

Urban Spaces in Modern India

Narayani Gupta and Partho Datta Edited

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Among other disciplines, urban studies has adopted an interdisciplinary approach where scholars have benefited from the synergy of eclectic ideas blended in a concerted way. This book is an addition and a valuable contribution to the field of urban studies where academicians and practitioners from diverse backgrounds gathered (in a seminar in IAS Shimla, 2015) to gauge the impact of urbanism on contemporary Indian cities. The protean intellectual churning, as expected, resulted in a wide range of papers which prise open new debates on Indian cities and towns. The relevant themes which emerged from the presentations are grouped in four sections namely 'spaces carved out by the planners', 'people-generated spaces', 'reshaping city spaces' and 'representation of spaces'.

Sukanta Chaudhuri's keynote address at the conference features as the first essay titled as "Improbable Realities: Urban Spaces in India". It draws attention to the challenges countenanced by people inhabiting the towns and cities in a post independent nation where the "notions of urban growth and urban culture" are based on models that may be outdated in the West but remain "premature, if not radically inappropriate" when applied here. It sets the momentum for other papers in the section as it ends on a cautious note stating that one cannot "leapfrog" over the "basic challenges to embrace the urban models spawned by Western post-industrialism". Shweta Wagh's essay on "Resources, Livelihoods and Spatial Control" probes into one such concern incidentally laid out in the keynote address by locating it in the context of "urban commons" in Mumbai where the communities are resisting its appropriation and commodification in a neoliberal scenario. Hussain Indorewala's paper on "Housing and Dishousing in Mumbai" historically traces the discourse and policy on slums from nineteenth century till date. Snehanshu Mukherjee's article "Taking the City Back

from Planners to People" reiterates the need to focus on the subaltern roots of urban planning to counteract the maladies produced by the master plan. Pradipto Roy's essay "Locating Hospitals In and Out of City" brings forth the debate on epidemics, sanitary reforms and town planning in the context of medical institutions. This section of the book is largely devoted to the colonial and post colonial urban experience in the metropolis cities of Mumbai, Calcutta and Delhi.

The second section brings together four essays where the experience of denizens in the urban underbelly is reified in the informal or transitory spaces inhabited by them. Dipti Bapat's article on "Emerging from the Rags" discusses the trade practises of Waghris, a nomadic community from Gujarat practising the itinerant trade of exchanging old clothes for new utensils since five generations and Waddars from Maharashtra who exchange waste hair for new utensils. The frictional encounter between street vendors and permanent residents in a locality is a subject matter of this paper. Bhushan Arekar's "Heterotopia: Dalits, Citizenship and Urban Spaces" brings out the perennially festering and unresolved question of caste in the context of annual public gathering in Shivaji Park in Mumbai to commemorate the death anniversary of Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Pradeep Nayak's work on vending zone in Bhubaneshwar analyses the stiffly contested right to the city's public space for vending in opposition to the state government's attempt to showcase Bhubaneshwar as an "investment destination" under the fanfare of development paradigm. Devesh Vijay's article is an interesting ethnographic deviation in the section as it compares two slums in the peripheries of Delhi. The micro study of a jhuggi cluster Aradhaknagar and Dhantala opens the window to the cyclical experience of

migration, settlement and unsettlement occurring in the mundane lives of slum dwellers.

The third section in the book ties together sundry set of concerns. Malavika Kasturi's insightful foray to the inner world of Nath Yogis in Goraknath Math unearths the deeply enmeshed world of sacred and secular as evident from the litigation related to land disputes. The close connection of Mahants to the Sangh Parivar has augmented their political sway over the city of Gorakhpur. Garima Dhabai resurrects the long drawn debate on renaming places/spaces through her work on rechristening the Amani Shah Nallah to Dravyawati river. However, this time it is the unique story of claiming and reinscribing a languishing putrid creek which brings out the intersection between a variety of concerns revolving around bureaucratic policy, legal orders, popular narratives and politics of land and heritage in Jaipur. P Arun in "Surveilling Space: Punitive or Preventive?" uses the Lefebvrian lens of understanding everyday life through the produced social space. The case study of pervasive CCTV surveillance in Delhi Metro raises the irreconcilable concern over scrutinizing flaneur on the one hand and the invasion of privacy owing to technological innovations on the other. Rohit K. Gulati in his article "Transforming Urban Spaces for Citizens" restates the need to make the citizens, who are the eventual stakeholders become active co-producers in shaping the cities which are otherwise designed by architects, planners and engineers.

The last section in the book on the representation of spaces is quite stimulating as it weaves together more

compatible set of essays by Saba M Bashir, "Vignettes of the 'Urban' in Hindustani Cinema", Ella Datta's "Imagining the City in Modern and Contemporary Art" and Swathi Shivanand's well researched essay on "practices of governance" through Delhi's Urban Art Commission (hereafter DUAC). Bashir's piece depicts the struggles of a migrant to Mumbai (where he encounters issues of housing, unemployment etc.) through the empathetic canvas of Hindi Cinema. Ella Datta discusses the visual representation of city as illustrated in the Indian Art in the twentieth century. It fuses the despair, dereliction and hope of lived and imagined realities. Swathi's essay on DUAC strings together the dual responsibility of the institution in ensuring aesthetic order along with bringing about development of sorts in post colonial Delhi. It traces the historical four decade course charted by DUAC from 1974-2010 with specific mention to key moments related to urbanization such as Emergency (1977), Asian Games (1982) and Commonwealth games (2010).

The book is an interesting potpourri of varied experiences related to spaces in a city. One wishes that it had addressed the issue of modernity in contemporary urbanism so as to complicate the positivist notions embedded in coeval existence. Nonetheless this empirically rich work will whet the appetite of research scholars, social scientists, urban designers, conservationists, administrators and laymen alike. Some essays are illustrated with maps and photographs which enhance its appeal to the readers. It goes without saying that the book is indispensable for those interested or working on issues related to urbanism and urbanization in the Indian cities.