

A political dissection of agrarian development in developing countries: A case from Bangladesh

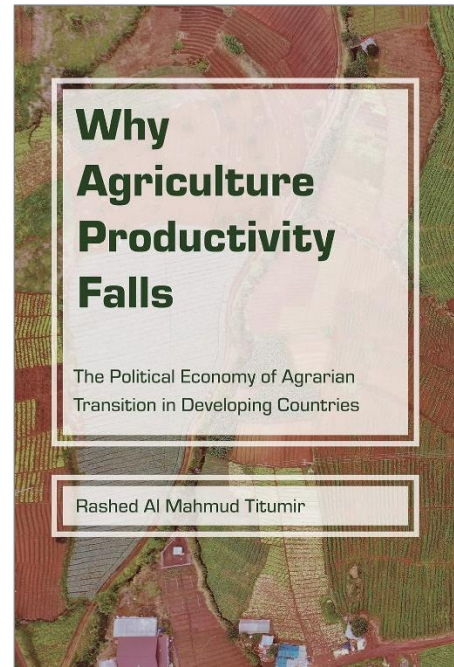
Book review by

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Review of *Why Agriculture Productivity Falls: The Political Economy of Agrarian Transition in Developing Countries*, by Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir. (2023). Published by Purdue University Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and Kindle; 232 pages. Publisher's website:

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Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir's *Why Agriculture Productivity Falls: The Political Economy of Agrarian Transition in Developing Countries* raises a

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profound question: why has agricultural productivity in many developing countries slowed or stagnated despite decades of Green Revolution technologies and neoliberal globalization? The author's central claim is that productivity in developing countries is shaped less by factor endowments and "efficient" markets than by social property relations, political settlements, and non-market accumulation. Taking Bangladesh as the empirical case, the book shows how smallholder-dominated agrarian structures experience short-run output growth when capital-biased technologies and clientelist institutions prevail, but are locked into long-run stagnation and environmental degradation. The argument moves between neoclassical, Marxist, and neopopulist perspectives. On the one hand, Titumir engages neoclassical and new institu-

tional economics, which stress market (re-)allocation, property-rights reform, and (supposedly) scale-neutral technology. On the other, he draws heavily on Marx, Brenner, Wood, and political-settlement theory¹ to foreground class power, “politically constituted property,” and nonmarket processes. He explicitly distinguishes between market accumulation and non-market accumulation (primitive accumulation), arguing that “there are at least two dimensions of nonmarket processes[:] ... primitive accumulation and the operation of the political settlement” (p. 26). These are not residual complications to an otherwise well-functioning market order. They are, in fact, the main drivers of land misallocation, disinvestment, and, ultimately, productivity decline.

A key conceptual note is to consider land as a political asset and store of value, rather than just a factor of production. Titumir argues that in developing countries, “land is treated as savings rather than an investment” (p. 3). Buyers are often non-farm actors using remittances or business income, not cultivators seeking to raise yields. At the same time, smallholders face capital and technology constraints, while the available technologies, such as high-yielding varieties (HYV) and hybrid seeds, mechanization, groundwater irrigation, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, are scale-neutral in practice. Small farms can show high land productivity in the short run through intensive family labor and “self-exploitation,” but they are structurally disadvantaged when it comes to big investments and risk management. Migration and remittances deepen this pattern: land is mortgaged or sold to finance migration, then repurchased as a savings asset, which decouples ownership from productive use.

The empirical heart of the book lies in four villages that embody different shapes of urbanization, climate risk, migration, market access, and primitive accumulation. Srimantapur (Comilla), the “village between two cities,” shows high yields and

intensive input use under extreme land fragmentation. Farmers are “hyper-productive” but ecologically vulnerable. Char Lakshmi (Noakhali), a disaster-prone char land that is formed through the natural process of sand deposition due to flows of rivers, exemplifies low productivity and aggressive land-grabbing, with khas land² and newly accreted chars captured by politically connected elites through what Titumir calls “networked power and land accumulation” (pp. 124–128). Bara Pakhia (Tangail) is a village of migrant workers where remittances structure land markets, producing absentee landlordism without a corresponding productivity surge. Dastika (Bogra) is a semi-urban, diversified economy where agriculture remains largely subsistence-oriented and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) themselves emerge as large landowners, contributing to new forms of primitive accumulation.

Together, these cases demonstrate that what Titumir terms “market failures sustained by power asymmetries ... [where] diseconomies of scale that affect small farmers, and unstable property rights” have “led to low growth of output and productivity” (p. 4). Methodologically, the book draws on a mixed-methods design. Village-census surveys document landholdings, tenancy, input use, cropping patterns, credit, and political affiliations. Qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations explore how households understand land, risk, and power. This is complemented by simple field experiments and national statistics. Titumir uses descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and stylized models (e.g., expressing productivity as a function of land, labor, capital, and technology, and land prices as a savings asset) to ground his propositions.

The book’s main contribution is to reframe the agrarian question under conditions of smallholder dominance, capital-biased technology, and clientelist states. It challenges both neoclassical optimism that removing market distortions will lead

¹ A political settlement theory underscores that the distribution of power among elites and social groups shapes the formal and informal “rules of the game” and institutionalization in rural and agrarian settings (Gray 2019). Titumir uses this theory to explain that productivity decline in countries like Bangladesh is not solely technical but also a consequence of political settlements and institutional arrangements that favor factions, which benefit at the expense of productivity growth in the short run.

² In South Asian context, Khas land is government-owned land that is meant for redistribution to landless or marginal farmers.

land to the “most productive” users and neopopulist faith in smallholder-led development. Land is becoming more fragmented “through demographic processes” while “smallholding agriculture [is] increasing as opposed to the concentration of land” (p. 3), yet aggregate productivity remains arrested. At the same time, the “common underlying feature in all the villages is political settlement” (p. 4): factional politics, donor-state entanglements, and rent-seeking “syndicates” condition who gains access to land, credit, and technology, and on what terms. Breaking out of the “sub-optimal productivity growth trap,” Titumir argues, “requires a steep change in land consolidation” (p. 4) and reforms that confront these political structures directly.

There are, however, important limitations of the book. Despite its general title, the empirical basis is purposefully chosen from four villages in Bangladesh. The specific nature of land politics, demographics, socio-economic properties, and party–bureaucracy networks may not transfer easily to other settings and may be insufficient to generalize the context to “developing countries” as a whole. Empirically, the study focuses on breadth over depth. The employment of formal modelling

is a useful heuristic, but the book largely overlooks the micro-econometric methods. Further, the book is stronger in its diagnostic approach than in offering solutions. The text can be dense and occasionally repetitive, especially in revisiting the critique of neoclassical and neopopulist approaches. Some readers may wish for sharper and clearer distinctions between different dimensions of “productivity” (yields, profitability, labor productivity, or total factor productivity).

Despite these caveats, *Why Agriculture Productivity Falls* is a significant contribution for scholars and practitioners interested in agrarian political economy. The book is fitted for readers with a background in agricultural economics, rural agrarian studies, or political economy. Graduate students and researchers, particularly those interested in South Asian land politics, will find it a useful resource. Policy-makers can also draw lessons, though these are often implicit. The book’s strength lies not in offering quick fixes, but in dissecting the interaction of land, power, technology, and political settlements to explain agricultural productivity in countries like Bangladesh.



Reference

Gray, H. (2019). Understanding and deploying the political settlement framework in Africa. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.888>