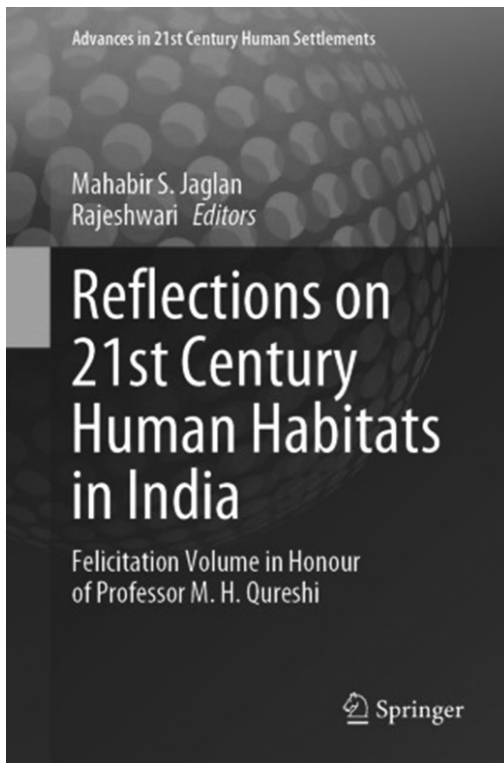


Book Review

Reflections on 21st Century Human Habitats in India by Mahabir S. Jaglan and Rajeshwari

Felicitation Volume in Honour of Professor M. H. Qureshi, Part of the series titled *Advances in 21st Century Human Settlements*, Springer Nature, Singapore, 2021, pp 392.



The human habitats have been ever changing as they transform from small to large, from rural to urban and from traditional to modern. Most studies on human habitats draw attention to these dimensions largely from a narrow ecological perspective and/or the environmental degradation that are associated

with this transformation. In a significant departure from these conventional approaches to habitat studies, the book under review is a refreshing contribution spanning cultural and political ecology, the political economy of the environment, humanistic landscape interpretation, cultural studies of nature, and is a definitive guide to environmental studies in Human Geography. The articles collected in this book are carefully chosen to an audience within and beyond Geography, addressing the diversity of human habitation attributes including environmental, economic and socio-cultural milieu in India. The articles included in the book are clearly representative of the diversity and remarkable vitality of geographical research on society-environment relations.

The plurality of transformative characteristics in terms of social and economic classes, gender and space are aspects that the editors have diligently pursued in making the contributions look elegantly persuasive. Inequality in access to natural resources such as land and water is still a big factor in socio-economic differentiation in rural habitats. This constructs a pedestal of unequal opportunities and access to basic human necessities such as healthcare, education, potable water and sanitation. Human habitats since time

immemorial have been experiencing socio-spatial segregation and exclusion based on gender, caste, and community and is detrimental in the formation of a civil society that poses serious doubts on its sustainability in the long run. The underlying assumption is that of developing an inclusive society that celebrates age-old socio-cultural diversities which reduces inequalities and reverts composite culture.

The book is a festschrift of Prof. Mohd. Hashim Qureshi, a great teacher, an eminent academic, a distinguished scholar and mentor who has immensely contributed to the field of geography teaching and research in India and abroad. Prof. Qureshi had a long association with the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and retired from this university as a professor. This book in his honour has 13 very well researched articles contributed by his former students, colleagues and other scholars.

Organised in four broad sections the book reflects on three distinct aspects of human habitats in 21st century India: nexus between environment, resource base and livelihood; economic development and disparities; and emerging socio-spatial inequalities during the post-reform era. The first section introduces the reader about the book and the emergent issues related to environmental and socio-economic dimensions of human habitats in India. The most illuminating contribution in this section includes a personal narrative by Prof. M. H. Qureshi on his life and explorations within Geography. His article titled '*Journey in the Realm of Geography*' provides a reflective overview of his life and work- of becoming a Geographer, teacher and exponent of a school of thought related to

studies on folk regions, studies on Ethiopia, survey, field studies and his interactions with other Geographers in India and abroad. His journey is well captured in his own words in this piece of writing, introducing the reader to the vast contributions, recognitions and other scholarly works he has made and still making.

The second section on Environment, Resource Base and Livelihood has articles judiciously selected by the editors corroborating the theme of the book. The article by Dinesh Pratap and Aradhana Pratap on *Livelihood Adaptation to Climate Variability in Jaunsar-Bawar Tribal Habitat of Central Himalayas, India* brings out the consequences of the impacts of changing climate on the local communities whose livelihoods are at stake as a consequence. Lack of data validation or field based information however, has seriously undermined the results of this fine paper on climate change and its impacts. The subsequent articles in the section focus on the water scarcity and its management as part of livelihood dilemma. Sucharita Sen in her article on *Scarcity of Common Property Resources and Spatiality of Women's Livelihood in Rural India* draws attention to gender dimension as the access to common property resources diminishes day by day. The evidences of exclusion and forced withdrawal of women of marginalized socio-economic groups due to scarcity of these resources has emerged as a big concern. Jitender Kumar and Mahabir S. Jaglan in their article *Inequalities in Access to Groundwater for Irrigation in an Agriculturally Developed Region of India* focus on rising inequality in Haryana in accessing another dwindling resource with its adverse impacts on the rural livelihood. Sachinder Singh's paper on *Crisis of Water*

