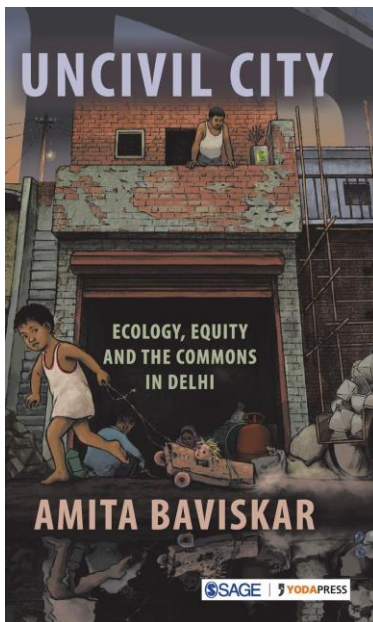


BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Delhi, When ecological Consciousness crosses paths with Bourgeois Imaginaries

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Amita Baviskar, *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi*, New Delhi: SAGE-Yoda Press, 2020, pp. xvi–243, ₹ 1195, ISBN: 978-93-5328-940-9 (Hardcover).



In the wake of the “urban turn”, the city-space is increasingly being imagined as mappable, griddable, and segregable, and is being territorialized into urban “enclaves”. Territorial techniques of urbanization, which Schiller and Çağlar (2018) call “city-making”, give rise to proprietorship and create imaginary border(land)s within the city. Such enclaves realign the geographies of the city, and in so doing, create an “enclavist” identity not only for those who imagine the city thus, but also for the commons in the city. Amita Baviskar’s *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi* addresses the politics and nuances of the privatization and commoditization of the urban commons in Delhi. “Places are made

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meaningful,” Baviskar insists, “by the memories they accumulate, as much as by the everyday practices that animate them” (p. 1). This book combines personal memories with rich ethnographic detail to shed light on a range of practices that strip Delhi off its urban commons and transform it into what Baviskar calls an “uncivil city”.

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 lays down the central *problématique*—how “selective and superficial framings of environmental issues derive from economic and political inequality” (p. 18). It uses different sites in Delhi—homes, workplaces, streets, the river, and the ridge—to illustrate how ecological consciousness emerges from disparate understandings of the environment across class and space. Chapter 2 discusses the conflicting nature of spatiality and issues of marginality in the context of Delhi’s transformation into a “planned city”. It demonstrates how the Master Plan, executed by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in 1962, has reoriented the coordinates of spatiality, sociality, and labour in the city. Chapter 3 deals with how bourgeois environmentalists played on the notion of “public interest” and, with the aid of appropriate judicial interventions, helped shut down factories and firms in Delhi; far from achieving environmental goals, this ended up further disenfranchising out-of-work industrial workers and other urban poor. This, Baviskar argues, “added epistemic violence to the structural violence of the Plan” (p. 19). Chapter 4 examines how, during the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, privatization of public wealth and resources was facilitated through the mobilization of an affective resonance—Baviskar calls this “the fragile facade of civil solidarity”—stemming from “anxieties about national honour and prestige” (p. 19). Chapters 5 and 6 look at how the discourse around certain non-human actors—cows, cycle-rickshaws, and the Yamuna River—play out in the context of Delhi’s intended ascendance towards being a “world-class” city. Chapter 7 considers the curious case of Delhi’s sacred grove, Mangar Bani, in the context of urban environmentalism, and how it has become a symbolic site for two sets of competing aspirations: that of urban developers and the public. Chapter 8 discusses alternative claims on Delhi’s ecology—the subaltern voices that are unheard, if not actively silenced—that run contrary to the bourgeois environmentalist discourse. Chapter 9 concludes with a discussion on how the bourgeois environmentalist discourse turns a blind eye to climate change and serenely evades the consequences of the crisis.

The book offers a welcome break from a chronological style of writing. Baviskar approaches Delhi’s shift from a “planned” city to a “world-class” city using certain compelling themes. The book is an easy read, but the narrative—spanning ecology, politics, history, and sociology—warrants

patience and provokes thought. Baviskar has a flair for discussing complex matters lucidly and supplementing them with anecdotes. Her writing is stimulating and engaging and forces the reader to think critically about the complex historical, political, and cultural dynamics of Delhi, the diverse meanings of which reflect and reproduce broader socio-spatial contestations in contemporary times. Indeed, these contestations yield different actors (and networks) with distinct dispositions and aspirations—and, more importantly, competing environmental concerns—many of which find their spatial outlet in Delhi. This book does a wonderful job of exploring Delhi-based lifeworlds that articulate new expressions of territoriality and novel possibilities for social stratification, based on a contingent understanding of nature, as well as the historical dynamics that generate them. In short, the contestations over Delhi’s meaning—as a literal and figurative “place” amid feuds over environmental and ensuing territorial claims—come across clearly in this book.

The most interesting aspect of the book is how it integrates two diverging paradigms, the ecology *in* and the ecology *of* the city—a contrast best illustrated in Pickett *et al.* (1997) and Grimm *et al.* (2000). It views Delhi’s urban ecological politics through the lens of an actor–network, as an integral part of a socioecological system beyond the biotic–abiotic binary. However, the book offers limited insight on the practicalities of urban commoning practices: collaborative and solidarity networks based on anti-capitalist principles of ecology and ethics. In other words, it has much to say on the ecology *in* and the ecology *of* the city, but very little on the ecology *for* the city, which may translate to “knowledge to action” (Childers *et al.* 2014). Baviskar “began writing these essays ... almost 20 years ago” (17). Indeed, all the chapters except for the Introduction and the Conclusion are reproductions of her previously published articles. Baviskar’s key finding that Delhi’s urban environmentalism is territorially governed and essentially elitist is by now a fairly well-established proposition. Many of her interlocutors cited in the book have already established this.

In this book, Baviskar’s notion of the “uncivil city” is squarely juxtaposed with the imagination of a “civil city” of yesteryear. However, the imagination of Delhi-from-the-past as an idyllic “civil city”, that “with a careless generosity, welcomed all—different species of living as well as different classes of people” (8–9), has not been historically substantiated. At best, such traditionalist nostalgia seems only to arouse an acute sense of loss. But Baviskar does acknowledge that “it’s easy to be nostalgic ... from the vantage point of a place of privilege” (p. 7). It is germane in this context to consider that Baviskar too recently changed her affiliation from the

publicly funded Delhi University to the privately managed Ashoka University, which, for me, contravenes the persuasiveness of some of the arguments she presents in the book. However, in a recent piece, she writes, “The public versus private distinction needs a lot more nuance, and waving it like a flag only distracts attention” (Baviskar 2021), although this nuance does not come through in the book. Here, the antagonism between the public and the private is way too stark.

Despite some concerns, this book does a reasonably good job of illustrating how urban ecological consciousness crosses paths with bourgeois imaginaries and renders Delhi an ambivalent site where territorialization and cultural differentiation are sanctioned, enacted, and contested. It should be of interest to scholars of urban ecology, sociology, history, and politics.

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