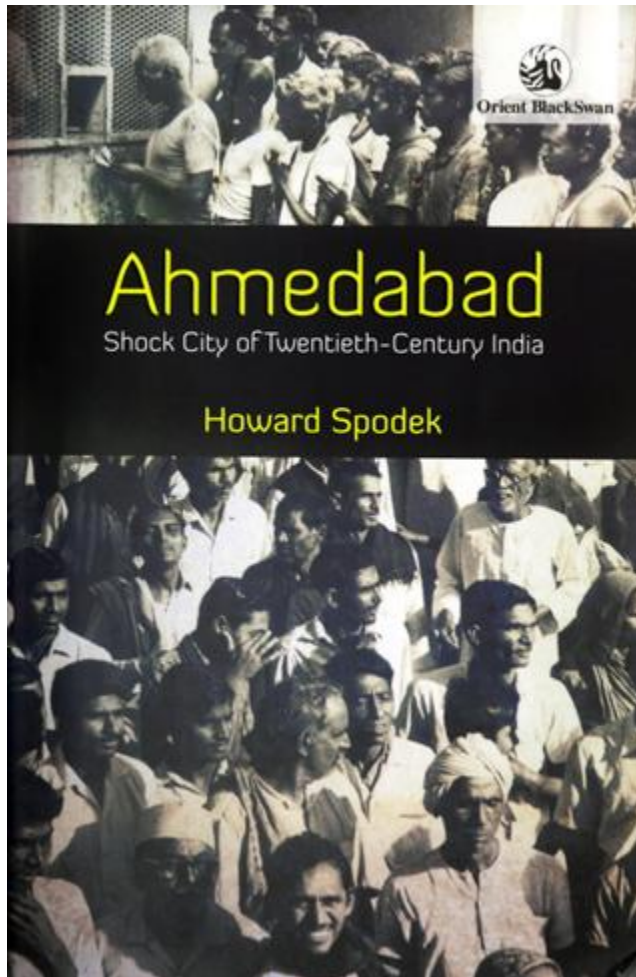


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## Ahmedabad: tales of one city

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[Special Arrangement](#) AHMEDABAD — Shock City of Twentieth-Century India: Howard Spodek; Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 795.

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*Howard Spodek writes of the city that was in the forefront of almost every change that overtook India*

A shock city, the author tells us, is at the cutting edge of industrialisation, a cauldron of bubbling issues, sometimes contained, sometimes spilling over. If one had thought of Ahmedabad as a city where nothing much ever really happened (as one well might have in 1965 — just one department store, only one restaurant!), this book proves one terribly wrong. Here is a city at the forefront of almost every change that overtook the nation, that gave Manchester stiff competition, was the home of outstanding freedom fighters, housed some of the country's premier institutes. Yet it has not figured in the national imagination except, unfortunately, in 2002.

Spodek's tracing of the trajectory from Gandhi's day to our own enables the reader to stand back and view the effects produced by industrial change in Ahmedabad. Civic collaboration and benign capitalism, communal and caste riots, unscrupulous power grabbing, the overthrow of government by the citizens (leading, Spodek believes, to the imposition of Emergency nationwide), opportunities offered by globalisation, the ruthless pursuit of economic ends in a communally charged atmosphere today — Ahmedabad has had it all. Industrialisation came earlier than in other Indian cities with the production of mill cloth in the late 19th century. Among leading industrialists, Kasturbhai Lalbhai at one end of an arc and Dhirubhai Ambani at the other end, underscore what has changed; the lot of the poor excluded in a tale of growth points to what has not changed.

The study of the city is divided into three sections. The first deals with what he calls the Gandhian era; the second shows wealthy industrialists in the process of 'westernising' the city; and the third, stretching from 1969 to the present discusses communal and caste riots and political power practised by leaders entirely different from those who had preceded them, and is rounded off with remarks on the rise of Hindutva forces. One closes the book with an awareness of how charismatic leadership contains forces rumbling below, which in the flash of an eye, can splinter into clashing caste and religious groups.

### **Harmony**

Essentially a textile city to which large numbers of people from the surrounding rural areas had migrated, it was, from 1915 to 1947, Gandhi's city. The textile workers lived in appalling conditions; and, from his ashram by the Sabarmati, Gandhi persuaded wealthy business men that his concern for the poor would ultimately help their business. He set up the TLA (Textile Labour Association), a union that worked through negotiation and arbitration, not violent protest.

Vallabhbhai Patel, another figure strides the scene like a colossus, elected again and again to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. Indulal Yagnik flits across the scene, idealistic dreamer, dissenting, mobilising, fighting for a separate state of Gujarat even if it means renouncing Bombay. It was a time of harmony on the whole.

The second section gives us sketches of leading industrialists, the sethias who, besides amassing wealth, not only supported the freedom movement but assumed civic responsibilities. Gandhi made them see that their own wealth depended on the well being of their workers. This is a unique point of difference from the periods that have followed and clearly derives from Gandhi's concept of trusteeship. One minor factual error here — Gitaben, Ambalal Sarabhai's daughter, did not found the BM Institute of Mental Health; that was founded by Kamaliniben, the wife of Gautam Sarabhai.

Spodek is clearly impressed by the institutions set up by these families, especially the Lalbhais and Sarabhais, as indeed anyone looking at the Indian Institute of Management, or the National Institute of Design, or the Physical Research Laboratory, or the Ahmedabad Textile Research Institute, or the Calico Museum, is bound to be.

The final third section deals with the shocks of changing times. Politicians are now of a different hue. Chimanbhai Patel, a college lecturer, rises to be Chief Minister with full control over all the colleges in the Congress-ruled state. His government stirs the middle class (students, faculty, housewives) to revolt in the Nav Nirman Movement, brings down the government, and sets off ripples in Delhi.

## **Riots**

The textile mills have all closed down or are 'sick' and in the arms of the Bureau of Financial Reconstruction. Huge numbers of mill workers are unemployed. The peaceable approach nurtured in the TLA by Gandhi goes against the workers when the industry collapses. Power looms take over, government policies encourage small scale enterprise, the demand for mill manufactured cotton declines, millions of mill workers lose their jobs and the TLA is unable to get them adequate compensation.

Riots erupt in the 1980s, and again in the 1990s, and then in 2002. Madhavsinh Solanki's coalition KHAM (Kshatryias, Harijans, Adivasis, Muslims) fizzled out, caste riots after Mandal turn into communal riots, Gujarat becomes the laboratory for Hindutva, and the tinder box is set ablaze in 2002.

Sopdek's account of the 2002 riots is too familiar, and a sense of the secondhand pervades these last pages. Little wonder that, despite several long visits to the city since he first arrived as a Fullbright scholar in 1964, Spodek finds it changed almost beyond recognition. The city has expanded in all directions; the population has burgeoned and the traffic competes with that of Bangalore.

His book takes account of the track from the city's extraordinary past to its volatile present, and does it well. But one gets a sense of something left out — the toiling masses of spinners and throstlers and weavers left without work in the mills; the malnourished children; the huts on the river bed before the Sabarmati borrowed water from the Narmada. There must be stories there too as well as in the Cali-dome and the National Institute of Design. The shocks and energy come from that layer.

But that is another tale. Meanwhile this is a story well told, a lucid and readable book about an interesting and complex city.

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