

Book Reviews

Lancy Lobo, and Biswaroop Das. 2001. Poor in Urban India: Life in the Slums of a Western Indian City. New Delhi: Rawat Publications. Pages-203, Rs 400.

Present book emerges out of two separate research studies undertaken by the Centre of Social Studies, Surat exploring different aspects of slums in the city Surat, Gujarat. The problem of slums has raised alarming concerns for city dwellers, planners, activists, academicians and people from different walks of life. The questions asked here deal not only with the issue of hap- hazard growth of urban milieus but more importantly with how people belonging to marginalized sections live, struggle and survive in city slums. The present study seeks to explore the dynamics of living conditions of such people in the city. The study examines both macro and micro dimensions of socio-economic characteristics of slums and in doing so rises policy issues for urban planning.

Without going into academic debates on the Place and repercussions of slum in the social sciences, the study straight away goes on to explore the empirical issues through descriptions of slums and slum dwellers in chapter two. Here historical growth of slums and their broad characteristics are discussed. Focus of the study i.e. Panchsheel, a slum and its people form part of the third chapter. Besides the demographic details, the interesting part of this chapter deals with accounts of migration and occupational histories. These provide glimpses of urban poverty, nature of work available and the profile of workers.

The fourth chapter highlights the problems of coping with varied nature of livelihood and other such issues. Notable here are the total absence of white collar dwellers among the slum dwellers unlike big metropolitan cities. Majority of people work in unorganized sector and are largely unskilled. Heterogeneity in terms of representation of people from different states is fairly evident. These people earning from marginal sectors of economy encounter several problems such as shortage of amenities, Limited means of livelihood, crime and indifference of state authorities. These problems however do not necessarily diminish the human spirit.

The fifth chapter deals with on the leisure time activities of people living here. The variety of these activities like entertainment, festivities and celebrations both specific to groups and general are elucidated here. Here we also get glimpses of heterogeneous groups living together notwithstanding their inherent social differences. Extending on this theme chapter six. highlights sensitive issues relating to communal harmony and discord. The discussion outlined here focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations during and after the communal riots which erupted in 1992. The slum

dwellers were found to organize themselves at the level of slum exhibiting the strong sense of unity despite heterogeneity among its members.

The next chapter describes the governmental and nongovernmental efforts in the given slum. Slum emerges in this context as a site for action, participation and mobilization of its inhabitants given various programmes and agenda of agencies involved. On the whole, this work tries to raise many familiar issues discussed in similar studies. Focus on the living conditions of dwellers in a particular slum, however, allows us to get a better picture of nature of urban poverty. The work would have greatly benefited from a analytical discussion of the issues raised without which they seem rather descriptive. This book would be useful for academicians, planners and others interested in issues in urban sociology.

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