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A Disaster Foretold

Aesthetics and ecological crises in Delhi

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Delhi's rapidly changing relationship with its ecology has privileged the middle class. The city's transformation into an inequitable and exclusive place increasingly makes it a harder place, an uncivil city, for the poor.

Delhi holds the unenviable position of being the most polluted capital city in the world today. We are also talking about the city, where the government has gone ahead with the Rs. 20,000-crore Central Vista Project in the middle of a pandemic, with 'environmental clearances' which should never have been given in the first place. Quite obviously, this did not happen overnight. There is a historical as well as socio-political reason for this predicament that reinforces the importance of studying urban ecology with far more urgency than ever before.

Uncivil City brings together essays from Amita Baviskar's two-decade-long engagement with the city of Delhi and its ecology. She revisits seven of her essays, each of which is a reflection on different 'events' and narrates a story of an unfolding ecological crisis. From the Yamuna Pushta demolitions, the Commonwealth Games, to the siege that Public Interest Litigations lay on the city and economy of Delhi, she strings together a narrative that throws light upon how Delhi has come to stare at an ecological crisis.

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Baviskar shows that these changes have not been slow and covert, but rather rapid and eventful, and often accompanied by drumrolls from the aspirational middle class of the city. Each of these events has had a life-altering impact on the life of Delhi's people, especially the poor. The essays collectively draw our attention to the changing relationship of the city to its ecology and its people in the backdrop of a city rapidly neoliberalising.

Bourgeois environmentalism

Ecology is a fairly new lens to look through at Indian cities, each of them staring at their dystopic futures. Activist groups had by the 1990s already begun to locate the presence of environmental problems like pollution and groundwater contamination on the urban poor of the city. Hazards Centre, founded in 1997, had been consistently working on this question until it had to shut down under unfortunate circumstances. The Sajha Manch and the Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch, coalitions of slum dwellers, trade unions and NGOs, had been actively working at the confluence of ecological concerns and the rights of the urban poor.

These groups not only critiqued Delhi's Master Plan — the periodic vision documents for the city's development — for its top-down approach, but also launched a sustained critique of the state for privileging energy-inefficient and ecologically unsustainable urban development programmes. They challenged the state for privileging the aspirations of the middle class at the cost of providing dignified living option for its poor. Baviskar's work draws its inspiration from these organisations, from the resistance that they throw up to the city itching to become 'world class'.

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Many of the concerns in *Uncivil City* are carried over from Baviskar's first work, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Published in 1995, this was a foundational work on Narmada Bachao Andolan. Refusing to cast the tribal community of the Narmada valley as 'noble savages', Baviskar showed the complexity of their worlds both entwined with nature as well as modern politics. The introduction to *Uncivil City* is a deeply personal note of her intellectual trajectory and her relationship to the city. Despite the starkly different milieu of Alirajpur in the Narmada valley and New Delhi, Baviskar's work continues to pry open the different relationships people have with ecology and how they are politically articulated, retaining her

investment in people’s movements.

Baviskar’s now-classic ‘[Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi](#)’ (first published in 2003; reprinted in this volume as ‘Making Plans and Places’), was one of the earliest works that brought the question of politics of ecology to the heart of urban politics. This foundational essay showed how environmentalism underwent a radical and discursive transformation to end up as a conservative force in the city. Baviskar introduced the idea of “bourgeois environmentalism,” a term which has now come to stand for the narrow, ‘not-in-my-backyard’, approach of the upper middle classes to the environment.

Bourgeois environmentalism privileges aesthetics and conflates poverty with ecological degradation, a view that has found increasing resonance in the courts. PIL after PIL espousing bourgeois environmentalist claims have led courts to order slum demolitions, shut down factories in the name of pollution, and compare rehabilitation of the evicted with “[rewarding a pickpocket](#).” But on the other hand, the construction of malls on ecologically sensitive areas and vehicular pollution have been met with a blind eye.

|| [Bourgeois environmentalism is oblivious to the concerns of social justice and ends up becoming a weapon in the hands of the rich to assault the poor.](#)

Bourgeois environmentalism stands all the more relevant when contrasted with Ramachandra Guha’s concept of the environmentalism of the poor (Guha 2000). Guha had made a case against a discourse emerging from the Global North that only advanced nation-states could afford to turn their attention to environmentalism. This Global North “environmentalism of the affluent” perspective looked at environmentalism from a preservationist point of view. Forests and wilderness were to be preserved from humans. Guha, taking the examples of Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Green Belt movement in Kenya, argued that the poor had indeed led rather vibrant movements to protect their ecologies. But rather than being narrowly conservationist, environmentalism of the poor was deeply rooted in the discourse of social justice. The fate of the rivers, forests, and mountains was deeply connected to the existence of the local communities.

Baviskar takes this argument away from tribal and village communities and locates it squarely in the urban space to show us how this environmentalism of the poor comes undone in the city. Bourgeois environmentalism is oblivious to the concerns of social justice and ends up becoming a weapon in the hands of the rich to assault the poor.

It is not a coincidence that bourgeois environmentalism gains ascendancy in post-liberalisation ‘New India’ — an India restless to become like the West. The noise around Mumbai becoming a Shanghai or Kolkata becoming a London pushed cities to invest in glitzy flyovers, malls, and signboards that cost millions but did not quite improve the quality of the life of its common people. New infrastructures like flyovers incentivised private car owners over environmentally friendly modes of transport like cycles, rickshaws and carts. Through the framing argument of bourgeois environmentalism, Baviskar brings our attention to how a neoliberal sensibility has overturned the entire discourse of environmentalism as social justice.

