

Harvesting perspectives: A comprehensive review of two pivotal works on Indian agrarian transformation

Book reviews by

Mallory Cerkleski*

Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa

Reviews of

Distress in the Fields: Indian Agriculture after Economic Liberalization, edited by R.

Ramakumar. (2022). Published by Tulika

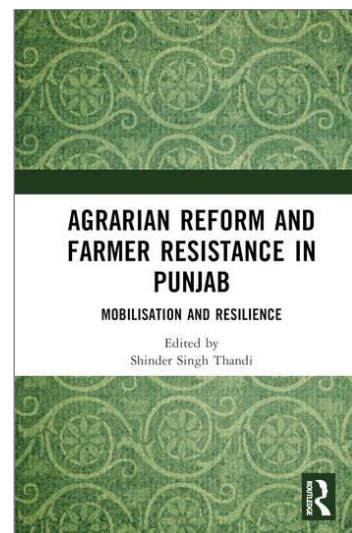
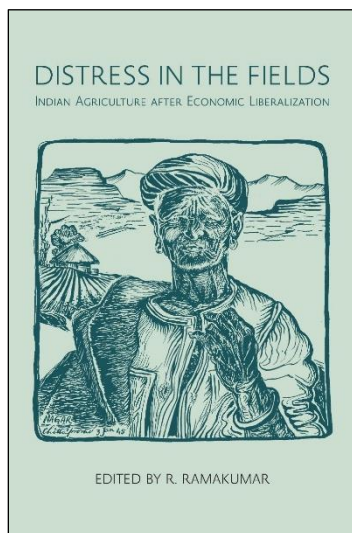
Books. Available as hardcover; 508 pages. Publisher's website:

<https://tulikabooks.in/catalog/product/view/id/22411>

Agrarian Reform and Farmer Resistance in Punjab: Mobilization and Resilience, edited by Shinder Singh Thandi. (2023). Published by Routledge India.

Available as hardcover and ebook. Publisher's website:

<https://www.routledge.com/Agrarian-Reform-and-Farmer-Resistance-in-Punjab-Mobilization-and-Resilience/Thandi/p/book/9781032291895>



Submitted December 29, 2023 / Published online February 7, 2024

Citation: Cerkleski, M. (2024). Harvesting perspectives: A comprehensive review of two pivotal works on Indian agrarian transformation [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 13(2), 251–254. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.132.003>

Copyright © 2024 by the Author. Published by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. Open access under CC BY license.

As the Indian agricultural landscape continues to undergo transformative shifts, the need for nuanced literature addressing agrarian change

* Mallory Cerkleski is a PhD student in History at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. She recently graduated with her MA from the University of Gastronomic Sciences, where her studies focused on the intersections of food, history, anthropology, and politics. Her research focuses on the perceptions of the food systems and food distribution in socialist/post-socialist states as well as broader topics of food sovereignty, food justice, and food movements specifically with a decolonial or post-colonial lens. She can be contacted at mallory.cerkleski@gmail.com

becomes increasingly pronounced. In this review, we delve into two pivotal works—*Distress in the Fields: Indian Agriculture after Economic Liberalization*, edited by R. Ramakumar, and *Agrarian Reform and Farmer Resistance in Punjab: Mobilization and Resilience*, edited by Shinder Singh Thandi. As a scholar of agriculture, food systems, and history, I bring to the forefront a critical evaluation of these books, positioning them within the broader context of agrarian evolution in India.

In a world where success is often measured by the relentless pursuit of growth, and in which right-leaning governments champion the narrative of

neoliberalism, the consequences are a widening gap in inequality, regardless of the metric employed. India, a land teeming with diversity, is a relatively new unified state, presenting an ever-shifting reality that defies easy categorization. Amid this complexity, we can discern specific themes that shed light, at least on a surface level, on the various dynamics at play. This review delves into the content and analysis of two books, exploring themes such as agrarian history, economic liberalization, mobilization, and resistance. Beyond these, it seeks to underscore how food and agriculture in India can illuminate broader global issues, including colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism—themes that each of these books inexplicitly touches on. It aims in particular to spotlight how these realities impact the most vulnerable and essential segments of populations: those who provide us sustenance.

In the current landscape where the intersections of tradition and modernity are more apparent than ever, both these books offer distinct perspectives that demand our attention and scrutiny. While both books were released at nearly the same time, when reading them together it feels like one book may have germinated from the other. The collaborative work edited by Ramakumar is an extensive, technical, and meticulous guidebook. It quantitatively maps the landscape of Indian agriculture from 1991 onward. Functioning as a cornerstone, it lays the groundwork for a more profound comprehension of the second book, edited by Thandi, which serves as a crucial backdrop to the 2020/2021 farmers' protests. It offers deep insights into the hyperspecific context surrounding these events. It explores the farmer resistance that potentially led to or inspired these protests.

The State of the Field

Numerous scholars and scientists have remarked on the complexities of India's agrarian policies and systems, setting the stage for reform and change in the country's agricultural systems. Delving into the intricacies of agrarian change in India is not merely an academic pursuit but an exploration of a cornerstone of the nation's identity (Dutt, 2016). Agriculture, deeply rooted in India's socio-economic fabric, has undergone transformative shifts, and understanding these changes is imperative (Frankel,

2015). With a significant portion of the population dependent on agriculture, that sector's health is intricately tied to the nation's well-being (Chandra et al., 2013). The ecological consequences of agrarian practices and the impact of globalization on indigenous farming methods (Shiva, 2016) laid the foundation for the recent farmer protests, which form the backdrop of these two books. The complexities of land distribution, economic policies, and global influences are not abstract concepts but tangible forces shaping the destiny of millions. The agricultural sector in India is at a crossroads, facing challenges that resonate globally (Sen, 1983). Issues such as agrarian inequalities, land distribution, and the impact of economic liberalization have far-reaching implications. Therefore, the significance of these books is underscored by contemporary events, where the agrarian crisis is not confined to the pages of policy documents but spills into the streets, with farmer protests making headlines. The lens of these books is attuned to the pulse of the times, offering readers a deep understanding of the forces driving change and the resilience of those who cultivate the land.

