

Susanne Thorbek. *Gender and Slum Culture in Urban Asia.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1994. 233 pages. Hardbound: Indian Rs 225.00.

The process of urbanisation is fed by the migration of people from the rural to the urban areas. Among the several reasons why people move to cities, the following are considered to be the most important: modernisation in agriculture and the resultant labour displacement, rapid industrial development, and concentration of land in a few hands; also the lack of non-agricultural jobs in the rural areas and the increase in population. The immigrants face a different environment in the cities and generally find it difficult to adjust to the setting with a new set of social relations. The poor unskilled labour coming from the rural areas to settle in the cities at any cost finds its way to the squalor of the slum areas. The resultant population pressure forces the people of these areas to face severe problems not only in terms of inadequate wages and incomes but also in terms of their relations with their spouses, children, friends, relatives, and neighbours. In the slum areas thus growing, it is not possible for the planning and development authorities, despite their extensive efforts, to provide to all the inhabitants such social services and amenities as education and health facilities, parks, playgrounds, and safe drinking-water. Left without the amenities of developed urban areas, these inhabitants struggle for survival.

This book portrays the social, economic, and cultural life of the slums of urban Asia by comparing the life-pattern of the poor people in Colombo (Sri Lanka) with those of Bangkok (Thailand). The description of Thai slum culture is taken from an earlier book by the author [Thorbek (1987)]. These two slum areas are very different in their socio-demographic and physical features. However, both countries possess a common religious background, i.e., Theravada Buddhism. The author has selected large cities for study because it has been observed that most of the rural population moves towards big cities in search of work and a large part of the population, therefore, lives in poor physical and economic conditions. The main focus of the book, however, is gender identity and struggle. These are the women who have to face and deal with the familiar and unfamiliar social and economic problems in and outside the home. In the labour market, they compete with men for scarce resources. If they find employment, it is women who bear the greater burden of generating household earnings as well as taking care of the household. Sometimes it is very difficult for them to fulfil the expectations of their husbands and children. This causes distress in family life. The analysis presented is strengthened by the author's personal contact with the women of these slum areas, in gaining their confidence and having them to speak about their lives.

Of its four parts, the first part of the book describes the impact of migration on gender relations which determines the scope of action for both men and women and compares the status of women in the process of urbanisation in these two slum areas. The details of the welfare policy adopted by Sri Lanka and its impact on the lives of the poor are also reported in this part. The second part defines gender identity and discusses the role of women in the contradictory culture, one that is actually prevailing and the other that is publicly expressed. The author generally heard two different stories of the

lives of the women: one was told in a group and the other was told when the person was alone with the author. The detailed interviews of two women of these areas are presented in the third part. These interviews reveal the pain borne by these women, and the complications created by the circumstances and the struggle for survival. In the last part of the book, the author speaks about the common cultural characteristics of slum life and shows the significance of gender in shaping this slum culture. It also explains how people generate the means to adjust to a new environment.

In describing the welfare policy adopted by Sri Lanka to maintain a high standard in terms of the quality of life, the author explains its impact on the women of the slum areas. In this regard, she looks at food subsidies, education, the use of contraceptives, and women's participation in politics. The effects of urbanisation on gender are also observed by the author. She compares the gender struggle in the two slum areas and finds that despite the provision of an effective welfare policy in Sri Lanka, gender struggles are very harsh and violent as compared to those in Thailand. Women are forced to depend on men for the fulfilment of their economic and social needs and, therefore, their scope for action is restricted. This implies that, in the long run, relative to men, welfare policy fails to provide a permanent improvement for women in Sri Lanka's slum area. Although attempts are being made to improve the condition of the people of the area, it does not imply betterment in the lives of women. In Thailand, however, the situation is very different. Gender struggle creates opportunities for women to participate in work actively, in and outside the slum. This may have been caused by Western influence.

The gender aspect is considered not only in terms of financial security but also in terms of the relations with other family members, relatives, and neighbours. The results drawn are based on: (1) detailed interviews with women in which they speak about every aspect of their life in their own words, and (2) the observations made by the author during her stay with them. The observations highlight the efforts made by the migrant people who inhabit the slum areas, and enhance the quality of the inferences drawn. They facilitate an in-depth understanding of the joys and sorrows of the people, particularly of the women. The comparative analysis of the problem indicates that the process of industrialisation causes urbanisation and creates new conditions for understanding the gender dimensions in society as well as in daily life. It influences income-generating activities and the division of labour at work and in the home. Thus, the gender dimension is the focal point for understanding the development of the slum culture.

The comparison of the two slum areas also shows significant differences between them. In Bangkok, different ethnic groups live peacefully. Women react against the physical violence of men. They discuss their problems with their husbands, children, friends and neighbours, and often help each other in difficult situations. In Sri Lanka, however, the relationship with friends and neighbours is not stable. Women can not share their problems with each other because their husbands do not allow it. Unstable relationships between husbands and wives are also observed when men are not good providers and spend all their money on drinking and gambling instead of maintaining their families. This causes quarrels and physical violence between the genders. Though

the women in Thailand are better off than the women in Sri Lanka, it is evident that the dominant power in both places is in the hands of men. Despite the many differences, the people of the two slum areas have one thing in common: the surrounding community considers them low-grade and inferior. Therefore, they feel ostracised and despised. This results in the development of their own special culture, which is different from the “civilised” culture of the city.

As it provides a deep insight into the consequences of urbanisation and its resultant effects on social and economic changes, the book is very useful for political organisations and NGOs engaged in similar studies. Policy-makers may find it of interest in considering the problems of an underdeveloped area in a developed city. The research methodology will also prove to be of interest to researchers.

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REFERENCE

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