest colonization began. In Ludden's view ca. 550-1250 was the formative period of South Asia's agrarian history and its agrarian regions. To the north, west and in the high mountains, warrior lineages joined local leaders, pastoralists and hunters "by imitation, alliance, genealogical invention [and] intermarriage" [p. 89] to form Rajput clans whose power was based on martial might and whose dharma did not include the act of farming. In contrast south of the Vindhya Mountains down the peninsula warrior lineages joined with agricultural communities and new castes of dominant warrior-cultivators arose. These broad divisions were reflected in kinship practices, women's land rights and agrarian alliances that continue to the present.

Chapter 3, "Regions," focuses on the late medieval, early modern centuries (14th-19th) as agrarian institutions and landscapes evolved towards those we recognize today. As world trade across Eurasia by land and sea became more closely integrated from the 14th century onwards, "new technology, ideas, habits, language, people and needs came into farming communities" [p. 113], agriculture further intensified, and states through their institutions of money and taxation

encouraged the cultivation of crops for sale and penetrated more intimately than before into agrarian life. Across the subcontinent i) transportation networks expanded, ii) urbanization (measured by both number and size of towns and cities) speeded up, iii) new and more intrusive accounts of people, production and trade evolved, iv) agrarian taxation was systematized and its burden increased, and v) entitlements to land use and power shifted from social to financial obligations. Under the East India Company discontinuities were introduced: land was no longer the property of its clearer and user, but of the state; hereditary property rights to cultivated land were converted into use rights subject to payment of land taxes; bureaucratic regulation replaced negotiation, exchange and dharma; and caste rank, status, entitlements and income were both codified and threatened. The final chapter, "Modernity," explores the role of the state in agrarian life and struggles against the state and its interruption of old patterns of agrarian intercourse. The armed rebellions of 1857, the partitions of British India in 1947 and of Pakistan in 1971, the post-independence struggles for regional sovereignty, the social movements for the rights of the marginalized, and the political power of warrior-cultivator descendants are all shown to have historic roots in the agrarian structures and identities formed over the previous centuries.

The rhetoric of historical knowledge, the evolution of agrarian social, political and economic institutions, the interplay of sedentary peoples and those on the move, the tension of conflict and negotiation are all themes which run throughout this book. There are, as the secondary literature allows, discussions of particular regions and regimes, of the intellectual tradition of discourse and policy debates, and of the organization of agrarian life -- its farming, manufactures and trade. This is, however, a book that focuses on the forest, not its individual trees; its purpose is to describe and analyze the whole of the agrarian experience of South Asia, not to focus on the partic-

ulars of any one or few specific regions. For those wishing to use this text as a reference for specific events or regimes, the index is detailed and exhaustive.

The "Bibliographical Essay" runs 18 pages of citations organized into five sections: intellectual history, approaches to agriculture, long-term history, early modern themes and modern issues. An updated bibliography can be found at Ludden's homepage <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden>. The bibliography includes only English language books, monographs, articles and a few Ph.D. dissertations, and excludes work that has been superseded by more recent scholarship; a number of citations appear as footnotes but not in the bibliographic essay.

This is a fine source for anyone interested in the evolution of South Asia's agrarian systems and institutions. Its multi-disciplinary approach should be familiar to anyone with knowledge of other predominately agrarian societies, particularly those where religious ideas and practices are intimately interwoven with all aspects of human activity. For those without a knowledge of South Asian geography or political history, however, an historical atlas will be a useful supplement; there are no maps in this volume and little background information on many of the referenced pre-modern regimes.

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