Review Article

The (Un) governable City: Productive Failure in the Making of Colonial Delhi, 1858-1911 by Raghav Kishore

Reviewed by
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Delhi has always been a crucible of political disquiet, and the seat of manifold state and aesthetic desires to order, control and design the city. Even at this moment, we find ourselves before a ubiquitous impulse to change the appearance of the city through the Central Vista Project which proposes to cater to needs of increase in government office space. There are layers to the city and obvious enough, it is not monolithic. The vestiges and architectural remnants of subsequent ages narrate the relentless saga of power, domination and settlement. A historical analysis of the spatial structures reflects the reasons behind its physical organization. To talk about colonial designs within this very broad spectrum is but, only a brief moment in a longue duree of human settlement in this region. Yet, it is necessary to understand the spatial synchrony, for much of it is what we have inherited today and this is what shapes our experiences of this city even at present. Raghav Kishore's *The (Un)governable City* (2020), makes an intervention in this corpus of historical analysis with his impeccable research and endless forays into the archives. This is a welcome addition to studies in the field of urban development of Delhi, with Pilar Maria Guerrieri's *Maps of Delhi* (2017) being one precursor, which painstakingly curates maps of Delhi from the precolonial times, to the modern municipal Master Plans to contemporary digital mappings. Kishore unearths curious details from local sources and twines those with debates among colonial policy makers and personnel to highlight issues of political ideology, statecraft and governmentality. This volume juxtaposes notions of policing, control and accessibility with debates and discussions on sanitation, traffic, communication, railways and the building of military cantonments, which are significant if we think of the British rule in India as a garrison state, heavily dependent on the easy mobility of its military forces. The success of the control was conditional on the ability to gather up huge military forces to curb parallel sporadic outbursts at their very onset. The broadening of roads, regulation of quarters and delimiting encroachments and concerns over connectivity, were carefully thought out strategisations towards the goal of containment and territorialisation.

Interestingly, the volume begins with a chapter on acquisition of property from resisting natives, immediately after the revolt of 1857. This is, in a way, reminiscent of the rebellion of 1641 in Ireland, the confiscation of estates and property of rebellious Irish families and the English

project of Down Survey that ensued soon after. It was reason enough to identify lands belonging to dissenting families and to accommodate them within the map of Britain as British territory. In a similar move, parts of Delhi in the erstwhile capital of the Mughal Sultanate were cleared and made subservient to the North Western Province of Punjab. A fundamental difference between the restructuring of Delhi after 1857 and the establishment of colonial Calcutta is that the palatial arcade of the port city came up as a direct counterfoil to the native quarters with clear cut demarcation from the 'black town'. Like the Delhi of the period under discussion, however, the Fort William and the adjacent township too, were built in response to the challenges posed by the Battle of Plassey and thereafter, annexation of Bengal, a century ago. The revamping of Delhi, on the other hand, primarily followed the existing layout of the erstwhile residential quarters and bazaars and *mandis* (grocery market). The purpose was to make the city more manageable and amenable to a centralised governance. It was further sanitized and regimented for the sake of security and opened up for military establishment. In unearthing the cultural aesthetics behind the architectural development of the city, the book addresses colonial anxieties and tensions behind modern urbanization of the place. The plans for clearings, roadways, landscaping and architecture delineate its history of phased and gradual gentrification. The long deliberations on municipal plans and policies of broadening of narrow streets and passageways, regulating the encroachments and projecting *chabutras*, cleaning of drains, constructing surface drainage, sanitation and sewerage, make for one of the most riveting parts in the book. The recognition of religious street processions as potential threats to colonial order and procedural attempts to manage such processions is another aspect which is analysed in great length. In underscoring the communal aspect of the state measures, Kishore further underscores the complexity of colonial advocacy in this region.

