

## ***Book Review***

**Amita Baviskar.** *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi.* 2020, Sage and Yodapress.

Amita Baviskar's latest book titled **Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi** provides an in-depth analysis of exclusion of the Commons from the socio-economic and political spaces of inarguably India's most powerful city; Delhi. The book is divided into three sections with eight chapters encompassing book's themes. It starts with setting the context by explaining the reasons for titling the book as '*Uncivil City*'. Conceptualising Delhi as *Uncivil* expounds the City's changing spatial dynamics which the author has detailed by analysing City's social history by doing socio-historical analysis. She also reminisces her early-life experiences with the City; what the City was for the Commons in the past; how infrastructural development has excluded the Commons; what the City's formal politics and politicised environment is doing to the Commons and what does future entail for them.

The book's first section "**Remaking Landscapes and Lives**" includes three chapters in which the author articulates City's socio-cultural and economic spaces for the Commons with the City's urban planning and development agendas. The second section "**Contesting the Commons**" argues the ecological component of the book, explaining how and why the spaces of transportation which were once operable for public consumption are being over-regulated by the State. In addition, this section also highlights that the Commons are being deprived of the opportunities of economic survivability because of urban body polity's controlling of physical environment; the River and the Ridge. The last section, "**Conclusion and Coda**" talks the readers through the burgeoning capitalist intervention in the City and the uncertainties pertaining to the rampant climate change causing unforeseen contingencies for the Commons.

In the introductory note, the author calls the three C's, **Construction, Commerce and Cars** as monstrous. Construction of physical infrastructure is swelling government's partnerships with the private sector and the continuous commercialisation of public lands in South Delhi over the last one decade is the subject of political, discursive and media criticism. She also takes a critical position on the vertical development in the City which she propounds by exemplifying high-rise buildings packing multifarious businesses and people. This predilection towards vertical over horizontal development is risky for the ecological footprints as the City's water, energy, sewage and traffic will be under severity and depravity for the Commons. For the author, Commerce and Cars are not inherently evil but the ways these have been institutionalised at the disadvantage of certain social groups such as street vendors, *thelawala*, *sabziwala*, or shops selling fresh fruit juice and hot *jalebis*, or shops offering services for repairing pressure cooker or a puncture, depict exclusion of the poor. In an attempt to gentrify the city, many small-scale traders have

left or have been forced to leave their businesses because they cannot afford the rents of industries and markets which have expanded under the westernised notion of *Commerce and Trade*. This lack of discourse on ecology and justice while focusing on debates of metropolitan urbanisation, intellectualisation and modernisation is the major critique of the author and the importance of articulating this discourse in the policy domains is the central argument of the book.

In the first chapter, “**Making Plans and Lives**” Baviskar starts by taking a theoretical route and details about the process of state-making in Delhi. In addition to practicing functionalities of formal politics, urban planning and development is also considered a marker of what ruling government and hence the State is doing and performing. To Baviskar, whatever it entails to inflate urban development and planning in Delhi has created passive and voiceless subjects and world-class and highly technocratic places, in absolute subservience of the powerful; bourgeois environmentalists, politicians and urban elites. Delhi’s changing urban landscape is also indicative of coercive State apparatuses in the form of displacement of the Commons by encroachment operations. Baviskar is not only critical of this high-handedness of the powerful but also of the incessant urge and desires of City’s social groups for higher living standards. The powerful capitalises on these desires and institutionalises practices of development and displacement. Baviskar also brings in metamorphosis of the Commons from being passive subjects to being agentic and retaliatory. She illustrates it by highlighting spaces of friction and contestations between *basti*-dwellers (informal settlements) and policemen during encroachment operations.

