

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355131690>

Review of "Outcaste Bombay" by Juned Shaikh

Article · October 2021

CITATIONS

0

READS

11

1 author:



Amitrajeet A. Batabyal

Rochester Institute of Technology

632 PUBLICATIONS 3,904 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Regional economic growth and development [View project](#)



Research on the Economics of Marriage with particular reference to arranged marriages [View project](#)

Review of

Shaikh, Juned, 2021. *Outcaste Bombay: City Making and the Politics of the Poor*. Orient Blackswan Private Limited, Hyderabad, India. Rupees 995.00, Hb, 227pp, ISBN 978-93-5442-040-5

by

Amitrajeet A. Batabyal¹

1

Department of Economics, Rochester Institute of Technology, 92 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, NY 14623-5604, USA. E-mail: aabgsh@rit.edu

This book is about the city of Bombay (now Mumbai). Bombay is one of the largest cities in the world in terms of population, it is the capital of Maharashtra state, and it is the commercial capital of India. The book builds on existing studies about the working class of Bombay by pointing to the importance of the notion of *caste* in explaining how the city has evolved over time. Specifically, the argument made by the author is that “caste not only influenced the built form of the city, including provisions for workers’ housing, but also underlay its industrial economy” (p. 4).

Caste is a significant feature of social hierarchy in India and it specifically refers to the fourfold division of rank (or *varna*) in society. *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), and *Vaishyas* (traders and businesspersons), in that order, occupy the top three ranks. *Shudras* (peasants and artisans) occupy the fourth or lowest formal rank. The so-called untouchables or *Dalits* are outside the *varna* scheme and these people are literally at the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy. Comprehending this classificatory scheme is necessary because the author evaluates the production of urban space and urbanity more generally from the perspective of Bombay’s Dalits and its urban poor. In what follows, rather than provide a tedious chapter-by-chapter review, I shall sample selectively from the book’s contents. This ought to provide the reader with an adequate flavor for the intellectual contributions of the book.

The author begins the proceedings by pointing out that in both pre-independence (before 1947) and in post-independence Bombay, capitalism and caste shared a symbiotic relationship with each other. As industrial capitalism

progressively attached itself to caste and made it a part of its metabolic system, caste became sinister in the sense that even though it affected virtually all aspects of city life, it was insulated in what the author calls “the garb of modernity” (p. 5). In addition to understanding the evolving relationship between capitalism and caste, we learn that in order to comprehend the built environment in Bombay, we also need to recognize how the notion of class has impacted and been impacted by the twin concepts of capitalism and caste.

Caste and class together shaped the prospects of Dalits in the housing market in both colonial and in post-colonial times. The author does a good job of pointing out that even in tenements built for the poor, “caste was acknowledged and tenements [were] allotted by caste” (p. 20). Municipal officials often suggested that the problem of overcrowding in slums could be ameliorated by geographically expanding Bombay. Even so, the power of caste in constraining the housing choices of the Dalits remained. As the author puts it, “[t]he spatial solution did not eliminate slums” (p. 30). Bombay’s booming industrial and commercial economy in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries required housing for large numbers of low-wage workers. These workers were housed in slums. In contrast, upper caste individuals were able to create their own cooperative housing societies, away from Dalit slums, because caste was used by city administrators and private developers to allocate the necessary land. In this way, “housing and the built environment became the material referent for caste in the city” (p. 45).

Discussing the rise of socialism in Bombay in the 1920-1950 period, the

author chides the early champions of socialism for not comprehending the extent to which caste was entrenched in public thinking and hence would be impervious to change when confronted with the seemingly positive promise of socialistic thinking. As such, even though it is counterintuitive, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that as socialism was translated into Marathi (the regional language), it encountered caste and in “the voice of the socialist upbraided non-Brahmins for letting loose a reign of terror on Brahmins” (p. 58).

Readers will be interested to learn that urban planning was used in the 1945-1971 period to respond to the plight of Bombay’s urban poor. However, two points about this use are worth emphasizing. First, primarily technocrats and bureaucrats championed urban planning because they thought “it could be largely insulated from the politics of the city’s poor...” (p. 87). However, this kind of urban planning yielded few positive benefits. This is because Dalits and the urban poor were not the ideal subjects of urban planning. In particular, they did not meekly accept eviction followed by the demolition of their slums. Instead, these individuals responded by mobilizing in space, using the legal apparatus of the state to challenge evictions. Second, the urban planning utilized was top-down. Because its champions thought of the planning exercise as a scientific one, they paid no overt attention to caste even though caste stratification was all around them. As a result, the urban “plans utilized and exacerbated caste stratification in the city” (p. 98).

How have the interactions between the trinity of caste, class, and capitalism influenced how Bombay has turned out in the 1970s and beyond?

The author answers this question by concentrating on what he calls the “three transitions” (p. 115) that the city has experienced. The first is the horizontal spatial change from Bombay to Greater Bombay that accelerated the process of suburbanization. Second, the focus of planning changed in the sense that city planning changed to regional planning with the creation of Bombay’s *doppelganger* New Bombay. Finally, at the level of the city, the regional, and the national governments, attitudes toward slums changed. What this means is that instead of thinking of slum clearance as a solution, as was done during much of the 1950s, city and regional planners increasingly looked at slum rehabilitation as a desirable solution to the problem of how to house the city’s large population of Dalits and the urban poor. These three transitions had a salubrious impact on Dalit literature. We learn that “Dalit literature thrived in the context of the production of urban space and the everyday lives of Dalits in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s” (p. 116).

In conclusion, this book makes a compelling case for taking non-economic factors such as caste into account when attempting to address economic inequality specifically and city and regional problems more generally in non-Western nations. Policies that simply demolish existing slums while promising to build new housing are likely to fail. Why? Because such policies are dynamically inconsistent and because they address some of the symptoms associated with a problem and not the underlying problem that has everything to do with the impoverishment, unfairness, and hopelessness with which Bombay’s Dalits and urban poor lead their lives. This book would have profited

from some discussion of two points. First, how has migration into Bombay by low-wage workers from India's northern states (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) affected the outcastes (Dalits and the urban poor) studied in this book? Second, what role has officially sanctioned affirmative action played in improving the lives of these same outcastes? That said, I recommend this book to all readers who would like to see how an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on hard to find English and Marathi language sources can shed valuable light on urgent city and regional problems in Bombay in particular and in the cities of the world's developing nations more generally.