

Book Review

In the Name of the Urban Poor by Amitabh Kundu, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1993, 299pp, Rs.285.

In this book, Professor Amitabh Kundu analyses the extent of access of the urban poor to five basic amenities necessary for life—housing, water supply, sanitation, health care, and the public distribution system of some essential commodities for daily life. The main purpose of undertaking this study has been to (1) analyse the existing organisational structure at the state, city, and town levels for providing the above amenities, the vertical and horizontal inter-dependencies among them, and to identify the deficiencies in their functioning; (2) assess the capacity of the existing organisations to meet the needs and demands of the urban poor and the extent to which they have succeeded; (3) investigate the process of formulation, approval and implementation of programmes and projects by the central, state and local bodies to ascertain if the interests of the poor are indeed taken care of in their day-to-day system of decision making; (4) analyse the consumption expenditure and saving potential of the urban poor in the context of the stipulations of increasing the user charges, recovering the current and capital costs, lowering the standards of the services to match affordability, etc. in many of the present and proposed schemes for urban infrastructural development; and, finally, (5) recommend specific measures through which the interests of the poor can be made the central focus of decision-making in the concerned organisations and the way their accountability to the people, particularly to the economically weaker sections, can be increased without compromising the efficiency of the production and delivery systems (p.20). Professor Kundu has arrived at the above specific objectives because he finds that the demands for cost recovery, Jukes in user charges, etc., being made on the concerned organisations in recent years, particularly because of the resource crunch in the economy, might lead to the adoption of solutions that will price the poor out of the delivery systems. The analysis for the study has been carried out in three stages. In the first stage secondary information on the management system—the production and the distribution of urban amenities—has been obtained from the organisations concerned. In the second stage of analysis, micro-level studies conducted by individual researchers, organisations and government departments on the access of the urban poor to basic amenities have been reviewed in an attempt to build up hypotheses and arrive at some tentative conclusions. Besides using published and unpublished data contained in the NSS Reports of the 38th and 42nd rounds, and from reports of the various government departments, field surveys were conducted in selected slums in different cities to cross-check some of the hypotheses and conclusions, particularly with regard to the factors hindering access of the poor to the amenities. At the final stage the conclusions and recommendations of the study have been

discussed with people's representatives, the concerned officials, researchers and experts in informal meetings and formal workshops organised for the purpose.

The study has been presented in seven chapters. After a brief introduction, the second chapter focuses on the concept of the urban poor. It examines the major areas of agreement and disagreement of various research studies and highlights the possible reasons for the anomalies. It concludes that people with per capita expenditure of less than Rs. 125 per month (forming around 40 per cent of the urban population) should be regarded as urban poor. It makes further analysis of the NSS data (which is the major data set for analysis) for examining the access of the "urban poor" so defined to housing, water supply, sanitation, health care, and public distribution system for the essential commodities. In the last category, it has limited basically to the availability of foodgrains and sugar and has not taken into consideration availability of kerosene or cloth from the fair price shops.

The functioning of the public sector organisations managing shelter, drinking water, sewerage/sanitation, health care, and distribution of foodgrains has been discussed in the third chapter. The fourth chapter reviews the schemes and programmes implemented by the central and state governments during the past few years to strengthen the existing system or augment the facilities. While the fifth chapter analyses the level and quality of the amenities in cities and towns of different size categories, and identifies the deficiencies and inadequacies, the sixth chapter examines the issue of access to the facilities of households in different expenditure categories based largely on the data from the 38th and 42nd rounds of the NS S. The final chapter proposes a set of recommendations to improve the access of the urban poor to the five basic amenities considered by him. The book, thus, has been very informative throughout and has provided a very good reading on some of the basic issues in respect of the urban poor.

Professor Kundu feels that within the present liberal politico-economic framework structural adjustment, almost leading to *laissezfair* state, has become an integral part of India's policy and planning today. But, he also strongly feels that interventions in the provision of basic amenities considered in this study to the urban poor from time to time would not only be important but necessary.