The city’s publics

While several scholars have turned their attention towards the city’s ecology, the one idea that makes Baviskar’s writings unique is her deep investment in the notion of the public. The co-creation of two different kinds of publics in Delhi has been at the centre of her work. One is that of the middle classes, driven by notions of civic propriety and aspirations of being citizens of a new modern nation. The other belonging to the increasingly marginalised urban poor, one that manages to reorganise its ‘public’ anew despite the consistent assault from the state and the market.

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In this progressive story of the urban commons breaking down to make way for privatised forms of civic spaces — gardens with entry tickets, malls, the Commonwealth Games Village or even the Akshardham temple —the essays in the volume show how these two publics interact with each other. She shows how the middle-class public constantly articulates itself as ‘concerned citizens’ through PILs and media-savvy awareness campaigns but fails to turn an inward eye into its own consumption patterns. The counter-publics of the urban poor, on the other hand, are created to collectively challenge their continued displacement and dispossession from urban commons.

In the essays titled ‘River’ and ‘Ridge’, Baviskar shows us how the Yamuna and the Mangarbani forest emerge as a space of conflict for both these publics. The riverbed and the forest, on one hand, led to the rise of new public spaces like metro stations and private condominiums; but on the other hand, continued to be a space for recreation and sacrality for the poor. New infrastructural projects emerge that value speed and privatised vehicles, but at the cost of a ‘public’ that depended on cycles and rickshaws. River cleaning projects along the Yamuna meant the demolition of working-class settlements along its banks. There is a constant and unequal conflict between these two publics. While courts appear as one of the most important arbiters of this conflict, they are by no stretch neutral. Delhi’s transformation into an inequitable and exclusive place increasingly makes it a harder place for the poorer to survive in, an *uncivil city*.

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But Baviskar also shows us that these two worlds are not watertight compartments. As the state puts its weight behind making Delhi ‘world class’, it is constantly plagued by the fear that Delhi’s citizens may never live up to the demands of ‘civic behaviour’ in a world-class city (p.88). The urban poor, despite being fully aware of their increasing marginalisation, are still hopeful that these transformations would yield them some good (p.90). Despite the law’s violence on the urban poor, Baviskar also shows how poor and the dispossessed seek recourse in law (p.175), and she speaks of organisations like Kalpavriksh (which Baviskar was a part of) that emerge from the middle class but refuse to get stunted in their narrow conceptions of bourgeois environmentalism (p.189).

Remaking the city

Since Baviskar’s pioneering work, the concern over ecology has only grown among scholars of urbanism, especially of Delhi. Awadhendra Sharan’s (2014) phenomenal book ties how ecology, with respect to congestion, pollution and diseases, has been at the heart of the urban governance of Delhi since colonial times. David Asher Ghertner’s (2015), which is deeply inspired by Baviskar’s work, locates a new urban aesthetic that comes to dominate the landscape of Delhi after the 2000s, but at the expense of both its environment as well as its poor. Slum demolitions in Delhi received significant attention from scholars who located this spate of violence of the state in its neoliberal turn (Batra and Mehra, 2008; Bhan and Menon-Sen, 2008). These works collectively show that while the state at no time could be called poor-friendly, the market-led state that we witness post liberalisation has unleashed a far more intensified assault on both the city’s ecology and its poor. They foretell the story that despite numerous court orders, civic clean-up drives, World Environment Day celebrations, and biodiversity parks, Delhi was always hurtling towards an ecological crisis that we see it in today.

In places, however, Baviskar’s revisions (or lack thereof) to her original essays feel somewhat forced. For instance, in ‘Making Plans and Places’, there are references to the controversy over the National Register for Citizens (NRC) and the fear of evictions that several migrant communities faced at that time. But Baviskar does not tie that up with bourgeois environmentalism that forms the backbone of the essay (p. 50).

In ‘River’, she continues to stick with the concept of ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ as in the original article. ‘Non-place’ refers to the universal aesthetic of supermodernity which renders airports, malls, highways looking uniform, with nothing to distinguish one from the other (Augé, 1995). Baviskar argues that the Yamuna riverfront begins as a ‘non-place’ devoid of “history, identity and social relations” for the most parts (p.146).

She describes how the Yamuna transforms into briefly a ‘place’, when it becomes susceptible to speculative land markets (p.162), before soon converting into a ‘non-place’ of a different kind: one that is spectacularly modern, a space of national prestige, “inhabited by non-people, illegible as either nature or culture” (p.166). The Yamuna is only a ‘place’ at specific ‘spots’, where it has religious and social significance, where it has a space in Delhi’s socio-cultural existence. One would have liked a deeper exploration of this concept of Yamuna as a ‘place’ and ‘non-place’. Does it mean that Delhi’s two publics have always had a weak relationship to its river? If that is indeed the case, then what does it mean for the larger riverine ecology of a city like Delhi?

Baviskar warns us of the dangers of falling into the trap of a ‘world class aesthetic’ that is both unsustainable and unfriendly to vast majority of its citizens.

These limitations aside, the book is an essential read for anyone interested in the city’s relationship with its environment and its diverse publics. It collectively frames the last decade through an ecological lens that bears ominous warnings to the state in which Delhi finds itself today. Baviskar warns us of the dangers of falling into the trap of a ‘world class aesthetic’ that is both unsustainable and unfriendly to vast majority of its citizens. But as the Central Vista Project comes up at the cost of Rs 20,000 crores, several old trees, and the long-loved public space of India Gate, it does not seem that we have learned much. Now that it is clear that the dominant modes of environmental protection have failed miserably, it is only urgent that we begin to rethink the very frames of environmentalism in our policies and popular conceptions.

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