

[Book Review] Entangled urbanism: slum, gated community, and shopping mall in Delhi and Gurgaon, by Sanjay Srivastava
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Book Review

Entangled Urbanism. Slum, gated community, and shopping mall in Delhi and Gurgaon.
By Sanjay Srivastava, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2015, xlv + 318 p.

Entangled Urbanism is about what makes a city, in the context of Delhi and its suburban developments. Beyond this minimal outline, how best to summarize the main themes of a book whose author has a taste for Prévert-style inventories while introducing the issues at stake? From the outset, the subtitle of the introduction –“Slums, Criminal Suburbs, Urban Bodies and 'Superb Housing Schemes' for People with 'Modern Outlook'” (p. xiii)– provides a sense of the author’s style and range of themes. The series of six questions, presented as “the key themes the book seeks to explore” (p. xxi) further illustrate this point and deserve to be quoted *in extenso*:

“How do the pleasures of the gated residential enclaves encompass the pain of the demolished slum locality? How do localized rituals of suburban life incorporate the symbolic procedures of the nation-state? What processes link contemporary manifestation of consumerism, the middle-classes and the urban poor? What kind of a city is produced by the relationship between 'illegal' settlements such as 'slums', the traffic in fake documents that seek to stave off slum-demolitions, and representatives of the 'legal' city such as Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs)? What can the increasing visibility of RWAs in the quotidian politics of the city tell us about new notions of citizenship and the emergent relationships between middle-classes, the state and the market? And, what is shared between new forms of urban religiosity, the desire for a ‘global’ city, and new consumer cultures?” (pp. xx-xxi)

The list of fieldwork sites explored by Srivastava for his book is accordingly impressive: “slum and resettlement colonies, government departments, offices of pyramid selling schemes, ‘urban villages’, shopping malls, living rooms of the middle and upper middle classes, gated communities, RWAs [residents welfare associations], religious theme parks, government offices, ‘international trade fairs’, ‘citizen-state cooperation’ workshops, and the Delhi state archives” (p. xxi). The author claims an anthropological approach, and proposes an ethnography of these different urban sites, based on participant observation and interviews with selected denizens in their various capacities and roles as residents, consumers, visitors, local leaders, office-bearers, managers, planners, architects...The discussions use this firsthand material, including biographies and long excerpts from the interviews; they are further supported by archival material, numerous references and quotations from other authors, in the Indian as well as in other contexts. This rich ethnographic material provides lively and fascinating accounts, and contributes to subtle analyses of transforming spaces and to larger sociological debates.

Srivastava wants, through such variegated fields of investigation, to underscore the idea that “the city is no whole entity” (p. 261), “but a series of interconnected spaces and processes” (p. xx), “a series of overlapping meanings produced at points of conjunction” (p. xxi) and consequently, is better understood through focussing on specific spaces, times and processes. Indeed, the main focus of *Entangled Urbanism*, as its title suggests, is on connections and interactions: “ties that bind the city” (p. xli); linkages between different realms ranging from the slums to gated communities; intertwined processes, events, and histories; relationships between the citizens, the state and the market; connections between spaces, including between spaces of living, praying and consumption.

The multiple themes and sites that the book seeks to explore are discussed across eleven chapters, organised in three parts. Broadly, the first part (chapters 1 to 3) explores the spaces of ‘informal’ Delhi – the so-called slums. The second part (chapters 4 to 7) focuses on gated spaces, barricaded neighbourhoods of Delhi as well as on gated communities in new townships developed in suburban Gurgaon. The third part (chapters 8 to 11) explores cultures and places of consumption, including, in addition to the expected shopping mall, a “Disneyfied” temple complex and a pyramidal marketing scheme that is popular among some sections of the poor population of Delhi. Although each chapter focuses on a specific urban site or realm (or on a couple of them), the author spares no effort to connect each chapter of the book, or the thematic section within chapters, to other ones through cross-referencing and analytical arguments.

As underlined above, *Entangled Urbanism* engages with a large range of issues. Some are indeed crucial ones and relevant to a large section of Delhi’s population, such as the means and strategies of the urban poor to secure a foothold in the city in the face of the threat of demolition (Chapters 2 and 3). The discussion about “the rise of middle-class ‘activism’ and its role in delineating realms of legality and illegality in the city” (p. xxii and Chapter 4) is another essential trend to understand contemporary urban transformation. The exploration of “subaltern consumerism” through the analysis of the “Revolution Forever” marketing scheme (Chapter 11) also provides an illuminating and original contribution. Other discussions touch upon more futile considerations, such as choosing the design for one’s kitchen and drawing room (Chapter 5), or choosing the right shopping mall to visit as “You don’t want to be seen at the wrong mall!” for the residents of up-end gated communities (p. 241 and Chapter 10).

The challenge is to connect eclectic themes together, and to find significance to even the anecdotal and the futile. The author skilfully juggles with times, spaces and issues. The reader is admiring but might at times be lost in this exploration of the city, especially if one is not already familiar with the context of Delhi. For Srivastava further supports the significance of “fragmentary analysis” (p. 261, quoting Chatterjee 1993) for understanding the experiences of contemporary urban life and transforming spaces, and does not “strive to join the fragments” “out of which ‘modern times’ (and spaces) are experienced” (p. 261).

Reference

Chatterjee, P. (1993), *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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