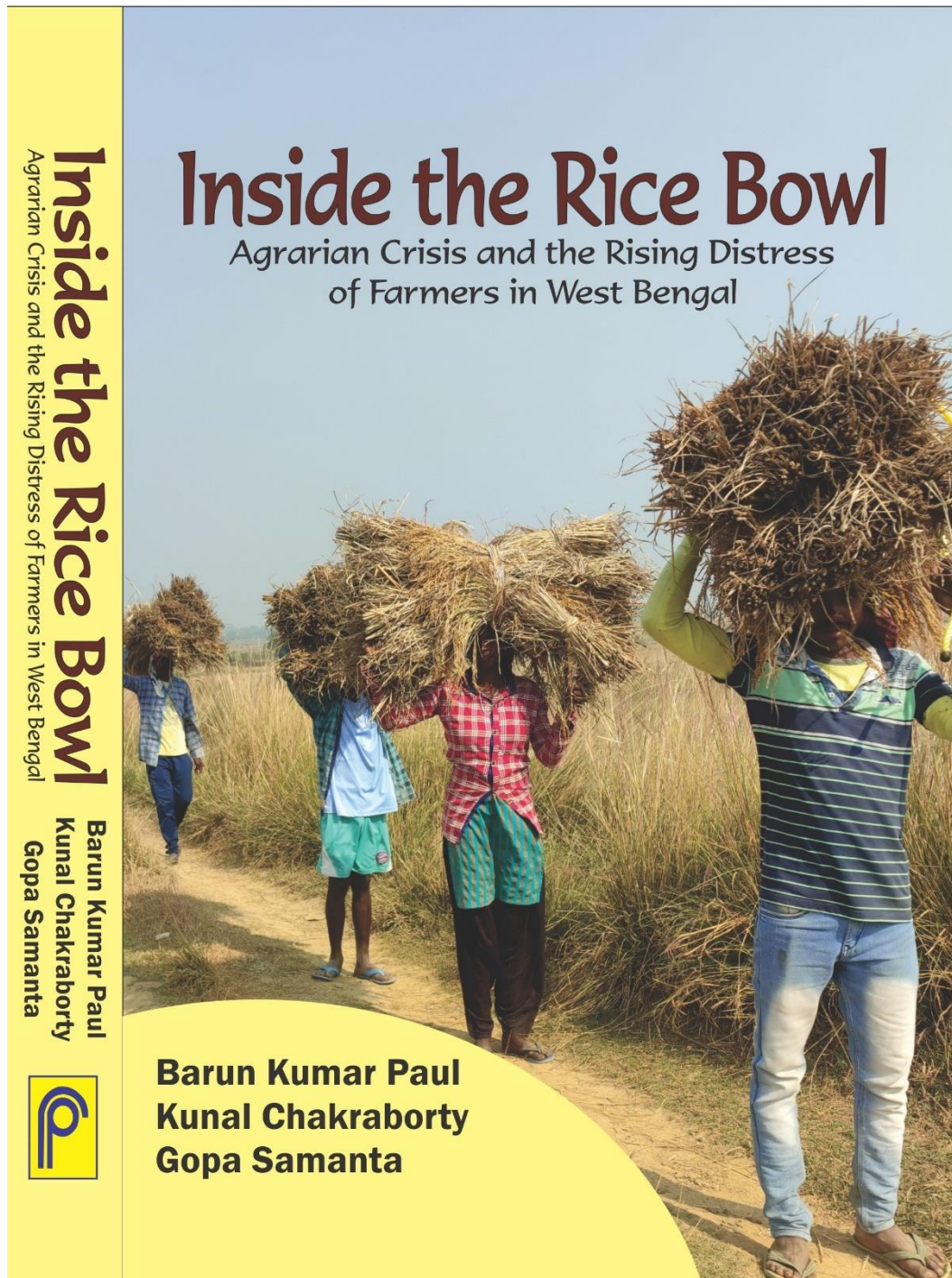


**Inside the Rice Bowl: Agrarian Crisis and the Rise of Distress of Farmers in West Bengal, by Barun Kumar Paul, Kunal Chakraborty and Gopa Samanta. New Delhi: Rajesh. 2023. Pp.1-291+**