and Water in Crisis: Some Reflections from India is a befitting concluding contribution to this section. All the contributions are rich with information from the field and judicious use of relevant secondary data which have enriched the discussion. While most studies lament deterioration and depletion of a freely available natural water resource like water, the significant value addition to the understanding of the problem is achieved by reorienting the issue to the social dimension of unequal access of water which is further dispossessing the marginalised sections of the people.

Incorporation of six diverse articles from micro issues of caste to regional characterisation and national outlook of disparities in section three of the book on Economic Development and Regional Disparities enhances the importance of geographical studies on socio-spatial inequality which is only on the rise. Sachidanand Sinha, Ruchika Singh, and Sonali Bhatia in their article *Socio-cultural Spaces and Dynamics of Transformation in Rural India* clearly bring out the irony of the ongoing developmental processes in rural areas which is bypassing the deprived sections of the society. The authors find that the rigidly iniquitous social structure enables the dominant social groups to use the traditional institutions in their favour by forging an alliance with forces of modernisation. The articles titled *Industrial and Commercial Geography of India: A Study of Changes in the Post-Reform Period* by Abdul Shaban and Sanjukta Sattar, and *Dynamics and Spatiality of Socio-Economic Development during Post Liberalization Period: A Study of Ahrwal Region (Haryana), India* by Ankita Yadav and Mahabir S. Jaglan deliberate on the much discussed economic reforms initiated in the

early 1990s which, from available evidences have merely induced jobless economic growth and further widened the inter-regional disparities in the levels of development. The authors have conclusively proved this fact by showing how new enterprises have mostly concentrated in economically developed states and in already developed industrial regions.

Negative social and environmental cost of rising economic growth and disparities are no less conspicuous. A disquieting feature of the post economic reforms and the resultant regional disparities is reflected in breaking down of the homogeneity of socio-cultural regions due to concentration of foreign direct investment and enterprises at favoured locations such as the National Capital Region. The tourism induced urbanisation and spatial organisation in Goa and coastal tourist destinations have certainly ushered economic growth but at the cost of increasing environmental hazards and overcrowding. The subject has very lucidly been presented in the article entitled *Tourism, Urbanization and Spatial Reorganization: Some Reflections on Tourism Development in Goa, India* by Babu S. Sutheshna, Sarfaraz Alam, Satya Prakash, and Harsh Jaiswal in their article, *Continuity and Changing Characteristics of Traditional Commodity Specific Markets in Varanasi City* have unravelled how the traditional commodity specific markets (*mandis*) in Indian cities bear the onslaught and adapt to corporatization of the economy and re-organisation of urban landscape in the name of urban development.

The articles in section four of the book concern with the socio-spatial inequalities especially about availability and accessibility of health and healthcare services, educational

infrastructure, water and gender issues. The chapter titled *Socio-Spatial Dimensions of Disease Transition and Health Preparedness in Haryana, India* by Rajeshwari and Gulshan Mehra presents that even economically developed states are rarely spared from the burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases and experience critical gaps in healthcare facilities. Anindita Datta in her article *Gender, Urban Spaces and Gendered Resistances: Towards Inclusive and Fear Free Cities in India* unravels new forms of regional and social inequalities in higher education despite fast expansion of higher education infrastructure and massification.

The chapter titled *Everyday Practices of Urban Poor to Access Water - Evidence from Delhi Slums* by Anindita Sarkar highlights lack of access to the basic amenities like water in cities as determined by geographical location and multiple social and economic identities. Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal in the chapter *Nature of Access to Higher Education in India: Emerging Pattern of Social and Spatial Inequalities in Educational Opportunities* highlights the fact that the unequal access of urban spaces to women in India is a cause of concern and calls for building the idea of gender equal and fear-free inclusive urban spaces.

The edited volume is a recommended read for the students and researchers interested in

a critical understanding of the habitat changes in diverse regions of India. The editors Mahabir and Rajeshwari have completed with commendable skills a difficult task of weaving themes so diverse and yet fully integrated into a volume of this kind. The coverage of the topics has included many sub-regions and themes worthy of exploration by geographers and other social scientists. The contributors have provided answers to several crucial questions relevant to contemporary as well as expected future processes of ruralisation and urbanization. In nutshell, the book is an excellent compendium of pertinent issues spanning over the entire spectrum of human geography. The felicitation volume in honour Prof. M. H. Qureshi has served its purpose in the chapters dedicated to different geographical streams and areas exploring the thematic purpose and with the help of first-hand data collected from the field in most cases.

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