

Ashok Rudra's Contribution to Indian Agricultural Economics

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IN the sudden and untimely death of Ashok Rudra his numerous students have lost an excellent research supervisor and teacher and our country has lost one of its most brilliant, insightful and creative intellectuals of his generation. His loss will be irreparable. Rudra will be long remembered for his extraordinary energy and versatility and for his warm and intensely human personality.

It is extremely difficult to specify all his major contributions in various areas of economics and on other subjects such as politics, art and culture, literature, etc, for any of which he will be remembered. Broadly speaking, in economics he first worked on problems of planning in India, then moved on to Indian agricultural economics in particular and finally to the political economy of Indian agriculture. He also wrote on national income and allied topics, on Marxian analysis of economic history and on levels of living and poverty in India. All his writings show a high degree of objectivity and adherence to sound statistical principles.

Subjectwise, agricultural economics was his first love. His numerous works in this area put him on a pedestal. His interest in agricultural economics started at the Delhi School of Economics in the mid-sixties where his two studies—one relating to the farm size-productivity relationship and other to big farmers of Punjab—are considered as pace-setters in their fields.

In the late 60s he joined the Visva-Bharati University and devoted the major part of his time to research on agricultural economics. He undertook there the responsibility of conducting Farm Management Surveys in West Bengal during 1969-70 to 1971-72. It is there that his numerous students were engaged in research on various aspects of agricultural economics. I had the good fortune of being his MA student there at that time and later a PhD student at the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta.

Rudra was at the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, during 1973-79. Before 1973 and after 1979 till his death he was honorary visiting professor of ISI. During this decade, Rudra concentrated mostly on studies in agricultural economics. His approach, framework and methodology of studying agricultural economic problems were different from stereotyped agrarian studies and this impressed me very much. I would like to briefly recapitulate this aspect of his contributions as a tribute to this great researcher.

Rudra's basic approach to agricultural economics was to expose the limitations of the neo-classical framework in studying production conditions and relations of produc-

tion in Indian agriculture. He believed that the theoretical propositions made by 'bourgeois economists' who keep in mind the conditions of agriculture as prevailing in American and other western countries need not be valid in India. Again, he never hesitated to criticise those Marxian scholars who 'manufactured' the concepts of 'the semi-feudal' mode of production or of 'feudalism' in studying the political economy of Indian agriculture.

Rudra's wide-ranging interest in economic problems is reflected in his eight books and more than one hundred scientific articles published in various reputed journals. Out of his eight books, four books are in the field of agricultural economics. These books are based on researches carried out by him during the past 20 years on different aspects of Indian agriculture, viz, growth of agriculture, small farm efficiency, tenancy inefficiency, market efficiency, allocative efficiency of farmers, new agricultural technology, rural employment and unemployment, marketable surplus, different kinds of labour, tenancy and credit relations and finally class relations of Indian agriculture. His first book on agriculture, *Indian Agricultural Economics: Myths and Realities* (1982), deals with some ongoing debates centring on the neo-classical views on small farm efficiency, tenancy inefficiency, nature and form of agricultural product market, surplus labour phenomenon in an underdeveloped economy like India, etc, with the help of fresh field enquiry data and fresh statistical exercises. His second book, *Agrarian Relations in West Bengal: Results of Two Surveys* (1983), written jointly with Pranab Bardhan provides some interesting results on the interlinkage of labour, tenancy and credit transactions which still continues to haunt some researchers working in this field of political economy. The basic thrust of the third book, *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia* (1984) by him edited jointly with Meghnad Deasai and S N Rudolph, is broadly in the same direction. His own paper in this book, 'Local Power and Farm-Level Decision-Making', is famous for the concept of 'power' which he conceptualised in a somewhat different manner: "By power we mean a social phenomenon given rise to by such institutional factors as class divisions, caste hierarchy, distribution of wealth and income occupational patterns, etc, and such ideological forces as customs, traditions, taboos, etc, affecting the process of decision-making by economic agents". Interestingly his concept of power excludes the concept of

economic power. However, this operates on the economic system by preventing markets coming into existence and by preventing markets from becoming perfect (as defined by economic theory).

Ashok Rudra's last book, *Political Economy of Indian Agriculture* (1991), is a revised version of the first book and an extension of his earlier work on relations of production in Indian agriculture. All the research done so far by others on relations of production and class relations in Indian agriculture have been critically reviewed here. The results obtained by him through various field enquiries and published in his earlier books have been summarised here to provide an analytical framework towards an understanding of the political economy of Indian agriculture. Thus on the mode of production he writes, "we have not found in Marxian classics any categorical statement about what is the appropriate 'domain' for the concept of mode". According to Rudra, this concept has been manufactured or subscribed to by political economists writing in the vein of Marxian analysis. He took the position that "for purposes of practice it is sufficient to have a correct class analysis; that is correct characterisation of the different features, traits, relations of dominance, etc, of classes taken in their dynamic setting, whether or not one can conceive of all these to constitute a mode of production of the standard species". Again, regarding the criteria for identifying classes in Indian agriculture, Rudra took the position that the standard Marxian definition which states that economic classes are to be looked at in terms of possession of the means of production and the exploitation of labour does not hold in any clear way in many parts of India because of some peculiarities of our agrarian structure which have been guided by the particular historical conditions of the country. In fact, Rudra throughout his academic life tried to unfold the peculiarities of our agrarian society through a number of small- and large-scale surveys on socio-economic problems. Rudra, in this connection, observed that Marx has said very little in explicit terms about the concept of class; whatever is there is too general to be a practical guide in empirical class analysis. He therefore used the well known concept of class elaborated by Mao Zedong that "classes are defined by class contradictions". According to this concept, as further strengthened by Rudra, "class relations are relations of production; but not all relations of production define classes; they define various 'social groups'. Only some social groups are classes." Classes are thus distinguished from social groups by the nature of contradictions while the points of contradictions define the boundaries of classes. While his views were not very popular to some Marxist scholars, he was at the same time very acceptable to political activists as well as to some political economists of the country. Although Ashok Rudra was different from mainstream economists, all the economists had to respect him for his academic boldness and his understanding of Indian reality. Students of economics will always remember him for his sense of realism and sharp analytical faculties.