

## Book Reviews

**Lancy Lobo and Biswaroop Das, *Poor in Urban India: Life in the Slums of a Western Indian City*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2001.**

This book by Lancy Lobo and Biswroop Das describes in detail the life of the poor in slums in Surat, the second largest but the fastest growing city of Gujarat. This study, in a way, represents various dimensions of the vulnerability of the urban poor in India and their efforts in coping with or overcoming the same even in the most adverse times such as the severest of state failures. Unfortunately, the frequency of State failures is increasing and in the urban areas, the poor are bearing the maximum brunt of the same. Somehow, the review of this book got delayed and meanwhile, the state of Gujarat, especially, central and north Gujarat, witnessed systematic violence against the Muslim community. Their systematic exclusion, bordering on expulsion, witnessed mainly in Ahmedabad city, can be seen against the backdrop of a large proportion of the urban residents living in such marginal existence as described by this book. From this book, one can deduct fairly well the impact of such violence even on the communities not directly under attack, as it is the marginal sections which are badly hit and are unable to cope when the city's economy comes to a grinding halt. This book is therefore important reading from many angles.

The need for the study is brought out by the authors through 3 series of questions: "What are the reasons for the decay of our large cities and for extremely unsatisfactory living conditions even in our non-metro as well as smaller and medium-sized towns; why is poverty so blatantly visible in cities which actually work as machines for generating wealth?" (p. 11), According to the authors, the "portrayal involves a detailed macro-description of slums in Surat that features their socio-economic characteristics and the extent of availability of some essential amenities within such slums for a deeper understanding of such spaces, and the processes through which people living within such colonies negotiate their social and economic lives" (pp. 12). The book describes in detail four aspects of the life of the urban poor; (i) the economic dimensions. viz., employment, incomes, expenditure pattern, savings, credit needs and availability, assets and child labour; (ii) social dimensions, viz., Leisure-time activities and various religious celebrations; (iii) communal riots, their impacts and how people cope during the riots; and (iv) governmental and non-governmental interventions.

The structure of the book is interesting. It starts with the macro-picture of Surat's slums that describes the social composition of slum dwellers, their economic status and so on, where-in, interestingly, instead of tables, the data is presented in the form of narrative. After the macro picture, the authors come to a detailed study of one slum named Panchshcel, located in central Sural, which is currently housing even a second generation of migrants. Lastly, individual cases are presented that cover the qualitative aspects of the lives and experiences of the slum dwellers in all the four aspects covered by the study. Thus, the book moves from the macro to the micro-level with ease and therefore makes interesting reading.

A few interesting observations of the study are cited here. At the city level, the study finds that: there is a pattern in the geographic distribution of occupation in the slum; the residents of the slums located in rich areas of the city have white-collar jobs. It finds that labour from all the states in India: migrates to Surat. The migration path observed in the case of a few individuals shows that most of them landed in Surat through personal contacts and many came very early in their lives and have stayed for a longer duration in Surat than their native place. Instances of child marriages and child labour have been described, which shows that most slum dwellers engaged in the most marginal and petty jobs, earn so less that their children are forced to work, either full-time or along with their studies. But, for most slum dwellers, such marginal jobs in the city are better than what they had in rural areas. Further, most of the slum dwellers studied are engaged in self-employment activities though the city is the largest manufacturing centre of the state. The dimension of old age security also comes out very clearly, with most of the old people interviewed stating that their old age security was their ability to work and that their children were not in a position to support them. Most did not want to go back to their native places, having spent all their lives in the city. The sources of borrowings vary from one community to another. The slum studied has a mixed population, though there is some congregation of people belonging to one social group in a particular part of the slum. Lastly, the study, through cases, highlights the constant threat of sexual violence faced by the women of the slum.

The city selected for investigation is Surat, which is most appropriate. The city and its region have received the largest investments in the state after the economic reforms and the region has the highest industrial investment density in India. The city has witnessed almost a 5 per cent per annum (p.a.) growth rate of population since 1981, whereas urban Gujarat has grown at the rate of only 2.9 per cent p.a. during the 1980s and 2.3 per cent p.a. during the 1990s. Only 11.86 per cent of the

population in the city was below the poverty line in 1993-94, as compared to 24.18 per cent in Vadodara and 31.79 per cent in Ahmedabad (Dubey and Mahadevia, 2001). Surat is fairly well integrated with the national as well as the global economy. Thus, on the economic growth front, the city has done very well, but incomes have not been translated into an imposed standard of living and the security of a section of residents of the city. The book therefore brings out the fact that even if the cities were to compete for bringing in business, as the philosophy of globalisation and liberalisation mandates, and a particular city's income increases, it does not necessarily translate into improved living conditions by the poor in the city.

The book makes for very lucid reading. It is a must for all policy planners and not just urban planners for whom the issues of privatising land and urban infrastructure are the most important. The book throws up a large number of social policy issues such as those pertaining to social security, livelihood security, education, health and hygiene, gender equity, etc. It is a picturesque description of the fragmented nature of Indian society and the sub-human existence of a large proportion of our population, on whose back the cities act as 'engines of economic growth' in India. It brings out the darker face of rapid economic growth, urbanisation and now globalisation in India. We have rarely been treated with such descriptions about the living of urban poor except for a few seminal works in the past.

While the book makes for interesting reading, it suffers from a few limitations that could have been taken care of. The time periods of the macro-and micro-studies are not mentioned making the interpretation of income and wage data difficult. In fact, the year is not mentioned anywhere in the book where the income/wage data is given and hence one does not know when the wages were Rs.3 per day and when they become Rs.35 per day. One is therefore unable to assess whether the wages have increased, over time or not. Some definitions used in the study are not consistent with what is used in general in India. For example, the age definition of the labour force in India is 15-59 years and not 19-60 years as has been used by the authors. The classification of workers adopted is very unusual and does not tally with either the National Industrial Classification (NIC) or National Classification of Occupation (NCO). The sex ratio is usually defined as the number of females per 1000 males but the authors choose to express the same as the percentage of females in the total population. Lastly, the extensive statistics given in the first part of the book require more detailed interpretation that could have highlighted many of the unnoticed phenomena in urban India. Two

major areas of interest are not mentioned at all, viz. the access of slum dwellers to education and health facilities.

Notwithstanding the minor lacunae, however the study does throw open some areas for further study and policy actions. Before that is discussed, this study raises the issue of the adequacy of existing data systems in capturing the urban phenomena in India. The labour statistics, including that of the NSS and NIC/NCO classification do not capture the diversity of urban occupations. It is also obvious that the child labour statistics are not captured adequately. We do not have information on the social composition of our cities, and so on. Much work is needed to improve the urban data systems.

One large area of research and policy interventions concerns the labour migrants in India, who have been pushed out of the rural economies but are living on the economic fringes in the urban areas. How do we take care of their overall economic well-being? The other area relates to the social security aspect of such marginal populations in our cities, be they small and medium or large cities. How do we ensure an end to the need for child labour? How do we make the work of such labour more productive? How do we ensure that urbanisation in the true sense, means development for the city residents? and how do we enhance the status of slum dwellers in the cities? How do we protect the slum dwellers from participating in and from bearing the brunt of the communal riots now quite frequently engineered in our cities? Do they have any answer to the development issues of the slum dwellers and can then plan with them, instead of getting fixated on the arguments of privatization and commercialization of urban development? An extension of this study and many such studies in various other cities of India would highlight the fact that India requires a radically new direction in urban development and planning than it has been pursuing till now.

### ***Reference***

Dubey, Amaresh and Darshini Mahadevia (2001), "Poverty and Inequality in Indian Metropolises", *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, April-June.

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