Unravelling Cities and Urban Spaces

ANUP TRIPATHI

This book is a riveting collection of essays on urban spaces in modern India. It brings together insights on urban spaces from different disciplines and covers a range of cities and towns in the country. The introduction presents an extensive survey of literature on urban history in India and serves as a gold mine of bibliography in this field of study, besides succinctly summarising the papers included in the volume. The book is divided into four sections. The first section has five essays on the spaces in Indian cities that have been created by the processes and practices of urban planning. The second section has four essays on the people-generated spaces in four different cities of India. The third section contains four essays on the changing nature of urban spaces and how they are being re-shaped. The final section consisting of three essays is about the representation of urban spaces.

Shaping the City

The first section considers various state initiatives and institutions providing what Jim Masselos (2007) calls “templates of urban patterning.” Sukanta Chaudhury’s essay, “Improbable Realities: Urban Spaces in India” points out that Indian notions of urban growth and urban culture are shaped by the urban models spawned by Western post-industrialism (p 21). They prove inadequate in tackling the overwhelming challenges of post-independence urban India. While analysing the Basic Development Plan (1966) of Kolkata, he questions the adequacy of importing models of city regeneration devised for Western cities. Shweta Wagh’s essay “Resources, Livelihoods and Spatial Control: Urban Nature and Practices of Commoning in the Neo-Liberal City,” presents a historical account of environmental discourses and spatial control in Mumbai. The twin aims of conserving nature and restricting urban growth allowed for commoning practices to flourish. The resultant “public city” provided the possibility of subsistence to the city’s working poor despite their exclusion from the formal economy. Post-liberalisation, the relationship of nature and commons is undergoing a drastic change in Mumbai as the land and nature are being increasingly commodified. In order to tackle these challenges, she suggests that urban social movements that safeguard the commoning practices may be crucial.

Hussain Indorewala’s essay, “Housing and Dishousing in Mumbai: A Historical Outline of Slum Discourse and Policy,” presents an interesting periodisation of public policy on housing in Mumbai beginning with the colonial period and identifying continuities and contrasts in the postcolonial period. The first phase called the Glasgow Phase between 1898 and 1933 is marked by improvement schemes and suburban expansion to decrease congestion and address the
housing crisis under the aegis of the Bombay City Improvement Trust (bcit) modelled on the Glasgow Improvement Trust. The Paris Phase of the 1950s and 1960s is marked by slum clearance and provision of public housing. The 1970s and 1980s known as the New York Phase witnessed slum improvement and upgrading. The role of the government in the provision of low-income housing was reconceived from a direct provider to a “facilitator” and “enabler” (p 68). The Singapore Phase of the 1990s saw the coming of the “enabling markets” strategy which reconceived housing as an economic good in place of a public good (pp 71–72). Policies, institutions and regulations were accordingly reformed to enable efficient functioning of the housing markets. The 2000s are termed as the Shanghai Phase in which the “Mumbai Make-over” aspiration captured the imagination of business leaders, the political leadership and city managers. Thus, the slum policy in the post-independence period has allied itself to market-friendly initiatives despite recognising the necessity of low-cost housing.

The idea of master planning in Indian cities is critiqued by Snehashu Mukherjee in his essay, “Taking the City Back from Planners to the People.” With special reference to Delhi, he notes that the cities in India are planned for those with money and there is no place for the poor to exist in a natural way (p 84). The planned post-independence city is mostly an extension of the colonial city. The first Master Plan for Delhi continued the plotted suburban development with segregated land-use zoning that soon became the urban development model across the country (pp 84–85). Lack of maintenance, proper design inputs and enforcement have made such type of planning moribund and redundant. He argues that we need to rethink Delhi not as a city but as a collection of towns. Such a federation of towns is easier to manage and facilitates problem-solving by giving inhabitants of these towns a say in the planning process. Thus, through such decentralisation and Gandhian alternative of development we need to “unplan” our cities. Pradip Roy gives a fascinating account of history of modern medicine in Kolkata and its subsequent urbanisation in the 19th century in his essay, “Locating Hospitals In and Out of the City.” He juxtaposes the history of town planning with the history of hospitals. He argues that setting up of hospitals like the Presidency General Hospital, the Calcutta Police Hospital, the Calcutta Medical College, the Campbell Hospital, etc, on the Western model set important precedents for colonial urban India. Further, hospitals are permeable social spaces where hybrid urban spaces are defined and redefined around every corner and season (p 114). Thus, modern institutions like hospitals served as nodes of urbanisation and acculturation in colonial Kolkata.