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The 850 million farming population of India, (now in the largest populous country) is a worried lot and stressed, with rising rural unemployment [despite Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act, (MGREGA)]. The small size of farm holding (over 85 per cent below one hectare), land fragmentation, increasing sharecropping and falling profitability of a farming enterprise is the universal story, even in the so-called prosperous agricultural states like Punjab-Haryana-Western Uttar Pradesh region. The present book under review, apparently the outcome of a doctoral research or an independent research study, in a way supports the struggle the Indian farmers undergo now, despite various promises from concerned state governments or the Central Government. The book compiles detailed field-level data from two development blocks (CDB) of the most intensively farmed, East Burdwan District of West Bengal, the apparently agriculturally most developed district of West Bengal. The authors tried to deal with a vast canvas of agrarian (historical) issues in Bengal. They tried to link with the contemporary situation based on the village and block-level data for the given district, which, perhaps, could have been avoided, focusing entirely on the Green Revolution decades of the past half a century or so. Burdwan was one of the very first districts that came under the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (IADP, launched in the 1960s) programme with the support of the Ford Foundation in the early nineteen seventies.

However, the core part of the study from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6 shows flashes of rigour and brilliance often marred by a bit of oversupply of perception data, which may have some anecdotal use but little inferential value. Two chapters, especially Chapter 4 on costs and profitability and Chapter 6 on the 'technology trap' and the issue of sustainability of farming, are both interesting and significant.

Some of the issues the study brings out of which one is the falling profitability of rice farming over the past two decades, indicating the huge

difference between realised revenue from sales and the potential sale by Minimum Support Price (MSP). This is indeed, the single most important issue that not long ago the farmers of North West India were agitating against the Central Act of ending the *Mandi System* and opening up open market transactions of cereal crops, in a way forcing the Central Government to withdraw the Act. Government of India, through the Agricultural Price Commission (APC) each year pronounces MSP for 23 agri-commodities with all the promises, but the actual market intervention by the Food Corporation of India (FCI), the central agency of procurement, storage and distribution of agro-commodities, especially cereals, pulses and sugar is confined to only 3 or 4 commodities, particularly in rice and wheat procurement, that too for a limited period and in certain areas of the country only. The majority of small farmers, sharecroppers, for example (distress) sell rice or wheat at a 30-40 per cent discount to the MSP. Therefore tall assurances of fulfilling the Swaminathan Committee Report (SCR) with a promise of 50 per cent profit over cost of production remain by and large a distant dream. Moreover, even if the farmers get the promised profits, this still may not solve the rural distress in the country because of the very small size of farms and large-scale landlessness, especially among the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes and other marginalised communities.

When compared with the only comparable country, The People's Republic of China (PRC), the farming population has dropped to 22 per cent due to large-scale inter-sectoral movement of population (from farming to non-farm activities both in rural areas as well as large-scale rural to urban-industrial migrations) in the past three decades of exceptional and sustained growth and in India the farming population share still remains around 55-60 per cent of the population, with a minuscule shift in farm to non-farm activities. The study indicates a simultaneous increase in unemployment and farm labour shortages, especially for rice farmers pushing up wage rates and making further

farming less profitable. This may lead to many landholders leasing out land to sharecroppers, on whatever terms, leading to steadily rising sharecropping numbers. The new generation of literate rural youngsters have little skill or grit to be farmers and aspire for non-farm jobs, which are few and far between.

The issue of sustainable farming is more of a slogan than one that obtains on the ground. The pressures of feeding the growing millions and small farmers pushing hard to eke out a living, the HYV technology itself an un-sustainable package, with an excessive drawing of groundwater, emphasis on water-guzzling crops like rice and sugarcane (especially in NW India), increased use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and depletion of organic manure and decline in soil fertility—all point to a hopelessly unsustainable future. If we encounter this increasing distress among the farming population in the supposedly the most agriculturally prosperous district, possibly not just in West Bengal but the whole of Eastern India (therefore, the aptly titled “Rice Bowl”),

one could well imagine the average situation in other not-so prosperous districts around.

The book certainly is an interesting read and a useful addition to the plethora of literature on the growing desperation and distress of farmers, issues that emerged in the early part of this century in Maharashtra and Telengana with large-scale farmers' indebtedness and suicides but have now acquired an all-India status and even the most prosperous states like Punjab not escaping these tragedies brought onto farmers and their families.

With global recession looming large, India still growing possibly, jobless growth, the escape from rural unemployment and a possibility of a significant sectoral shift of population appear unlikely, and the rural distress, at least for the visible future, seems to remain unchanged. The only saving grace has been the National Food Security Act and the availability and access to some subsidised food for a large chunk of these rural poor acute hunger has been kept away. However, child malnutrition is still a festering issue both in rural as well as urban areas of the country.