

Urban Aesthetics and Power

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Asher Ghertner, *Rule By Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2015, 272 pp. ISBN: 9780199385577

In Asher Ghertner's *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*, the question of aesthetics as a problematic category in contemporary city-making, and thereby the pertinent transformations in state processes, is explored step by step as evident in the chapterisation. The themes are: an outline of world-class city-making, the process of state gentrification and new methods of governance, the transformations in the idea and practice of nuisance, the ways in which aesthetics creates criminalized subjectivities, the effect of world-classing in the creation of belongingness, aesthetics as the normalisation and legitimation of the propertied as against the property-less (and thus the abject), and a comprehensive conclusion.

Ghertner's ethnographic study, besides being an incisive work on slum demolitions and their rationales, as this happens in India (urban Delhi), is probably the first anthropological analysis of this scope of the inextricable link between aesthetics and power. Further, it is not a mere description or examination of the role of law in all this, but rather a contextual ethnography of jurisprudence in the matter of urban aesthetics. Problematising the inert binaries of the oppressor and the oppressed, the work looks into how oppressions in effect operate as rule by consent. The propagation and discourse of urban aesthetics is clearly one of the best methods to interrogate the hegemony of mutually encompassing visions. Control, even when it produces gains for a few, does not operate through clear-cut binaries and oppositions but becomes a complex, embodied process, as eloquently argued in this work on Delhi.

The methodology of tapping a range of sites, from the vignettes of the Delhi Development Authority's initial exercises in the southern ridge to close encounters in Shiv Camp, from the unpacking of statistics, legal discourse, nuisance-talk and world class-ness, to the politics of

property, provides a gripping way of getting not just the expert but also the lay reader into the core issues without watering down the analysis.

Some of the motifs in Ghertner's work would have otherwise appeared as disparate entities with abstract, emotive or descriptive evaluations. Thus, statistics like the one produced by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), nuisance talks and the affairs of the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) are now connected and grounded in the larger assemblage of aesthetics and the everyday production of world class-ness. According to French Philosopher Roland Barthes, myths are depoliticized statements that are taken for granted. Ghertner says that statistical facts (facticity- the condition of being fact), like growth oriented numbers (and directives) generated by management consultancy firm McKinsey, work precisely like the Barthian, standalone self-justifying myths. He uses both his own analysis and that worked on by scholars like Utsa Patnaik in order to unpack the conjury of objectivity in facts and figures. By bringing up the performativity of nuisance talk through authorizations in institutions with symbolic capital, he makes nuisance less emotive (even though it does invoke powerful emotions) and more of a contextual, legal and political deployment. The RWAs are no more inert descriptions of groupings that just come into being. Rather, the whole Bhagidari process, with the networking of market agents, higher level bureaucrats and RWAs, takes things away from citizens. The process, he says, is Neil Brenner's 'New State Space' making, whereby governance, through urban interventions, are taken away from political societies on the ground.

Ghertner argues that world-class city logic and rule by aesthetics work through the bricolage of changing forms of governance, legal frames of reference, everyday talks/visions as well as the phenomenological experience of the whole habitus.

Earlier, the calculative apparatus of codes, official papers and maps had got tweaked by the political

societies of the post-colonial state to make space for the least privileged, like the *jhuggi*-dwellers. So the appropriation of identity cards or survey statistics, as well as documents gathered during a certain political climate (during the time of the V. P. Singh government, December 1989–November 1990) built up a rights' regime of documents. The change of this document-based regime to the contemporary governance regime based on certain forms of gaze is meticulously traced.

The change in the legal frames of reference is carefully followed by Ghertner: the 80s reference to constitutional provisions to prevent evictions by the Bombay Municipality, the 1980 Ratlam Municipality Council vs. Vardichan case that emphasised the responsibility of the system to provide clean and safe environments to all residents including the *jhuggi*-dweller, the early 2000s indirect targeting of slum dwellers (referring more to the 'waste' they generate, B. L. Wadhwa vs. Union of India), the direct reference to slums themselves as the problem by the latter half of 2000s, and the defining of the 'right to life' provisions in the constitution exclusively for private property owners.

