

Mechanics of Exploitation

BETSY HARTMANN AND JAMES BOYCE, *NEEDLESS HUNGER: VOICES FROM A BANGLADESH VILLAGE*, Institute for Food and Development Policy, San Francisco, 1979, \$ 3.00.

THIS little book is essentially a political document. Hartmann and Boyce carry on the spirit of the earlier publication of the Institute for Food and Development Policy (IFDP) by Collins and Lappe. The effort is to portray to the western readers the mechanics of exploitation through the concrete example of the village of Katni in Bangladesh. In this attractive book there are heart-rending descriptions of the misery that is imposed on the ordinary people. Effective use is made of photographs, statistics and case studies.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is on "Hunger in a Fertile Land." Bangladesh is among the best naturally endowed regions of the world for agriculture. It had an effective traditional agricultural system and skilled cottage industry in the past. It is today one of the poorest regions of the world. It is a country where in the mid-seventies thousands died of hunger in the course of a man-made famine. The second section "The Making of Hunger", tries to explain why so much hunger exists in such a rich land. There is a discussion on who owns the land with a case study of a man who is simultaneously a landlord, merchant and moneylender. The next chapter uses the example of Katni to show how the surplus is siphoned off from those who produce the food to those who own the land. The following chapter talks of the Western argument that there is a conflict between efficiency and equality or distributional justice and economic growth. This book argues that hunger is the result of efficiency resulting from inequality. The alternative to this for eliminating hunger is seen in

terms of a different social order, which eliminates inequality and its profit calculus. According to Hartmann and Boyce only a far-reaching social reconstruction can break the fundamental barriers to increase production and at the same time ensure that the poor majority shares the fruits of development. The last section, "Us and Them", is directed to readers in the rich western world (with whom the authors identify themselves). It shows that the object of foreign aid is not to help the poor people but to keep them in a state of helplessness and poverty. This section argues further that in this exploitative process the rulers in the rich countries work hand-in-glove with the rich elite of Bangladesh so that by keeping the vast majority in a state close to starvation, the rulers in both areas can enjoy their own high standard of living. The book makes a plea to the well intentioned but ill informed silent majority of the rich capitalist countries to re-examine their own policies and try to help in at least three ways— 1) halt military and economic assistance to local elites; 2) assist as many people as possible in the Third World to mobilize the poor for development and social change; 3) educate themselves and others about "the needless hunger of millions of people throughout the world". The book ends with the sentence that in this struggle, the poor of Bangladesh are "our" allies.

Since this book is primarily a political document, it would not be correct to dismiss its brief discussion of the economic history of Bangladesh as simplistic. It is not meant as a scholarly contribution, but as a pointer to a reader who is normally deliberately misinformed about other points of view about some general facts and their implications. The argument of the book is not that hunger is needless, but that the hunger of the poor is an essential need of the parasitic rich in an exploitative capitalistic system. One must not be misguided by the technical possibilities and get deflected into false directions where it is argued that "more" of modern science and technology can improve the situation on the food front. Basic to this entire argument is the fact that it is the control of resources through ownership, inheritance, patronage and so on by a few that causes hunger for the many. Hunger and poverty are man-made; not nature-based. In this system hunger is an essential product of the social order; it can only be eliminated when this inequitable control over resources is eliminated and a new social order established.

The book has certain important functions to perform for a western audience. It would however be a mistake to accept it as

being an equally useful political document in countries like Bangladesh or India. To those who are facing exploitation every day of their lives a more realistic and rigorous picture will have to be presented. The same point comes out in the context of the aid provided by the International Bank for Rehabilitation and Development (World Bank), and its rural development projects. Lifschultz and Bird¹ draw upon the work of Betsy Hartmann and James Boyce but they lay bare the supporting role of the World Bank in exploitation.

The analysis given in the book is reasonably straight-forward in that the linkage between the ownership and control of resources in agriculture and the poverty of the majority is clearly shown. In this general sense there is little difference in the forces of exploitation in industry or agriculture. At the same time it would be incorrect to say as Hartmann and Boyce do (page 39) that the key for a suitable reconstruction of society is land reform. Land reform is the slogan of many bourgeois political groups in the Third World countries and is not necessarily a revolutionary demand. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the land reforms that will benefit only an emerging exploitative group in the existing social order and land reforms that transform agrarian relations and support long-term economic development and social justice. Such agrarian relationships that could support revolutionary long-term objectives are necessarily linked with revolutionary movements and capture of political power by the exploited and oppressed class. While Hartmann and Boyce are very clear on this question the book as it stands gives the impression that land reform is necessarily revolutionary, when it is not.

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¹ Lifschultz and Bird, "Bangladesh: Anatomy of a Coup", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 8 and 15, 1979.