

Book Review

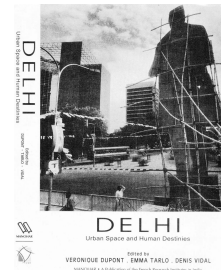
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Delhi: Urban Space and Human Destinies

Dupont, V, Tarlo, E & Vidal, D (Eds. 2000), Manohar Publishers & Distributors, ISBN 81-7304-366-3

This book, as the editors suggest, is concerned with challenging the conventional images of a capital city that ‘nobody loves’, offering alternative images of Delhi originating from less predictable perspectives, alternative social dynamics and from other less conventional life experiences. Delhi, it appears, does not evoke the same kind of zealous affection amongst its inhabitants that other metropolitan cities like Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta) command. A frequently discussed image of Delhi is one of fragmentation, characterised by urban, spatial and architectural ruptures resulting from historical, political and cultural discontinuity. The lack of politico-historical continuity had given rise to a much publicised and subscribed colonial idea that South Asia did not have a genuine historical, cultural and social continuity prior to the advent of the British. Independence in 1947 did not immediately remove the persistence of such a notion, not surprisingly though, if we were to draw parallels with the fate of many other colonial cultural constructs. However, increasingly in recent years, such a notion has been challenged, analysed and reversed, as a new historiography of Delhi and India has emerged, resulting in an altered sensibility towards and a new engagement with those very issues that were once considered trivial and mere disruptions.



Edward Said’s publication of *Orientalism* and the subsequent development of Post-modern sensibility have no-doubt influenced the debate over the construction of such new paradigms of thought. Following Said’s trail, the emergence of the field of Subaltern Studies has had an especial impact on academic work on India, in which leading institutions such as the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi played an important role. A quick review of the main trajectories of thought in this volume of fourteen essays, dealing with wide ranging topics from migration to architecture and from transport economics to politics will, I hope, illustrate this underlying yet unstated position. One focus of this volume is the understanding of urban dynamics through the perspective of conflict, violence and disruptive events and how such actions have reconfigured the nature and perception of Delhi. An interesting example of this is provided by Tarlo’s ethnographic study of a re-settlement colony of displaced squatters in East Delhi. There, she demonstrates how critical religio-political events, on both macro and micro level, have shaped the physical and demographic nature of the colony, much more than the planning initiatives which created these in the first place. These disruptive events and reactions towards such happenings on a micro scale have worked in tandem with (and against) government policies to (often adversely) shape, restructure and

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disfigure the physical plan, critically altering the demographic status and challenging the official version. Tarlo draws another crucial conclusion in her essay; this is to do with the perception of what constitutes history in this day and age when much of the earlier uncritically accepted historical wisdom is looking increasingly suspect. Her study highlights the crucial role of micro histories (life histories and experiences of the inhabitants, in this case) over meta-narratives in piecing together an account of a spatial evolution. Micro history provides a more complete understanding of the local dynamics by incorporating many voices, challenging the reductionist perspective common within conventional history, which is, in any case, often the voice of one person (i.e., the historian).

The third aspect concerns the crucial role played by the intermediaries, be it the various government bodies or the myriad of private agencies. Menon explores the role of the state in the development of the architectural and urban design professions and in brokering the development of the physical architecture in Delhi. He identifies several strands in this state intervention producing, with varying degrees of success/ failure, examples of soulless Modernism, revivalist façadism, or impoverished utilitarianism. It is only in the 1980's that some enlightened state policy finally allowed the professions to mature and become confident and reflexive about their actions. The essay, by Menon's own admission, is an initial attempt at understanding the nature of architecture in post-independence Delhi. Probably this is why it suffers from a certain meta-narrative tendency; providing an overview, it does tend to gloss over some potentially interesting discussion that could result from the analysis of more localised effect of state policies. Perhaps Menon intends to adhere to the modernist critique of 'contingency' and regards it as irrational! Soni's analysis deals with another category of intermediaries as she discusses the rural elite's role in brokering the gentrification of outer Delhi amidst a perpetuation of colonial laws. Focusing on the Mehrauli area of South Delhi, she maps the pattern of expansion supported by 'asymmetrical power relations between the expansionist urban elite (co-opting the emergent rural commercial class) and the subjugated hinterland'. Vidal's study of the grain market, Naya Bazaar, situated at the western edge of the old city, addresses the role of trading intermediaries within a commercial context that blurs the usual distinction between bazaars and markets

Despite some rich pieces of socio-economic investigation, one cannot help feeling somewhat lost in the organisational structure of the book. The categories are confusing and even questionable, at times and make one wonder about their intellectual underpinning. 'Part II' entitled 'People and goods on the move', appears to contain pieces which could have sat more comfortably within other categories, especially as they deal with aspects of actors, intermediaries and stage sets (places). The editors take much pain to describe the organisation of the collection in terms of its trajectory from the specific to the general. Unfortunately, many of the generalised essays, lapse into the predictable and the charted; while the associated photographs show a potential for a high degree of specificity in the analysis, the authors seem not to have circumvented that path. Specific studies of the visual and material culture appear somewhat underrepresented; the two general studies on architecture and conservation and one photographic essay, is all we have! Surely this angle of investigation would have provided more alternative life experiences.