Second chapter “**Sealing Factories and Fates**”, makes a point that despite the fact that 64 per cent of Delhi’s air pollution in 1993-94 came from motor vehicles and 12 per cent from industrial sources, the courts decided to close down factories in the public interest. Media, environmental activists and middle-class citizens co-opted with the courts and as a result thousands of industries were shut down. Resultantly, significant financial losses were incurred by the factory owners and thousands of poor workers also lost their only source of livelihood. Over the last two decades, Delhi’s industrial base has been confined in ghettos, a few of the industrial sites have been re-developed as commercial real estate and some locked in lawsuits. In chapter three “**Playing Games**”, Baviskar crystallises similar apathy of State intervention in 2010 in what she calls a *spectacular event*; the Commonwealth Games. In the pursuit of creating an extravagant imagery of India as a super-power country and Delhi as a ‘world-class’ city, Delhi’s sports infrastructure was decided to be refurbished in line with the standard of the Commonwealth Games. This refurbishment of city’s landscape included building four new air-conditioned stadiums, revamping eight existing ones, and creating a new Games Village Complex for the incoming 8,500 athletes and officials visiting Delhi for a period of two weeks of the Games. Baviskar questions about the rationality behind the political economy of such spectacular events while questioning, who is there to care for the Commons? The Commons need *circus* (constituting such events) but also livelihoods which these mega-projects disrobe.

In chapter titled “**Cows, Cars, and Cycle-rickshaws**” Baviskar dissects the role of bourgeoisie environmentalists in excluding the poorer sections of Delhi. Courts, traders’ associations, citizens’ groups and environmental activists co-opt to put in efforts to

compel State to regulate the mobility of cows, cars and cycle-rickshaws on the open spaces of the City's landscape. The author views such stringent regulatory frameworks as systematic and structural attempts of depriving the poor and an extension of economic liberalisation of the 1990s which resulted in displacement, despair, closing down of manufacturing firms and removal of squatter settlements. While critiquing State intervention, Baviskar also criticises the narrative of 'public interest' created by middle-classes which propels exclusion of the Commons from household livability, economic survivability, and occupational operability. The next two chapters titled **The River** and **The Ridge** further elaborate State and non-State intervention in regulating the spaces of Yamuna and Mangarbanī and the Delhi Ridge, becoming the reasons for enclosure of the Commons. Narrating modes of locomotion of the poor and the systematic over-regulation, Baviskar borrows from Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810):

دلی جو ایک شہر تھا عالم میں انتخاب  
 رہتے تھے منتخب ہی جہاں روزگار کے  
 اس کو فلک نے لوٹ کر ویران کر دیا  
 ہم رہنے والے ہیں اسی اجڑے دیار کے

There was a city, famed throughout the world/ Where dwelt the chosen spirits of the age/ Delhi its name, fairest among the fair/ Fate looted it and laid it desolate/ And to that ravaged city I belong.

The above excerpt not only captures the essence of the book but also of many experiential realities of the Commons residing across South Asian cities. In the book, Baviskar's literal, illustrative and metaphoric exactitude of Delhi's open spaces is palpable and her enduring association with *thelwala* and *sabziwala* enriches episodic accounts of urban poverty. Her reflexive positionality as a researcher and constructivist orientation as a philosopher facilitates in strengthening book's interpretivist stance. The use of sketches after every chapter gives a visual illustration of the textual accounts. The intersection of three constructs, i.e. Ecology, Equity and Commons, is explored in the broader geographical context of Delhi using qualitative research strategy and interviews, participant observation and textual deconstruction as research methods. Qualitative analysis of experiences of poverty is grounded on theoretical and pragmatic fronts. In one of her earlier writings, Baviskar writes at-length about difference between development which starts with a small 'd' and another with a capital 'D' with former connoting bottom-up approach and the later as the capitalist one. The pragmatic exposition of the difference between the two is very clear in the current book. The book, although critical of State and non-State intervention could have prescribed 'Alternative to Development' paradigm. The book's reticent stance towards taking a position in favour of this paradigm leaves even more discursive space for furthering research on this domain.

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