



# punjab geographer

A JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF  
PUNJAB GEOGRAPHERS, INDIA

VOLUME 9

OCTOBER 2013



## BOOK REVIEW

Farmhouses: Bliss or Curse by **S. P. Kaushik**

Published by: **Nirmal Book Agency, Kurukshetra, 2012, Pages 260**

**(including 49 tables and 65 maps/diagrams/photographs), Price Rs. 995/-.**

Ever since the farmers living in villages on the fringe of Delhi Metropolis sold their farms and houses to the city rich and powerful, the term farmhouse has made a popular entry into the urban lexicon of India and carries a connotation distinct from the way it is used in the West. These are fabulous resorts serving as a residence or a retreat or a festivity venue for the wealthy and elite and their associates hailing from politics, bureaucracy and other domains. Quite often these are turned into commercial enterprises by renting them out for social functions, such as marriages, birthday parties and other celebrations. This is done under the garb of a statutory requirement which entails their use only for agriculture, thereby enjoying holiday from tax and subsidy on facilities like water and electricity.

By comparison, a typical farmhouse in the western world is in the nature of a second home or vacation home or summer cottage. It is a locale for personal leisure and hobby like gardening. Renting it out for merry making events on commercial lines is not on its agenda.

The morphology of Indian metropolises is indeed turning inside out. Rural periphery in their case is witnessing multifaceted developments. For one, there is spatial diffusion of grandiose spacious farmhouses along the scenic pathways radiating out from

the city into the countryside; on the other hand, there is proliferation of unauthorised construction and emergence of slum localities on low cost inferior pockets of rural land in proximity. The resultant landscape gets manifest in two bold land use zones which contrast in their demographics, socio-economic background and environmental setting.

Simultaneously, land developers and builders are also raising hundreds of multi-storeyed flats to cater to the housing hunger of the burgeoning urban middle class. Spectacular malls, modern hospitals, nursing homes, institutional areas and what not are also extending their tentacles on the land originally under crops. All variety of social groups and interests of urban society are thus competing for space on the city's periphery.

Here is a play together of the typical centrifugal forces operating as push factor from within the metropolis and of the centripetal forces acting as pull factor on its rural periphery. Involved herein is the prime factor of wide gap in price of land within and outside the city. The cityscape is assuming a new configuration. It is imperative now to revisit the morphology of Indian cities and come out with a fresh theory to capture their prevailing and emerging reality.

In that light, the book *Farmhouses* by S.P. Kaushik makes a timely arrival in the premises of Indian Urban Geography. Bliss or Curse? This is the subtitle of the book. One wonders if the answer to the proposition raised could be in such a white or black. Reality, in all likelihood, lies somewhere in a shade of grey.

We are informed that, as per official records, there are around 3400 farmhouses in the National Capital Territory of Delhi. These are distributed among 69 villages and cover 42 sq. kms. of area, accounting for about one-eighth of the rural territory. These all have been noted as the post-independence surfacing; more specifically the first farmhouse took shape in early 1960's. A gradual increase was recorded in their number till mid-eighties. The post-1985 phase, coinciding first with incipient opening, followed by relatively quick liberation of economy, is marked by a rapid rise in their numerical strength.

In the initial phase, farmhouses were in the mode of speculation in land by businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats, and retired defence personnel. Subsequently these acquired their present form. Considerations involved were the low price at which the land was available in villages, scenic beauty of the site, proximity to the existing residence of investors in this venture and ease of access. Concurrently the aggravating conditions of congestion and overcrowding in the city were making life ever cramped and stressful.

Based upon a stratified sample of 171 farmhouses, representing five percent of the total, the author carries out an in-depth analysis of their origin, evolution and location. The actual purpose for which these are used vis-a-vis the legally laid out one was also

investigated. Attributes these acquired over time and impact these made on the village of their implantation were also explored in detail.

It is brought out that over 60 percent of the farmhouses are concentrated along Meharulli-Gurgaon, Sultanpur-Mandi and Chhatarpur-Najafgarh roads in villages adjoining South Delhi. Nearly 30 per cent find their location along Rajokri-Bijwasan-Najafgarh and Nangloi-Najafgarh roads in villages located in Southwest Delhi. The remaining 10 per cent are concentrated in the countryside adjoining Northwest and Northeast Delhi. All in all, the predominance of farmhouses in closeness to the high class localities of South Delhi is not difficult to understand. A majority of farmhouses belong to families who are *bania* or *khatri* by caste.

Legal provisions require that farmhouses are used primarily for the purpose of agriculture, with the residence of the owner located within. The reality is startling. Nearly two-thirds of the land under farmhouses is grass carpeted as spacious lawns and only around one-fifth is devoted to agriculture for raising vegetables, fruits and some wheat and rice. About three percent of the land is under built structures, and the remaining around 15 per cent is covered by features like swimming pools, artificial canals, locally raised hills, tree clusters, and of course roads and paths.

Regulatory stipulations have been violated not only in terms of use of land but also in other diverse ways. Building Bye-Laws for Union Territory of Delhi 1983 forbid any subdivision of a farmhouse land into plots. This provision has been thrown to winds in several cases where a farmhouse has been carved into



large sized plots for sale in the market at exorbitant prices. At the same time, some farmhouses have encroached upon the adjoining commonland of the village. Most visible is the wall around the farmhouse. It is not expected to exceed four feet in height, a provision which has been adhered to by not even one per cent of farmhouses. Often walls have been raised in such a manner that the farmhouse looks like an impenetrable mansion.

In total effect, farmhouses have generated a scenario wherein wealthy urban elite and typical rural folk are placed in neighbourhood to each other but are separated by an invisible wall of no interaction amongst them. These are not linked to their immediate geography but with their dispersed urban sociology. Nonetheless their very presence has stirred materialism of high order among the ruralites. Land prices in the vicinity of farmhouses have skyrocketed over the years.

Being essentially a publication based upon a doctoral dissertation, the book offers a systematic account of its objective of study, conceptual framework, research design and literature survey. The entire exercise has been done with a lot of diligence, clarity of understanding and maturity of judgement. One wonders, of course, why the book was not rendered a form free from its original format of a thesis. The two do vary in their presentation style.

The book is to be commended for a number of its strong points. It is an exploration into one of the newly emerging edifice, farmhouse in this case, as an adjunct to the landscape of an Indian city. It provides an emulative methodology for pursuing research on other such features, such as malls and multiplexes. It presents the entire material in a direct, coherent and lucid literary diction. One great virtue of the book lies in the Foreword by Professor Surinder Aggarwal, the author's supervisor, who has woven its context and content into a delightful intellectual tapestry.

But then there is a caveat. Had the book convincingly debated its subtitle of the bliss or curse; had it shed its original complexion of a thesis; and had it portrayed the internal morphology of some sample farmhouses, beyond statistics; it would have greatly added to its existing value. Notwithstanding all this, the book is a must read for research students working in the field of urban geography. For a general reader it offers a lot which is informative and stimulating as a fresh learning.

**Professor (Emeritus) Gopal Krishan**  
**Panjab University Chandigarh and**  
**National Fellow, ICSSR, New Delhi.**  
**E-mail: gkrishan13@yahoo.com**