

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth-Century Calcutta*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781009100113 (cloth); ISBN: 9781009109208 (ebook)

Streets in Motion narrates the story of twentieth-century Calcutta by reading together the production of space and the production of political culture at particular historical conjunctures in the making of the city—and it does so from the vantage point of the street. This is a street eye’s view of the city as it is produced, proliferates, and provides. In this telling of Calcutta’s story, we get to see how the craftsmen (and yes men) of the street—“agitators, rioters, commoners, raiders, hawkers, cops, and engineers” (p.254)—“create their own geographies; but they do not make it as they please: they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (slightly paraphrasing Marx). The circumstances here shift from colonial planning driven by a disgust for congestion, concern for public health particularly related to the spread of disease into spatially distant white enclaves, and the political desire for legibility, to the aspirational, oppositional, and consensual politics of the post-colonial state and its newly constituted citizens. The book leads us through the Harrison Road and Central Avenue Schemes of the Calcutta Improvement Trust in the early 1900s that effectively displaced thousands of working-class residents, primarily Muslims, and produced this part of the city as the stronghold of prosperous *Marwaris*. Thus we see how an urban planning project paved the way for class anxiety and communal tensions. These in turn produced urban space in Calcutta (further solidified in the post-partition years) as ghettoised. We then move across time and space—to the southern, marshy and forested frontiers of Calcutta transformed into privatised gardens and houses for middle-class Bengalis along with a lake and eventually industry. None of these developments (nor the Calcutta Improvement Trust that envisioned some of these developments) could hold up to the rush of refugee encroachment. The story unfolds with hawkers claiming space on the streets and in politics through trade unionism, mass action, patronage, and alliances. Their claiming of space is at times disrupted by the state and capital, but like a revanchist force retakes the city (at least in the period covered by the book). In that sense, it is a hopeful story that deftly alerts us to those very moments where it is not just capital, and not just the state, but the power of a street level politics that shapes urban environments.

Yet, the book also warns us against uncritically romanticising mass action, commoning, or encroachments by the poor. For the commons (such as the kinds in residents' welfare associations, or RWAs) can also be exclusionary. And while there can be "encroachment-as-class", such as the takeover of public and private property by refugees, there can also be "encroachment-as-community", which as the book shows displaced Muslims and Hinduised the commons in Calcutta.

Bandyopadhyay builds upon and challenges conventional Marxist understandings of the urban in several ways. Firstly, by showing streets *in motion* he deviates from Neil Smith's understanding of material infrastructure as the spatial immobilisation of productive capital, or David Harvey's conceptualisation of the spatial fix. Secondly, he complicates the hegemonic idea of seamless, ceaseless motion as emblematic of progress/development and instead defines motion as "a structural force in a mode of production" (p.17). Bandyopadhyay develops a dialectical understanding of motion as constitutive of and constituted by its apparent opposite—obstruction. While motion here stands for "the forces of the 'self-propelled movement of capital'" (p.14), obstruction is the "momentary, unstable, and creative" (p.16) action that interrupts, punctuates, and propels motion. Motion for Bandyopadhyay refers to a fetish that he seeks to demystify by deploying a materialist dialectical history from the streets of Calcutta. This dialectical approach frames the book's historical enquiry, posits motion as a socio-spatial process, and declares the author's politics by emphasising the agency of his interlocutors and the politics of knowledge production. The motion–obstruction dialectic thus traces the dynamics between planning and dwelling, between material space and lived space, between intended use and actual use—each as constitutive of the other. Thus as Bandyopadhyay writes, "the crowd is not simply the dialectical antithesis of the planner. It performs, in some instances, the groundwork for the plan" (p.6).

Motion has a speed and a direction—it has velocity. And with acceleration—from stillness to swiftness—obstruction and motion form part of the same continuum. Motion also needs an object that moves, a plane along which to move, a surface on which to move and where obstruction as friction becomes constituent of motion itself. To demonstrate how these mechanical and social processes unfold in the urban, the book sets up a triad—that of property, territory, and accumulation—and tracks the dynamics between these three vectors. Territory becomes property, property can be public or private, and as the author points out there is also the commons. Lefebvre used Marxist analysis to discuss the role that the urban property market plays in capital accumulation. In shifting between public and private, the accumulation of capital accompanies the

production of urban space. It is here that Bandyopadhyay makes yet another significant contribution to Marxist analyses of the urban process. Chapter 4, on “Frontier Urbanisation”, brings us to a new form of urbanisation called *jabardakhal*—“the forcible collective occupation of space by people ... a mass encroachment movement” (p.6, 159), in this case by refugees in the immediate aftermath of partition. Refugees and migrants transformed urban wastelands into properties with use and potential exchange value, yet the act of encroachment virtually removed these properties from the real estate market for more than four decades, thereby producing what Bandyopadhyay calls an “urbanization without accumulation” (p.26).

Apart from advancing Marxist theory on urbanisation and giving us a historically and geographically situated understanding of city making in the twentieth century, the book delights us through its details. We know from reading the book how street apparatuses and street life interact; we learn of the discovery of asphalt deposits in Bahrain that contributes to the standardisation of road construction methods in Calcutta; we see how the same bricks that were used in constructing neighbourhoods were also stored on rooftops to serve as weapons during a riot. There is also much to be said about accessing and creating the archive from the street: Bandyopadhyay combines ethnographic sensibilities with deft theory building and a skillful use of hitherto underexplored archives, namely those of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, the Calcutta Hawker Sangram Committee, and the daily notes of Calcutta police.

In this review, I would like to push further Bandyopadhyay’s use of the term “encroachment”. Encroachment refers to an intrusion, occupation, usurping of property that does not belong to the one encroaching. In that sense, why is the colonial and the post-colonial state’s attempts at urban planning, which displaced thousands, not viewed as encroachment? A street level politics is well positioned to categorise primitive accumulation as nothing other than encroachment-by-capital. What about the act of writing history itself—Bandyopadhyay shows by example how the hawkers union holds on tight to its right to write its own narrative, which the state and capital attempt to usurp into their own version. How then does his own attempt to tell their story enhance or encroach upon the hawker’s version?

There is another concern that I have especially since one sees that the book aimed to bring several different archives to life. However, while it tells us about how class, caste, and religious differences mark those who participate in the making of the street, there is a curious absence of women, *hijras*, or children—are they absent from the archive? Were they members of the unions,

did acts of child rearing occupy streets, and did *hijra deras* claim territory? Missing from this telling is the gendered ways in which the motion–obstruction dialectic built the street of twentieth-century Calcutta.

Nevertheless, *Streets in Motion* is an excellent treatise on the materialities of political culture and the accompanying spatial mobilisations. It will be read across disciplinary boundaries, by historians, geographers, anthropologists, and others interested in biographies of the city or its streets.

Anu Sabhlok

IISER Mohali

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research

anusabhlok@iisermohali.ac.in

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