

## Book Review



**Peer Smets**

*Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.\**

### **Living on the Margins: Social Access to Shelter in Urban South Asia.**

**Purewal, N.K.** *SOAS, Studies in Development Geography. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000, 204 pages ISBN 0 7546 1622 3*

‘As time has gone by, ... we thought that our conditions would have improved, ... but they haven’t. The harder we work, the less we seem to be able to afford....’

To obtain insight in the social dimensions of housing access of the poor, Purewal has made a study of the housing strategies and the development of low-income settlements in Amritsar, North India. She reflects upon the significance of social access to the low-income housing sector. This leads to a better understanding and improved actions of social equity, which she considers, of academic and political concern. Moreover, the book can be seen as an important contribution to the body of both urban housing literature in South Asia and more particular Punjab.

The fieldwork, with combined qualitative and quantitative research methods, has taken place in 15 low-income neighbourhoods around the walled inner city of Amritsar. Due to border restrictions, tensions between India and Pakistan, and insecurity in areas along the border, private and public investments except military ones deterred. That is why traders and industrialists moved to other cities and consequently income-earning opportunities declined. In Amritsar the poor were structurally marginalised, hindering them in finding shelter. Moreover, the national and state organisations withdraw from the provision of housing, and the state obtains a role as facilitator and enabler in line with the self-help ethos.

To obtain insight in the dynamics of low-income settlements, attention is paid to the consolidation of low-income neighbourhoods and its relation with state-assisted and unassisted self-help housing systems. For this reason, Purewal provides a theoretical review of the literature on poverty and housing in Third World Cities and uses the debate between self-help analysts and neo-Marxists to look into unregulated housing sub-markets. This has led to an insightful conceptualisation of a continuum of housing approaches, with the sequence "jhuggies", private self-help settlements and state-assisted settlements. It offers the opportunity of avoiding dual concepts such as legal-illegal and formal-informal. She shows that the discussion between neo-Marxist and self-help theorists concerning housing, reflected in the discussion between Burgess and Turner, is still relevant. Moreover, the market and self-help practices are analysed through theoretical notions of political economy and neo-Marxism. Market analysts consider the existence of slums as the result of a gap between demand and supply, while the political economists look for structural conditions determining production and distribution, underlying the existence of slums, which generate poverty and housing shortage. Finally, the neo-Marxist critique of self-help housing policies which criticises the roles of the state and individuals in relation to the operation of the market.

---

\* Faculty of Socio-Cultural Studies, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands Email:pgsm.smets@scw.vu.nl

Purewal shows that Turner's model for explaining mobility of migrants in the city does not fit for Amritsar. She shows that this model has an a-historical representation of stages in the development of households, which assumes a homogeneous progression of bridgeheaders, consolidators and status seekers. However, this model does not fit for Amritsar, where apart from demand also supply determines the mobility of social groups.

Purewal's background as a Punjabi Sikh, born in North America, and a researcher from a British university, enabled him to have a deeper insight in the research population. However, an insufficient knowledge of the language, however, made in-dept interviews very difficult. This work was taken over by two research assistants, who were both students at the Guru Nanak Dev University. It is a pity that the researched dwellers do not get the attention they deserve, despite her sincere efforts in going for a social anthropological research method.

Although Purewal's attempt to overcome the dual thinking in housing studies should be praised, she does not convincingly manage to integrate the self-help approach with the neo-marxist criticism. Nowadays, neo-liberalism is wide spread, which means that power dimensions are often neglected. Neo-marxism, on the other hand, had a strong sensitivity for power manipulations. The book could have contributed significantly to the present dilemma when more attention had been paid to the dynamics of power at the neighbourhood and state level in relation to the dynamics of self-help.