

### **Book Reviews**

Praveen Jha, Avinash Kumar and Yamini Mishra (Eds.), *Labouring Women: Issues and Challenges in Contemporary India*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2020, pp. 328, Price: ₹ 775/- only.

This book is a compilation of 12 research papers which are an outcome of an international conference organised by the Center for Informal Sector and Labour Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University in association with the United Nations. In the introduction, the editors tie all the papers to the subject.

The papers are grouped into several sections such as women's and labour questions; methodological issues measuring women's work; inter-linkages between paid and unpaid work; private property, the commons and structural changes; employment trends and the feminisation debate; need for universal social protection; challenges before women's movement; policy imperatives for future research, etc. While most of the contributors cover more than one of these aspects, they have been grouped into one of the two sections according to their major thrust.

The title of the book reflects both the primary role of labouring women in social change, dominance of women in informal sector of the economy, and women's labour research, practice and movement in contemporary India. It attempts to understand the methodological and conceptual issues regarding women's work and their status at the contemporary juncture. However, it argues, "Despite policy reforms and commitment of equality, experience shows that the challenges faced by labouring women have hardly diminished both at work place and at home" (p. 3). The contributors of this volume, therefore, support the demands by women and workers' organisations for universal social security for informal sector workers.

The paper by M.E. John on "Women's Labour Through Life Narratives" seems a modified version of his earlier essay appearing in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* (2013). He has narrated five disparate life stories of labouring women from different communities in the study area and found that exploitation and stigma towards the dignity of self-employment persist among the labouring women. He further raises the question whether the labour theory of value applies at all, or it is the 'stigma theory' of work that should be used as a theoretical framework.

Jayati Ghosh's work on "Time Poverty and Women's Work" is also a revised version of her keynote address delivered in the UN women's conference at CISLS (JNU) in 2014. It is technical and the analysis is based on the work of Perer Custers and Silvia Federici on the nature of capitalist accumulation from women's paid and reproductive labour. The author, however, accepts the social reality by saying

that it is crucial to understand the essential role played by the unpaid work performed by women.

Vinoj Abraham's study aims to analyse the rising share of women in unpaid domestic activities as against the declining female labour participation rates. The author outlines the hierarchy and power relations within the family as his main analytical framework. However, he wishes to conduct a deeper analysis in the process of status of unpaid domestic activities in near the future.

Gupta, Ralli and Gupta have summarised their paper entitled "Capitalism and Unpaid Work in India" in a conceptual and methodological perspective. They argue that capitalism in its systemic dimension has been dependent on both paid and unpaid labour from its very inception in which the wage-surplus relationship can only be explained through the relationship between paid and unpaid labour in the creation and appropriation of value. The paper concludes that it is the nature and process of 'inclusion' in the organisation of paid and unpaid labour which is the casual explanation of growth of Indian capitalism after Independence.

Neetha accepts the limitations towards the reliable data collected from the various dimensions of the subject in the paper entitled "Exploring Paid and Unpaid Work Dichotomy". The author further observes the role of unpaid work in underlining women's contribution and gender inequality, and that regular and reliable statistical data on unpaid work is a must.

Prasad and Krithi highlight the impact of recognition and regulation of domestic labour on the lives of women workers. Their paper shows that the class factor is more pronounced than the social group factor in analysing the character of domestic work.

Dewan's study on "Labouring Households" is based on extensive field experience in several regions of India. However, its focus is on various unrecognised forms of livelihood which is textured and diverse. It covers three districts comprising 19 *tehsils* in rural Maharashtra. It suggests that the sustainable livelihood and decent work demand women's movement towards land rights over private and common property.

The essay of Kaul and Shrivastava is titled "Public Investment Towards Promoting Women's Livelihoods." It outlines key concerns with women's engagement as service providers in some flagship programmes of the Government of India. It highlights the excessive reliance on underpaid labour of women for implementation of these programmes. The authors suggest that in such a scenario, there is an urgent need to ensure minimum wages and review the working conditions of women workers engaged under ICDS and NHM programmes.

The work of Sumi Krishna entitled "Women and Common Property Resources" raises some central issues pertaining to shared landscape resources. In order to challenge the institutional basis of marginalisation, the author needs to redefine terms like development, sustainable livelihoods and CPR as political rather than descriptive concepts.

Smita Gupta attempts to tackle the question of women's land rights through a democratic and gendered formulation. She goes on to identify institutions in

which the problems of women's land rights have had or have not had an impact on their land rights. She holds that such an assessment is helpful to identify the political and institutional spaces still available. In the social security system land is sometimes more important than money and wages.

The study on "Digital Commons" by Anita Gurumurthy is a venture in the Internet Space which represents a radical technological paradigm that allows duplication and distribution of information, knowledge and cultural works with near-zero marginal costs.

Most of the papers in the book have been constructed without the philosophical background and are placed against the historical backdrop. One cannot disassociate theories from strategies because without an appropriate theoretical framework, strategies have little meaning. However, this book has both academic and professional value for the women's movement on diverse fields of their social and environmental life.

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Raghav Kishore, *The (ungovernable city) Productive Failure in the Making of Colonial Delhi, 1858-1911*, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2020, pp. 259, Price ₹ 895/- only.

This book has been brought out under the series of New Perspectives in South Asian History. It is a study of the urban history of Delhi. It begins with the regret of Ghalib regarding the change in the city after the mutiny. Its restructuring has been discussed in detail. There was a change in the ownership of property. The loyalists were rewarded and refractory elements taken to task. Their properties were confiscated and sold. To resolve the shortage of house properties, the compensation plan relied on giving credit to the owners of demolished houses to procure the confiscated houses. The overall result was the creation of a market in urban property. Both demolition and erection of property took place. It was measured, valued and sold for the highest price.

Kishore then passes on to Delhi Municipality and the challenges of urban governance. With colonial attitude hardening, the need for policing the city became necessary. Agencies like the municipality were created. It took upon itself to keep a record of births and deaths, clear drains and sewers, ensure that streets were lit at night, and that octroi duties were collected to fund works of public utility. As the city was perceived as inherently dirty and disease-ridden, native habits came under its surveillance. One of the first objects of attention was the Sabzi Mandi which was a picture of chaos and confusion. In the name of public nuisance, the municipality sought to refashion urban spaces. The chabutras were ubiquitous and projected on to the streets. At times the doors of the shops were portable and could be folded to double the chabutras. They were demolished in