Agrarian Insights: Navigating Historical Shifts and Contemporary Challenges

In *Distress in the Fields*, the exploration of historical context, from the pre-independence era to the 1990s liberalization, provides comprehensive insight into the current agrarian landscape. Analysis of the four distinct phases of Indian agricultural growth, especially the Green Revolution and subsequent policy shifts, lays a foundation for understanding the complexities of Indian agriculture in general. The author's use of quantitative data and surveys, covering a wide range of policies and issues, showcases commendable analytical depth. Through data-driven studies, the book provides valuable information covering various periods of reform in Indian agriculture. The volume's scientific approach, however, which are somewhat lacking in demographic and social data, may confine it to academic circles rather than reaching a broader audience.

This book critically examines the challenges posed by economic reforms after 1991, particularly the reversal of land reform laws and the stagnation

of public capital formation. Some chapters also touch on the three farm acts of 2020 implemented by Prime Minister Modi and their implications for Indian agriculture. These analyses provide valuable insights into the contemporary challenges faced by the sector. While these analyses tie into the second book in this review, they do not feel like a repetition or discounting, but rather a new and different perspective.

On the other hand, *Distress in the Fields* stands out for its contribution to agrarian studies. By offering a historical context, analyzing policy shifts, and emphasizing the adverse effects of liberalization, the book significantly advances the discourse on this topic. The critical examination of the impact on public capital formation, research, and extension provides a valuable foundation for future scholarship. Altogether, this book sets the appropriate scenario for understanding the consequences of rapid industrial change in Indian agriculture, pre- and post-independence, and is an important transitional text for the next book.

Agrarian Reform and Farmer Resistance in Punjab provides a comprehensive historical background, effectively tracing the roots of the 2020–2021 farmer protests in Punjab. The historical context offered in the first part of the book exhibits a deep understanding of the agrarian struggles, colonial influences, and significant events shaping India's agricultural landscape. The parallels drawn between past and present movements enrich the narrative, establishing a strong foundation for evaluating historical accuracy. The book provides analytical depth through a multidisciplinary approach. The use of theoretical frameworks, as highlighted in Chapter 2, aids in understanding the complexities of socio-economic and political factors influencing agrarian change. Notably, Chapter 6 emphasizes the interplay of federalism and the government's media campaign, revealing nuanced dimensions of the protest's impact. This book skillfully addresses contemporary challenges within the agrarian sector; the proposed eco-socialist vision introduces a novel perspective, contributing to ongoing debates about sustainable agricultural practices. The critical examination of the repealed farm laws and their potential implications, along with insights into contract farming and its impact on diversification,

demonstrate a proactive engagement with the challenges faced by farmers. The analysis of the Sikh/Punjabi diaspora's role and the exploration of gender inclusiveness toward the end of the book expands the discourse beyond regional boundaries. The book not only provides a rich historical tapestry of the 2020–2021 farmer protests in Punjab but also engages deeply with contemporary challenges, offering a multidimensional perspective that transcends regional boundaries and contributes significantly to ongoing debates about sustainable agricultural practices.


Conclusion

As I navigated the pages of these two works, the synergistic relationship between the quantitative mapping of Indian agriculture and the in-depth exploration of farmer resistance became increasingly evident. While the book edited by Ramakumar lays the foundational quantitative groundwork, Thandi's volume acts as a complementary narrative, zooming in on the hyperspecific context of the recent protests. This interplay creates a dynamic and multifaceted understanding of agrarian change in India, showing the value of reading these works in tandem.

Both volumes contribute significantly to the broader discourse surrounding the impact of neoliberal economic policies on agriculture, echoing the global struggles against the forces of colonialism and imperialism. The contemporary relevance of these books cannot be overstated, especially in a world grappling with issues of social justice, economic inequality, and the consequences of global economic structures. The lens through which these works examine the intricacies of agrarian change in India resonates with broader struggles against systems of power, echoing the challenges faced by marginalized communities worldwide. Neoliberal policies, often touted as pathways to progress, are laid bare in the context of Indian agriculture, exposing them as the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate inequality.

These edited volumes are not only valuable resources for scholars and policymakers seeking a nuanced understanding of agrarian evolution in India, but they also contribute to the ongoing global conversations surrounding neoliberalism,

colonial legacies, and imperialistic structures. By connecting the specificities of Indian agrarian change to broader themes of economic injustice and resistance, these works serve as beacons illuminating the shared struggles faced by farmers and

communities worldwide. In navigating these pages, readers are not just exploring the complexities of India's agricultural landscape; they are delving into a universal narrative of resilience, resistance, and the quest for a more equitable and just world. 

References

- Chandra, K. S., Babu, V. S., & Nath, P. K. (2013). *Agrarian crisis in India: The way out*. Academic Foundation in association with National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad.
- Dutt, B. (2016). *This unquiet land: Stories from India's fault lines*. Aleph Book Company.
- Frankel, F. R. (2015). *India's Green Revolution: Economic gains and political costs*. Princeton University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400869022> (Original work published 1971)
- Sen, A. (1983, January 20). *Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Oxford Academic.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/0198284632.001.0001>
- Shiva, V. (2016). *The violence of the Green Revolution: Third world agriculture, ecology, and politics*. University Press of Kentucky.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt19dzdcp>