Discourses on diseases, mechanisms to minimize crowding, designs to maintain social distance and disciplining the subjects, strangely resonate with recent concerns to fight the pandemic outbreak. The discussion on steps taken towards inclusion of open spaces unfolds another debate. It is heavily influenced by the Mughal-Persianate *chahar baagh*, yet a departure from it. Most European colonial cities usually accommodated ornamental open public spaces at the center of the city-space, often begetting a cognitive expression like the 'heart of the city' or 'the lung of the city'. One could argue that this is a direct fall-out of industrial revolution and a romantic attempt to integrate nature within over-crowded factory ridden urban spaces. Srangely, the very same considerations of spatial significance inform our own ideas of the requirement of such open spaces or existence of 'commons' in contemporary life. The citizens' protest movement against the Central Vista Project also have their origins in those same ideas to some extent. These spaces, in colonial cities, however, were strictly not allowed to deteriorate into waste or wilderness and entailed regular tending and manicuring of its ornate plantations. They signified harmonious aligning of the virtues of countryside with the inherent horrors of the industrial centers, or in many cases, the chaotic local plebian town. In Calcutta, the 'Garher maath' (translated the field of the fort, namely Fort William), or simply, the maidaan, came up as a functional space for the British for their regular evening pleasure promenades. The practice gained traction as the opinions on its health benefits surfaced and circulated: that of inhaling pure cool air could be a respite or antidote to the putrid tropical heat and its resultent pathologies. In the Subcontinent, and especially in Delhi, the colonial designs of integration of gardens and parks followed on the footsteps of the

Mughal royal gardens, which, however, belonged to the royalty and were inaccessible to general public, but the gardeners and caretakers had rights on the produce from the royal orchards. This arrangement was altered considerably through arboriculture and flora transfers as new plant genus were introduced in landscaping the city altering its environmental ecology. Similarly, the fashioning of the banks and the *bela* lands of the Yamuna, the cultivation of farm lands and the cattle rearing also unite divergent discussions about environment and utility.

The question that arises is that whether the colonial reorganization of the city, prior to its status as an imperial capital, could be linked to the growth and development of urban centers in the colonial presidencies or elsewhere in India. Partho Datta's *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta c. 1800 – c. 1940* (2012), Amar Farooqui's *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (2006) and Prashant Kidambi's *The Making of An Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay* (1890 – 1920) and Rosie Llewellyn Jones' *A Fatal Friendship, the Nawabs, the British and the City of Lucknow* (1985), have made their impact in the area of historical Urban Studies. In fact, a precursor to all these works was Thomas R. Metcalfe's *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and the Raj* (1989) which exposed the Foucauldian relationship between architecture and power at the heart of the foundation of the modern colonial metropolis. Metcalfe's book came out on the heels of yet another important book in the same area, which linked British colonial architecture in India to the imperial pursuit of judiciousness: Philip Davies' *Splendours of the Raj* (1985). What all these works have done over the years, is to attach importance to the study of public works and urban engineering and investigated the idea of the city as a physical representation of ideological reasoning behind colonial modernity. Where Metcalfe talks of the imposing and majestic style of colonial buildings, Yi-Fu Tuan, in his seminal work, *Topophilia* (1974), talks of how cities owe their morphology to the convenience of the survey grid and to the economics of growth along lines of transportation. Ravi Ahuja's *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, Public Works and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c. 1780-1914)* (2009) also explores how the suburbs and mofussils were brought within a network, connecting the urban centers to the countryside in response to a steadily expanding capitalist regime dependent on spatio-temporal compression. Whereas commercial centers arose in response to the requirements of a market economy, political centers were triggered primarily in response to the tendencies of the political ideology of a centralized administration. As Tuan suggests, the city itself can be compared to a monument or a memorial. Its physical layout, its geometry and hierarchical ordering are a reflection of an ideal, fashioned on notions of behavioral practices: of what should and should not be encouraged. Kishore shows how the formal structuring of the city of Delhi marks a shift from its earlier plebian appearance to a patrician arrangement as a response to the Revolt of 1857, in that sense, making the entire city space operate as a reminder to the historic event and modeled on precautionary measures lest that should happen again. The language of 'improvement' adopted in this political project was in order to reshape the urban environment through new codes of regulations listed as municipal acts. It heralded a quintessentially Raj scheme of a circulatory regime that replaced the *ancien regime*.

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