Book Reviews

Bernhard Glaeser. *Housing, Sustainable Development and the Rural Poor. A Case Study of Tamil Nadu.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989. 432 Pages. Hardbound, Indian Rs 465.00.

Shelter is the most pressing need of the present times. Strategies to satisfy this need are urgently needed, particularly for the rural poor. Since eighty percent of the Indian population lives in the rural areas, the author tries to identify their demand for better houses and the required improvements in construction technology in rural India. This study is the result of a joint project of two institutes, i.e., Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (Social Science Research Centre, Berlin) (WZB), based on a survey conducted in Tamil Nadu, India. The majority of the rural population covered by this study are landless labourers. The survey covered 300 households in 20 selected villages where 71 percent of the respondents were living in traditional *katcha* houses made of mud, bamboo, and palm leaves. The study concentrates on the poorest strata of rural society and collects information about socioeconomic properties such as income, occupation, education, energy, and water sources used by the respondents. The respondents were asked during the survey to reveal the household preferences for more living space, privacy, ownership, and availability of public services like piped water, electricity, sewerage system, etc. The analysis is based on 291 (out of 300) questionnaires (households schedule).

While focusing on shelter, this research provides assistance in the development of appropriate technology for the construction of houses in the rural areas. Its aim is not to design and construct houses but to provide some tools and know-how to enable the villagers to build their houses. First, the study identifies the weaknesses and related problems in traditional house construction, e.g., water non-availability and susceptibility to fire and storms; frequency of repair necessary in a year or two; etc.

To suggest solutions of the problems, the book is divided in five parts. The first part presents the overall picture of the housing problem by discussing the geographical setting of the investigated area. It discusses eco-development as a new approach to rural housing technology satisfying the need of the poorest segment of the population, and also suggests alternatives that can be employed to improve the shelter conditions of the rural poor of India.

The second part deals with research methodology, socio-cultural conditions, and the housing constraints in the rural society of India and develops the concept of eco-development as applied to rural housing. Issues concerning available material,

technology, environmental impact, kitchen garden, ecology, and biogas energy are also discussed in this part. The section emphasises that kitchen garden and biogas energy will be helpful in reducing the workload for women. The results of this part show that while housing ranks first in the list of three basic needs, (i.e., food, clothing, and shelter), a separate set of problems is faced by the people living in *pucca* houses and the people living in *katcha* houses, the first group complains about unsatisfactory sanitation facilities, lack of living space, and leaking roofs, while the second group emphasises environmental issues. However, an inadequate supply of safe drinking-water is the main issue for both groups.

The third part delineates the role of sociocultural factors, such as the caste system, religious ceremonies, and work requirements in rural society. This part gives details of the occupations of the villagers according to gender and discusses the needs, general life, and working conditions of the most vulnerable group, i.e., rural women. The study indicates that it is crucial to create labour-saving rural technologies which will reduce the burden on women.

Part four discusses housing technologies which are cheap, easy to apply on self-help basis, and need little maintenance. This part discusses technological research and development, and their dissemination and absorption capacity in the village. Use of locally available material and environmental damage are the basic features of the technology used. The socioeconomic background of the groups and the kind of houses they reside in are very important in determining the villagers' tendency to adopt new technological improvements. Results show that about 90 percent of the people living in *katcha* houses are interested in new technologies and the NGOs are successful in implementing technological innovations at the village level.

The fifth part presents the summary and concludes the study with some policy recommendations for an ecodevelopment approach to rural housing. The results show that the majority of the respondents consider kitchen gardens very useful but very few actually have them. Availability of water and time needed to cultivate the gardens may be the main constraints as the respondents do not have spare time. Most of them are very poor and they are either working or searching for jobs. This aspect indicates that kitchen gardens could be a way to help the poor through self-sufficiency and higher incomes.

The following conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the discussion in different parts of the book. (A) In developing countries the provision of inexpensive roofing improves the housing quality in rural areas. (B) Ninety percent of the population shows a willingness to invest in thatched roofs and mudwall improvements, revealing the urgency of this matter. (C) Innovation programmes can be successful with cooperation among villagers; for example, several people can share the cost of the machinery and equipment and use it collectively. (D) There is a high innovation absorption capacity among villagers and the propensity to invest in improved building technologies is higher among the owners of *kutcha* houses. (E) There is a need for compromise between cost, durability, and comfort. (F) The collaboration with NGOs

can promote decentralised, grassroots development and facilitate technological improvements and innovations in the villages. (G) While the promotion of kitchen gardens results in reduced deforestation and slow soil erosion, the advantage of biogas development means time-saving from collection of firewood or money-saving from buying wood. (H) Self-reliance for house design and use of local building material should be emphasised. (I) The existing pattern of housing is also a result of financial constraints as it is virtually impossible for the poor to get housing loans, due to the absence of collateral.

Although the study presents an accurate picture of the Indian housing problem, yet some assumptions appear unrealistic: for example, considering 1:1 ratio of households to houses when an extended family system is prevalent especially in the rural areas. Similarly, the assumption of permanent and of semi-permanent structure is not true for *katcha* houses. These assumptions may produce biased results. It is clear from the study that the target group, i.e., 'rural poor' are very interested in technological innovations which prolong the life of mudwalls and thatched roofs. The study suggests that though the government has failed to solve this problem, it can still play an important role in greater availability of public services like piped water, electricity, and sewerage. An important question that the author has ignored is: How should the housing policy be evolved to develop strategies for renovation of houses? The policy considered mainly focuses on the building of new houses. Still, the study is an important contribution to the literature on housing, technology, and environmental issues related to housing. Furthermore, most of these recommendations would be valid for the construction of houses for the rural poor in Asia.

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