We see the gaze of power gaining hegemony through everyday talks and entrenchment of visions. Jacques Ranciere's 'community of sense' becomes effective when, within urban world-class aesthetics, the popular commentary '*sarkar aa gayi*' (the government has come), referring to police and officials who come for slum demolition, becomes normalised for the select and the abject. It is within these normalities generated in the everyday that visual depictions of nuisance become technologies of jurisprudence. Ghertner makes adequately clear that law is in every respect a phenomenology of perception. The spontaneous recognition of a legal provision like nuisance happens only in the 'scheme of perception', à la Bourdieu. It is only in this scheme that dominant aesthetics is appropriated by *jhuggi*-dwellers.

Neo-liberalism is an extremely flexible technology that can get instituted and embedded in the most efficient of ways. Post-nineties, urban policies have reframed and reconfigured the state in total accordance with neo-liberal capital. In the post-eleventh Five Year Plan period, there has been an increased emphasis on the transition from central and state sector investments to the creation of environment and ambience that is attractive to investors. Ghertner's theorization of rule by aesthetics shows that neo-liberal order does not happen in abstract or linearly. The flexibility of the neo-liberal order can be gauged in the way earlier forms of claim-making get foreclosed. There is an efficient insertion of the vernacular materialities (land) into global circuits through gentrification. Ghertner brings out ethnographically specific instances where

highly localized abjections become political priorities. There is also the specific problematic of placing narrators who recognise personal injustices but at the same time incorporate a common aesthetics.

Finally, the work also offers the reader who might plan further investigations into similar terrains very interesting theoretical engagements, informed detours and diversions. From Foucauldian frames for the impact of governmental programmes to James Scott's (1998) contemplations on the preoccupations of power with the legibility of subjects, Ghertner asks what happens when records once made are no more relevant. What happens when what belonged and what did not, happened more by way of certain codes? He brings in the 'community of sense'-idea of Ranciere and analyses how sense of unbelongingness gets generated by the rule of aesthetics. Thus slums, with forms of records generated within preceding forms of developmental state, become irrelevant, and malls that violate 'plans' become legitimate forms of vision. The work shows how political societies theorised by Partha Chatterjee (2004) become defunct in urban Delhi's everyday. When elaborating on the vernacularised forms of building power through aversions and entrenched casteist attitudes (of purity and pollution), Dipesh Chakrabarty's (1992) idea of the process of abjection is brought in. The theorization of urban abjection in the contexts of world-class cities in the making is original. Bourdieu's 'scheme of perception' as well as its associated 'urgencies' become important coordinates to situate the global circulation and local imbrications of world-class-ness. Mariana Ververde (2012) becomes significant in the valuations of property (as propriety). There is a discussion of the works of Phil Hubbard (1998), Tim Hall (1998) and Choon Piew Paw (2009) on city 'imagineering' in different regional contexts. Asher Ghertner also brings in Terry Eagleton during the final discussion on aesthetic hegemony and the disembodied expressions of common good.

In *Rule by Aesthetics*, world-classness becomes a regime of order and contestation. The work moves from abstract categories to specific legal provisions but importantly, according to the author, neither the abstractions nor the specifics by themselves generate reasons for the regimes in the making. Rather, Ghertner takes the reader through the genealogies of nuisance laws, property based rights and aesthetics of world-classness to make an ethnographically pressing point about the contemporary Indian urban process as exemplified in the case of Delhi. The point he makes is that it is not enough to put the pen down on consumerist logic, middle class inclinations, global aesthetics and materialisations. What becomes significant is the process

whereby the protocols of the preceding developmental order get reconfigured and new codes of order – as law, bureaucracy, strategies of state – give formal hegemony to elite aspirations and globally networked aesthetics. The enquiry is lucid about the ways in which new aspirations and desires emerge and often inform visions in their dialectical relationship with legalities, orders and codes.

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