The analysis presented in the book indicates that the subsidies that have gone into housing have ultimately reached the middle and upper income sections, and the government should, therefore, gradually curtail its involvement in those programmes and concentrate on those benefiting the urban poor directly. As the poor mostly live in illegally constructed or acquired *Kutcha* and self-occupied houses, a large section of them basically needs only a piece of serviced land with legal status. Land values, however, tend to rise when the land titles or the built-up accommodations are given to the urban poor. As the land then becomes a marketable commodity, the poor get pushed out of the programmes and massive subsidies reach the richer sections of the population (p.281). One way to counter this tendency suggested by Kundu is to give houses or land, on lease-hold basis to associations formed by the local communities and making it almost impossible to transfer the property.

For the sizeable floating population (basically houseless) found in metropolises and large cities, especially in areas around railway stations, bus terminals and other public places,

medium-sized night shelters, accommodating 50 to 100 people should be constructed in areas where there is such a demand.

The various surveys have indicated that the majority of the poor do not get the minimum quantity of water necessary for their daily use. The localities inhabited by the poor are mostly served by the public stand posts (PSPs), hand pumps, wells and tubewells. Water in these localities is generally available at low pressure and for a short duration (a problem of most localities in metropolises and large cities). Kundu suggests that utilising the information regarding the distance currently travelled to obtain water, and complaints regarding long waiting time in queues, the number of PSPs, water pressure and duration of water supply in the PSPs, may be suitably modified to ensure adequate water supply to the poor households.

Further, to limit the subsidy on water to the middle and upper income brackets, all domestic connections should be metered and the cost of the meters should be charged to the beneficiaries with graded rate depending on the water consumption.

The responsibility of maintaining toilet facilities should be charged from the households to meet at least a part of the current expenditure. Agencies like the "Sulabh International" can also be involved in the construction and maintenance of the facilities.

Substantial restructuring in the organisation of the public health care delivery system and improvement in its quality are necessary to make it more sensitive to the needs of the poor.

Finally, regarding the public distribution system (PDS), the main requirement relates to issuing ration cards to those households which have none. In view of the greater demand for rice (relative to supply) among the poor, the study suggests that the quantity of rice supplied through the PDS be increased by 20 per cent. As there is massive subsidy to the ration card holders covered by the PDS, it has been suggested by the author that the system itself must be drastically altered to ensure that at least 60 per cent of the purchase of cereals by the poor is through PDS.

While the study under review has thrown new light regarding the problems of the urban poor, particularly with respect to their accessibility to housing, drinking water, toilet facilities, health care, and to cereals through the PDS, one faces difficulty in knowing as to what is being said in each chapter and what points the author is trying to make in the absence of a summary at the end.

It is assumed that the author has considered only the urban sample of the NSS 38th and 42nd rounds. He has, however, not made any reference to sampling errors. My fear is that the sample even at the national level, what to talk of State/union territory level, becomes quite small when one considers the cell frequencies in some of the detailed cross-classification. It would have been useful if the author had given a note of warning in this regard and had himself been careful in making conclusions (for example, regarding medical care on p256).

It would have been useful to provide a little discussion on the working of superseded municipalities/other local bodies in a number of states (where elections were not held for long periods of time) with respect to the provision of basic amenities to the poor.

As the house tax and other local taxes were fixed in most municipalities and local bodies decades back on some principles (which no longer seem to be realistic), the issue of cost recovery in supplying drinking water, scavenging etc. becomes important for the municipalities and corporations, etc. This should have been discussed in some greater details.

Regarding the health care, the author has not discussed at all the universal immunisation programme and the school health programme which have direct bearing on the urban poor. Further, because of loss wages in seeking medical care for diseases which do not restrict day-to-day activities, many of their diseases go unattended till very late stage.

Finally, as indicated earlier, the book has been very informative and would be very useful to those involved in town planning and urban development, and, particularly to the urban economists.

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