**When People Create Spaces**

This section delves on people-generated urban spaces highlighting their agency as well as vulnerability. Appropriating urban spaces through livelihood strategies and identity politics positions claims on the Right to the City. However, as Edward Glaeser (2012) puts it “The city may win, but too often its citizens seem to lose.” Dipti Bapat’s essay “Emerging from the ‘Rags’” investigates two community-based urban industries, namely the second-hand clothes trade practised by the Waghris (a nomadic community from Gujarat) and the waste-hair trade practised by the Waddars (a nomadic community from Maharashtra). She argues that their efforts stand muted in the urban planning processes and suffer from the continuation of stigmatising attitudes towards such de-notified communities (p 123). They are continuously striving to sustain their livelihoods in the face of official intolerance and an oppressive planning regime that renders them invisible. Bhushan Arekar grapples with the Foucauldian Heterotopia of...
the contingent spaces like Chaitiya Bhoomi and Shivaji Nagar where Mumbai city encounters caste. In the essay, “Heterotopia: Dalits, Citizenship and Urban Spaces,” he studies the resent-
ment of elite residents to the annual con-
gregation of Dalits on 6 December, the death anniversary of B R Ambedkar. He argues that such heterotopias display the cultural practice of unequal citizenship being played out in urban landscapes. Pradeep Nayak in his essay “Right to
City in Neoliberal Times,” examines the
setting up of vending zones in some ar-
eas of Bhubaneswar Municipal Corpora-
ton. It was an attempt to legalise vend-
ing, despite the state machinery’s neo-
liberal policies favouring middle classes and developers at the cost of the urban poor. Devesh Vijay’s essay “Struggling
for Space: Notes from a Slum on the Periphery of Delhi” is a “biography” of Aradhaknagar slum in Delhi. It presents the crisis points the slum went through over a period of five decades as well as its changing profile in this period. Lim-
ited prosperity in the settlement has facilitated social mobility for some of its residents. However, inequality contin-
ues to be deeply entrenched and is magni-
fied through lack of domestic space and struggles for common space.

How City Spaces Get Reshaped

Reshaping urban spaces is the most interesting section of the book as it con-
tains essays that investigate the role of
religion, imagined past, surveillance and building designs in reshaping urban spaces and imagery. Malavika Kasturi’s
historical account of Gorakhnath Math illustrates the key institutional role played by it in remapping the spatial contours of Gorakhpur. The ascetic order became a pivotal social and political actor in the life of the city. Her essay, “Negotiating the Sacred in Twentieth Century Gorakhpur,” discusses how, through the polit-
ics of kabza (illegal encroachment), the Gorakhnath Math expanded its investment portfolio to become an im-
portant stakeholder in urban planning in Gorakhpur. The math and the power of the mahant enmeshed in political
Hinduism determined the evolution of Gorakhpur town in new ways because of the close links of the math with the
politics of real estate in the city. Garima
Dhabai’s essay “Of a Lost River and a
Dirty Creek,” investigates the politics around land and heritage in Jaipur city where a small creek buried under urban debris has been resurrected as the Dravyavati river. This symbolic river is to be reproduced through scientific and
bureaucratic machinations. It is obvious that the nostalgia invoked by the city’s rapid urbanisation has troubling impli-
cations. P Arun’s essay, “Surveillance
Space: Punitive or Preventive?” investi-
gates the use of cctv cameras and sur-
veillance technology in Indian cities with special reference to Delhi. He con-
tends that the surveillance gaze is more punitive than preventive, while it plays on the anxieties and needs of the people meandering through the spaces of dem-
ocratic citizenship. Rohit Gulati high-
lights the importance of nodal spaces in the city in his photo essay, “Transforming Urban Spaces for Citizens.” He stresses on the need to make spaces like airports, shopping arcades, coffee shops, plazas, etc, safe and habitable for citi-
zens. In addition, he recognises the need to make such designs friendly for citizens with inputs not just from architects like him but also from engineers, writers, bureaucrats, historians, etc.

Representation of Spaces

This section delves on aesthetics and the city through the representation of urban spaces in Hindustani cinema, painting and the Delhi Urban Art Commission (DUAC). Saba Mahmood Bashir in her essay “Vignettes of the ‘Urban’ in Hindu-
stani Cinema” explores the “city” in Hindi films from the 1950s to the present day. She focuses on the problem of housing, labour alienation, lack of intimate spaces and overall struggle for space in the city as reflected in the urban experience pre-
sented in the movies. Ella Dutta presents the representation of city in modern Indian paintings, installations and new
media in her paper “Imaging the City in Modern and Contemporary Indian Art.” Indian artists through most of the 20th
century to the present-day have evoked the mystery, pain, angst, alienation of life in the city as well as the harsh,
unfriendly milieu and manic energy of the city. Swathi Shivanan’s essay “Aesthetics in the Time of Develop-
ment” investigates the practice of gov-
ernance through DUAC, the institution that struggled to infuse a modicum of aesthetics in the built form of the Delhi city. She highlights the difficult space for aesthetics as a practice of reflection within a regime of development. Despite its best intention, DUAC could not enforce the aesthetic regulations because of the developmentalist agendas.

Conclusions

According to Richard Sennett, the idea of a “city” connotes two different things—a physical space, and a mental-
ity compiled from perceptions, behav-
ious and beliefs (Sennett 2018). The essays in this book seem to criss-cross through these two meanings albeit in a fragmented way. Most of the essays in this book are based on rigorous empiri-
cal and historical work which make it a compelling volume for the students of urban history, architecture, public poli-
cy and urban studies. Although the book is about the urban spaces in modern In-
dia, a great variety of those are not cap-
tured by the essays in this edited vol-
ume. Despite having informative and well-researched essays on the nature and substance of urban spaces in mod-
ern India as well as their production and social reproduction, the reader wishes the book to have contained writings on insurgent city spaces, including home-
less settlements, spaces, of consumption, consisting also of recreational spaces, political spaces, religious festivals, gen-
dered and queer spaces, transportation nodes, and streets, etc, which cut across themes covered in this book.

Anup Tripathi (anupdu@gmail.com) is a
PhD scholar with the Tata Institute of Social
Sciences, Mumbai.

REFERENCES

Glaeser, Edward (2012): Triumph of the City,
Masselos, Jim (2007): The City in Action: Bombay
Struggles for Power, New Delhi: Oxford Univer-
sity Press.
Sennett, Richard (2018): Building and Dwelling,