BOOK REVIEWS

ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION : THE HUMAN FACTOR IN URBAN PLANNING

by
Anjana Desai
(1985)
Publisher : Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi Price Rs. 100/-, pp. 162

Man-environment interaction is an age-old paradigm of geography. For long the concept of environment has involved something of an objective, real category. The relationship has referred itself to this objective category and it has been assumed that understanding has been pervaded by objectivity alone. *Prima facie* this has severe weaknesses and limitations for the simple reason that the meaning of the objective environment evolves in the mind of a perceiving human being. In other words, the objective reality and the subjective reality are not congruent and this divergence greatly influences human behaviour in space and adaptation to environment. But, while the environment in the complex of spatial behaviour is a perceived reality the process of perception itself can be analysed and comprehended through objective methods. Anjana Desai is fully conscious of the difficulties of operationalising the perception processes and extracting generalisations useful for the understanding of spatial behaviour.

Basically, Anjana Desai aims at an understanding of the urban environment of Ahmedabad city as perceived by its residents. There are vignettes of simple and effective discussions on man-environment relationship, charging philosophy in geography, and geographic value: in the last she states pithily the basic thrusts in behavioural and phenomenological paradigms. Two chapters focus on environmental perception theory and review of studies on the theory interviened by an effective processual model. Since even now there is a lot of debate, some very strong protest arguments, on whether perception is a valid concept or not (remember it is an anathema, to the radical/leftists/Marxist geographers) it is really the responsibility of the particular method of operationalising it that validates the concept. In this task Desai has been eminently successful. She emphasises rightly that environmental perception studies derive many of their ideas from adjacent disciplines, particularly psychology as also that natural environment is reached by human beings through social environment. Her basic premise: behaviour is controlled by image that is created through perception of environment is stated very convincingly and succintly. The complexity of this simple statement is displayed in the conceptual model of environmental perception.

Before she gets into the real discussion of perception she puts forth neat and elaborate statements on the study area which is the core city of Ahmedabad, methodology and data, and the characteristics of residents, particularly related to housing, health, environmental quality of living, and action space.

Her principal contributions, on residents' perception and image and hypotheses and analysis, are methodologically flawless. Her 'residents' belong to different religious, age, sex, income and education groups. Quantitative sophistication stretches only upto multiple regression and, mercifully, most of the arguments and findings have been qualitatively stated in direct expressions. At the end of these discussions she formulates as many as twelve hypotheses.

A good research piece, as Desai has given us, will raise questions: what is the explanation of the divergence between the perception of the residents and of the investigators? Are there any norms against which the perception can be measured and thus, the objective truth is identified and the validity of perception is obtained? The reviewer searched in vain the logical or empirical assumption underlying the twelve hypotheses.

Like a genuine scholar that Desai undoubtedly is, she frankly states the limitations of data and the evaluation of findings, methodology, data and future research possibilities. She admits that the measurement of perception is a problem because of its qualitative nature. Nonetheless, she is able to distinguish a Jain pol from a Muslim pol with the help of perception findings, a finding that can be of inestimable value in understanding the seemingly interminable communal tensions and conflicts. Desai with her characteristic candour identifies and expresses several difficulties in basing environmental planning on perception studies. Not many scholars are aware of or willing to submit to their colleagues the weaknesses of their findings. The tables, maps and sketches are leaders in new thinking and many will study them with profit. One very brief question: are there really no castes among the Muslims or social groups akin to their Hindu counterparts?

Anjana Desai's book should be a required reading for urban social geographers for she is, in essence, providing us with another and deeper insight to the functioning of society in space as understood by its members. It will come handy to the urban environmental planners if they are sincere about the success of their plans.

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CHRISTALLER ON THE MAHARASHTRA LANDSCAPE

CENTRAL PLACES IN WESTERN INDIA

by

Jaymala Diddee

(1984)

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Christaller, if he were alive today, would have expressed his happiness and surpirse on a book demonstrating the viable application of his seminal contribution to a land as remote from southern Germany, in history, culture, and economy, as Maharashtra. This is one of those rare good books, scholarly and readable, which have grown out of doctoral dissertations.

Through a brief but pointed and comprehensive (even eclectic) review of the central place theory Diddee escorts us over the land of Western India (upper Bhima Basin) indicating the salient features relevant to its central places: for once among the Indian books we are mercifully spared the ordeal of wading through a gazetteer! A native of the region, Diddee follows a self-prescribed limit, this much and no more.

There are many items, may be even the 'first', which will sustain and invigorate our interest as we leisurely move through the text uninterrupted by jarring notes of quantification. There is an intelligent discussion on the evolution of central places in the region going back to 7th century