

Joop W. de Wit. *Poverty, Policy and Politics in Madras Slums: Dynamics of Survival, Gender, and Leadership.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1996. 305 pages. Hardbound. Indian Rs 395.00.

The urban bias in economic development, coupled with the modernisation in agriculture and resultant labour displacement, has meant that the growth rates of the urban population have far outstripped the rapidly rising overall population growth rates in developing countries. Employment generation in the urban sectors generally does not keep pace with the growth in urban populations. Lack of access to education and training leads to low skill formation. A growing number of urban people are, therefore, forced to work in the informal sector. Low and uncertain incomes and the lack of suitable housing forces these people to reside in sub-human conditions without basic sanitation and health services. In recent years, the urban slum has become an increasing focus of economic development analyses and policy-making.

The book under review portrays general life in the slums of Madras, the capital of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It examines the impact of policy on slum-dwellers. The analysis covers diverse slum groups, both rich and poor, and the role of slum-leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties. The author addresses six broad themes. These themes are related to different levels of social reality ranging from the micro to the macro. The first theme describes the customs, culture, and intra-household relations of the poor people. These people belong to low castes, and are often illiterate, and therefore have limited access to educational institutions, health facilities, stable employment, credit, and productive opportunity, etc. The heterogeneity of the slum areas is highlighted by the wide mixture of different castes, religions, ethnic backgrounds, and political affiliations. The second theme of this book, thus, concerns this heterogeneity of slum communities. The migrant poor of rural background usually have less information and limited access to available resources for shelter, employment, basic amenities, etc. The local slum leaders play an important role in addressing this 'access problem'. Therefore, the third theme of this book focuses on the role of the slum leaders belonging to different political parties who act as brokers between slum-dwellers and the authorities. The fourth theme is related to the nature and the implementation of slum policies. The focus is on shelter policy, slum upgrading, and relocation. Political factors play a crucial role in the implementation of various policies and, consequently, on the lifestyle of slum areas. Thus politics is the fifth theme of this book. Because of its importance in the implementation and effectiveness of a policy; the examination of the impact of culture and tradition on slum life and on slum policy implementation is the sixth and final theme of the book.

In India, about 26 percent of the total population lives in the urban areas. Around 36.5 percent of the urban population lives in poverty. Tamil Nadu is the

seventh largest state of India, comprising 56 million people. It is the second most urbanised state and 34 percent of its population lives in cities and towns. After briefly explaining the economic and political history of this state, the author narrows down the focus to the city of Madras which is the fourth largest city in India. Its location as a sea-port makes it a principal trade and commercial centre. In-migration is the major cause for the city's rapidly increasing population and its ever-growing slum areas.

In 1981, there were 1417 areas that could be classified as slums in the Madras Metropolitan Area. These covered 37 percent of the city's population. Most of the slums are illegal and, therefore, lack adequate facilities. The author focuses his research on one of the poorest slums, named Chitra Nagar, inhabited mostly by Dalits, the former untouchables, for approximately 30 years. This slum had never been legalised and thus lacks all the basic services. The struggle of its inhabitants for survival is described in Chapter 4, the heart of the book. It portrays an extremely realistic social, economic, and political picture of Chitra Nagar. This chapter looks into the available facilities and characteristics of its population, such as caste, religion, kinship, and literacy, and reports on the problems of access to health care, education, credit, and better employment, with a special focus on poorer households. In describing the intra-household relations, especially in the division of labour, the author points out that the women of this slum are the major bread-winners and play a crucial role in household management. Most men are engaged in the informal sector with uncertain employment and very low and fluctuating incomes. They spend most of their income on cheap and illegally brewed alcohol, with the resultant bad effects on household budgets, increasing domestic frustration, and physical quarrels that sometimes end in suicides. The author represents the women's point of view through some interesting case studies. A detailed discussion on the use of alcohol and its effects on intra-household relations and on society is also presented in this chapter.

Employment, income, assets, expenditures, and debts are the parameters used to make the distinction between the rich and the poor. The analysis is then focused on the poor and the poorest households. The relationship between the rich and the poor is defined by the role of the mediators and the slum-leaders who are generally involved with different political parties. These leaders help in solving the problems of the poor and thus play an important role in attracting voters to their respective political parties. The author describes the personality, family background, work, and personal contacts with the people of Chitra Nagar of two slum-leaders belonging to two different political parties.

In 1989, a scheme was launched to relocate the slum-dwellers to Manali, located at a great distance from the city centre, by giving them the ownership of plots and credit facilities for the construction of houses. Due to uncertainty about shelter and inadequate employment opportunities in that locality, the people of Chitra Nagar

reacted badly to the plan. A section of this chapter is devoted to the contents of this plan, the people's reaction, the election in Tamil Nadu in 1989, and the promises of party leaders, the change in the relocation area from Manali to Velacherry, the issuance of plot-ownership tokens, and the irregularities in obtaining them, and the national elections of November 1989 and their results. The marked differences in the plan on paper and the actual implementation in the relocation area are also highlighted. In addition to these, the experiences and problems faced by the first slum-dwellers relocated to Velacherry from other inner-city slums are also presented in this chapter.

This book is a comprehensive piece of research in which social, economic, and political aspects of the slum situation are analysed in detail with the help of the data collected. The analysis is further strengthened by the author's observations and personal meetings with different people, such as women, slum-leaders, and the poor and the rich. The presentation of these views reflects what the slum-dwellers want, what promises are made by their leaders and politicians, and what has actually been provided to them. The book also points to the existing loop-holes in the projects aimed at urban poverty alleviation and it emphasises the importance of community participation in such programmes in order to achieve fruitful results.

Despite explaining the social, economic, and political problems in detail, the book does not offer any concrete suggestions on how to improve the standard of living of the poor people—to solve the problems of access, and to make policy implementation more practical and successful. The role of the government and the private sector in improving the social and economic set-up of slum areas is also ignored. Considering these factors would have enhanced the usefulness of the analysis further.

Despite these limitations, the book provides a deep insight into the consequences of rapid urbanisation and its effects on social and economic life, especially in the poor localities. It will be useful reading for political organisations, community leaders, policy-makers, and government agencies as it highlights not only the problems of underdeveloped areas in developed cities, but also the vast differences between policy plans and policy impact.

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