

**Mohammad Talib. 2010, Writing Labour: Stone Quarry Workers in Delhi, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp 278. Rs. 725**

'Writing Labour' is an unusual ethnographic account of informal workers. The book testifies the 'labour of love' of a researcher, who waited for more than two decades to fine-tune his doctoral research on stone-quarry workers, completed in 1989. Though the initial research was done during 1983-87 the extended enquiries go up to 2008. Similar to this expansion of the time-frame, the author also widens the physical canvas of the work – from the initial study village, PulPehlad in the southern outskirts of Delhi, to various stone-quarrying sites of the Aravalli hill ranges in far-off Rajasthan. The author tries to capture the trans-situational and temporal continuities of working and living conditions of the stone-workers through thick ethnographical narratives and closely-woven and layered arguments.

The book starts with select quotes from 'The Rock' by T.S. Eliot, in which the author sets the tone of his work through a precursory discussion of the theme and profiling of four interviewees. The subsequent part of the book is broadly divided into six chapters that address and delve into the nuances and complexities of informal work. The first chapter, which focuses on the conditions of life of stone-quarry workers, situates the research issues in the contexts of policy and field-level settings. Besides discussing wages and working conditions the chapter provides a detailed account of the organization of stone-quarrying and the processes and relations involved in this work. After this detailed 'contextualization of the study', the next chapter examines the self-perceived images and expressions of the workers. Drawing upon extensive case studies, the perceptions and attitudes of workers are captured vis-a-vis a broad range of aspects – including self image, wage-work, authority, patronage, sufferings, poverty and inequality. Further to this, the chapter also discusses on the role of government and the efficacy of extant strategies for the benefit of labouring poor.

The third chapter, which the author captions as 'Stirrings in the stone' focuses on the collective protests and struggles of stone-quarry workers and informal sector labourers. This outlining of the history of workers' protests, apart from providing a succinct account of the evolution of collectivity, also discusses related multiple concerns – such as the cooperative movement among workers, the state's role, modes of protests, and interwoven notions of collectivity and caste. The next chapter presents the case profiles of four workers, who belong to different castes and source regions. With the aid of these case studies, it is argued that there is no 'pure' social category of free workers. Following this, the fifth chapter focuses on the institutional and informal sites of world-making by the workers with three case studies (of quarry workers' children's school; the workers temple; and informal sessions of sharing folk tales).

The final chapter provides field memories/insights and the focus here is on elaborating the conceptual framework and methodology of field work. Since it is based on personal experience, engagement and travails of the author with the subject matter of the research, the chapter offers rich insights into the possible methods and tools for interdisciplinary research on labour.

In the concluding notes, the author also explains his research for focusing on 'labour', sidelining the customary concept of 'class', which to him, by now overshadowed the scholarly debates and led to the serious neglect of the labouring poor and their specific issues. The methodology of the book is truly interdisciplinary, integrating the possibilities of a wide range of disciplines – anthropology, economics, sociology, history and literature in labour

studies. Along with an eclectic mix of social science tools, the author has taken pains to collate, translate or even write relevant prose and poetry related to stones and rocks, which are spaced appropriately to set the tone for subsequent discussions.

The book is a complex but comprehensive analytical account of informal sector work and workers, which is organized in long-winded but interesting discussions. Due to this uniqueness, the book demands repeated readings and re-readings to grasp its ever-expanding implications, implicit meanings and imaginings. This uniqueness itself elevates the book to the level of an essential reference book for researchers, policy-makers, activists and others who are interested in the work and lives of labouring poor. Though its intricate narrations and discussions make the book slightly puzzling, this inimitability itself gets it 'imprinted on rock' as a methodologically-innovative and qualitatively-rich research on the work and lives of informal labour.

**BABU P. REMESH**

Associate Professor

School of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Studies

Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi