

## Book Review

**Suman Ghosh**

*Institute for Cultural Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK \**

### **Low Income Housing: Multi-Dimensional Research Perspectives**

*By K Iftekhar Ahmed Ed., Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation (PRPA), Grameen Trust, Dhaka. 2001*

The editor does an injustice to the contents of his book when he modestly describes it as ‘a compilation of synopses of eight research projects’. It is, rather, a collection of eight reports covering results of detailed researches into various aspects of low income housing in the context of Bangladesh. This includes alternative structural experiments like framing hollow reinforced concrete cement cylindrical posts, devising possible solutions to the problem of lighting rural Bangladesh, and integrating the use of building industry. Overriding all this, however, is an emphasis on two concerns: preserving regional identity and ensuring that rural people find it easy and affordable to build them on their own, without having to wait for government or other agencies to do it for them. This makes the book primarily a cultural text, over and above its technological concerns.



In fact, the focus of these researches is born out of technological necessity as well as cultural concerns. The technological necessity is due to the fact that ‘the great floods of 1987 and 1988 alone destroyed more than one and half million rural houses in Bangladesh; if we set out to reconstruct even one percent of this figure, then the amount will be a colossal 15000.’ (11) Any reconstruction activity must be both technologically improved and of a more permanent nature. The cultural concern is equally clear: ‘a house is a technological product and at the same time its production relates to a profound process of human relationships and interaction. How mutually exclusive can these two elements be? Are there overlaps between them?’ (4)

These two concerns decide the focus of this research: to provide safe, durable houses made with easily available materials that ‘can be built by the poor themselves, especially by women’.

Research on the framing of hollow cylindrical posts (headed by K Iftekhar Ahmed), for example, is not merely an improvisation in engineering. It is drawn out of the fact that people in this part of the world have easy access to, and for centuries have used, bamboo to construct the frames of their houses. Hollow cylindrical posts are posited as a more durable alternative to bamboo, while retaining its structural features. Apart from saving on concrete thus bringing the cost of housing down, it has the advantage of preserving traditional practices of building. Like bamboo, the hollow RCC posts are entrenched in the ground and then filled with mud and sand, thus increasing their rigidity and stability. Eight such posts are sufficient to preserve the roof structure of these traditionally single storied houses. The posts remain on the inside while the traditional bamboo mat wall covers them from the outside. These new houses look no different from the traditional ones, but are far more resistant to floods. Most importantly, they can be built easily by people without having to wait for external help. This ensures people’s participation by using their traditional building skills and not alienating them

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\* Doctoral research student, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK. Email: sumanghosh52@hotmail.com

with completely new technology.

Roy and Carter's findings about housing in Dinajpur district are based on a participatory process initiated by the Housing and Hazards Group, Exeter University, funded later by the Programme for Research on Poverty Alleviation and developed by Chetonar Dak, a non government organisation. The process is innovative and culturally sensitive. On the one hand, they organised workshops and built demonstration buildings to provide a hands on approach to studying various processes and their relative strengths, weaknesses and cost effectiveness. Simultaneously, they made use of traditional teams of singing entertainers to increase awareness of alternative systems of housing. Dr Zebun Nasreen Ahmed's ongoing study of lighting patterns seems to follow this approach. The outcomes of this project are to provide ways of optimising the use of light while minimising the costs involved.

Architect Mujtaba Ahsan's ongoing study on terracotta is original, not only because it looks at the aesthetic angle of housing by using a technology used for constructing temples and mosques in the region over centuries. The study aims to explore the prospects of terracotta items in local and international markets, especially among potential buyers in Europe and North America. This not only reinforces a unique aesthetic of traditional built environments in these regions, but also uses it to augment and rejuvenate local economies. As Ahsan puts it, 'terracotta murals are both art and craft; this combination makes them unique' (76). Here too, the cultural impact of this research might eventually outweigh the technological and economic angle.

The significance of the book, then, lies not just with respect to housing in Bangladesh. It incorporates approaches that can be helpful in other, completely different environments in various parts of the world. This is because it provides ways by which locals can help themselves while preserving their cultural identities, and also improving their quality of life and economic situation. Herein lies its importance.