

Reviews

Jürgen Blenk, Dirk Bronger, Harald Uhlig (eds.), *Fischer Länderkunde 2, Südasiensien*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Verlag, 1977, 478 pages, DM 10.80

The authors of this geography book have clearly done away with common clichés about India. They don't indulge in speculations about the profoundly religious nature of the Indians, their otherworldly outlook and their traditionalism which is generally attributed to the caste system. Instead they turn to fundamental material factors. This they do, however, from a mainly descriptive point of view.

First of all they attempt to outline the political-geographical, natural, social and economic-geographical structures of South Asia. Then they elaborate the development problems peculiar to this subcontinent. The book is clearly arranged, the style lucid, the contents are richly illustrated with diagrams and maps, and a comprehensive collection of the most recent statistics (included at the end) rounds off the volume - all this constitutes a pleasing external framework.

On balance this geography book is more of a handbook. The authors are for the most part geographers, which means literally 'describers of the earth'. Whereas on the whole they do justice to their profession, their perspective is such that the complex causes of underdevelopment in South Asia are seldom tackled from their primary sources. To a large extent the book is descriptive rather than analytical.

This is also true of the last part which is a mere quarter of the length of all the others together and is intended by the author to illustrate "the determinants influencing development as seen in specific development problems" (p. 306). Taking the agrarian sector as an example he enumerates 4 determinants influencing development (ecology, infrastructure, the caste system and development consciousness), the interaction of which is illustrated by representative agricultural units. However instructive these case studies may be on account of their concreteness, they nevertheless reveal how far removed the volume is from a really critical politico-economic analysis.

The all underlying social perspective is scarcely apparent, the international dimension completely lacking. The agrarian sector in India is, however, part of the Indian class society, which is in turn part of the international system of dependence. For this reason the agrarian system as such should be analysed. While not denying the relevance of ecology, infrastructure, caste system and development consciousness these factors would, within such a framework, automatically receive the significance due to them and could thus be defined as primary or derivative determinants of underdevelopment. It is also a moot point whether the much cited caste system as an explanation for social stratification in India does in fact do justice to reality. A specifically class-orientated approach would seem more appropriate here.

The book closes with a brief survey of theories of imperialism and modernisations. The author does not conceal his enthusiasm for Galtung's structural concept of

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imperialism. It become almost grotesque, however, when he tries to apply this concept to all periods of Indian history and, reaching the seemingly logical conclusion, characterizes the caste system as a system of domination and exploitation instituted by the Aryans and 'revealing all the features of imperialism as described by Galtung' (p. 395). Exaggerated structuralism leads here to a total levelling of decisive differences, a clear instance of a lack of historical thinking.

One must admit that the authors of this volume assess their work correctly when they describe the last part as a first tentative step towards a geography centered on problems of development (p. 11).

Despite all the criticism there is no denying the specific value of this geography book. In conjunction with a critical analysis it is quite useful, providing as it does a detailed compendium of data on India in a well ordered, easily comprehensible form, and, not least, at a very reasonable price.

Clemens Jürgenmeyer

Manfred Domrös, Sri Lanka. Die Tropeninsel Ceylon. (Wissenschaftliche Länderkunden, Bd. 12). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, 298 pages.

It is no doubt a difficult undertaking for one author to write a comprehensive account of any given country. Even though he may not be aware of it he might not succeed in avoiding a biased selection of topics and materials according to his individual training and specialization.

After reading the book 'Sri Lanka - Die Tropeninsel Ceylon' by M. Domrös one gets the impression that in this particular case a highly qualified geographer, specialized in climatology, has made his own personal selection. Domrös presents a very valuable description of the island of Sri Lanka; it can be considered a thoroughly systematic account of all the important areas as seen by traditional geography. As such Domrös has concentrated on the geographical (physical as well as anthropo-geographical) foundations of Ceylon's society and economy with particular emphasis on the climatic conditions of Sri Lanka and its agrarian economy.

In his introductory chapter the author approaches the theme by listing relevant historical and contemporary 'problem areas', a most welcome departure from the over descriptive approach of traditional geography. It is a pity, however, that in spite of this promising introduction the major part of the book is lacking in this kind of problem orientation. At the beginning, for example, Domrös talks with justification about the problems arising from the exportorientation of Ceylon's economy. Later on, however, the space reserved for external economic relations (four pages) seems inadequately short.

Generally speaking the author may be criticized not for what he has written but for what he has not written. One looks in vain for information on the socio-