

# Delhi, a Bourgeois City

*by Marie-Hélène Zérah*

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**Efforts to make Delhi a “global” city have gone hand in hand with the destruction of nature and the commons, as well as the relegation of the poor to the periphery. The development of this metropolis attests to the urgency to reconcile ecological justice and social justice.**

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About: Amita Baviskar, *Uncivil City: Equity, Ecology and the Commons*, Sage, 2020, 300 p.

With her work on the relationships between tribal populations and their environment, Amita Baviskar has established herself as a reference among contemporary Indian researchers interested in nature.<sup>1</sup> But in this book, a collection of seven articles published between 2003 and 2018, she invites us to follow her reflections on the metamorphosis of the Indian capital.

She began to write about Delhi at the beginning of the 2000s. This shift in focus illustrates the extent to which the protection of natural spaces and biodiversity has become a major issue for Indian cities. The book’s message is loud and clear. It defends the idea that any discussion of urban ecology is intrinsically linked to the issue of socio-spatial inequalities and the recognition of the rights of the poorest. As evidenced by the recent “yellow vests crisis” in France, it is imperative to combine environmental justice with social justice.

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1 Such as A. Kothari or N. Sundar, following the work of R. Guha.

## Ecology is an Urban Issue

A. Baviskar does not cling to a romantic vision of the past: Delhi has always been an unequal city. Yet, according to her, "our city was ecologically far superior to the one we inhabit now" (p. 7). The dazzling synthesis of the first 16 introductory pages evokes the profound changes that have taken place in the capital over the last 30 years, whether it be the disappearance of public spaces, the proliferation of shopping malls, the expansion of roads and gated communities, or the insidious rise of indifference to the exacerbation of inequalities.

A. Baviskar's main argument is that the strongest ally in this process of unbridled development has been the rise of bourgeois environmentalism. Her definition of this term is groundbreaking: it is above all the urban elite's expression of a search for order, hygiene and security, and the preservation of its environment, in opposition to what they perceive as a chaotic city where the presence of street vendors, slums or even cows is seen as a nuisance. This view of ecology is fundamentally contradictory.

The aim of the book is therefore to understand "how bourgeois environmentalism has transformed landscapes and lives in the capital in the last two decades" (p. 17). She uses accounts of the departure of industries and beautification policies (part 1), and of the destruction of the commons (the Yamuna river, the Delhi ridge) (part 2) to demonstrate how this bourgeois environmentalism becomes hegemonic. This dominant vision results in the elimination of activities that are considered unsanitary and backward, and it succeeds thanks to the support of the media (mainly the English language press) and the Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup>

### **Bourgeois Environmentalism in the Guise of General Interest**

The book starts by recalling the long history of structural violence intrinsic to urban planning in Delhi: the master plan enacts a frontier between the "legal" and the "illegal" city, home to informal sector employees and workers (chap. 2). In the 2000s, court rulings imposed the closure of small factories (especially those considered polluting) and household industries. Consequently, small industry owners had to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://booksandideas.net/The-Judge-as-an-Urban-Planner.html>

cease their activities and hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs, without any compensation for those employed on the basis of temporary contracts (chapter 3). In Delhi, the legal strength of the master plan, combined with the fact that it is the physical location of a proactive Supreme Court, makes it even more difficult than elsewhere in the country for the poorest to contest and defend their right to the city.

Until the middle of the 2000s the sharing of space by buffaloes, rickshaws, and bicycles constituted a “republic of the streets”. However, once again in the name of public interest and the environment, this democratic space no longer corresponds to the expectations of an increasingly globalized middle class. “Green-bourgeois” activists have appealed to the courts, which ordered the removal of cows from the roads, and the banning of rickshaws. The chaos of the Indian streets must give way to order and especially to automobile owners and their almighty right to pollute (chap. 5).

This hegemonic vision of a certain notion of citizenship takes many forms. Delhi's elites dream of being compared to those of the world's major cities. By choosing to host the Commonwealth Games in 2010 (chap. 4), the Delhi government demonstrated how Indian cities are more than ever influenced by neoliberal models, in this case, that of the role of mega-events. In this very rich chapter, A. Baviskar describes how even those who are victims of these projects consent to the staggering expenses involved in the organization of these games to the detriment of key development projects. In the name of national prestige, building shoddy stadiums and ignoring the deplorable working conditions on the construction sites is acceptable.

This mode of governance by exception culminates in the justifications put forward for the construction of the athletes' village on the bed of the Yamuna river. Numerous organizations joined hands to campaign for the preservation of the ecological integrity of the Yamuna and to protest against the eviction of the slums located on its banks. The Delhi High Court decided to constitute an oversight committee but the Supreme Court endorsed the government's response, declaring that ‘the Commonwealth Games Village site is neither located on a “riverbed” nor on the “floodplain”’ (p. 98)

In other words, the river is not really a river and this leads us to the second part of the book that denounces the idea of nature as a commodity and the disappearance of the commons in favor of upscale apartments, the construction of temples and beautification projects that transform forests into parks and lead to the concreting of the river banks. Following a sad process, similar to that of deindustrialization, this

socio-spatial reshaping becomes possible in the name of the environment and thanks to "benevolent authoritarianism and class affinities" (p. 76).

But these beautification projects have dramatic consequences. The transformation of the river bank has nothing to do with the preservation of the commons, but everything to do with real estate valuation and the financialization of public spaces. These projects also embody the rejection of 'backward' and 'polluting' practices associated with the poor and the desire to eliminate them. A. Baviskar recalls how in a single day (p. 155), nearly 150,000 people living on the banks of the river were displaced, the equivalent of the population of Angers, Saint-Denis or Oxford. This figure is stark, but merely a drop in the bucket when you consider that many researchers estimate that nearly one million slum dwellers were displaced between 1997 and 2007.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, these processes have multiple ramifications. The parcelling out of a village located in the sacred forest of Mangarbani that still hosts a range of native species, results from the logics of capitalism that attracts villagers who are eager to sell their land and are less and less concerned with the ancestral practices of common land management. Likewise, after having benefited from the commodification of land, members of the middle-class criticize the builder's mafia, from whom they have bought flats. They now want to protect green spaces and live in a clean environment (which has nothing to do with ecology). Some of them become environmental activists but the paradox of this bourgeois environmentalism is that they now ignore the demands of the poorest for whom access to water and basic services are the foundations of a healthy environment.

## **A Series of Narratives Rather than a Theoretical Treatise**

The power of this collection lies in the evocative writing, similar to a travelogue (a boat ride on the Yamuna, walks with a naturalist in the Ridge) and a wistful stroll through places that no longer exist. A. Baviskar emphasizes the structures of feelings, sensations and emotions that underlie the formation of collective identities. She invites

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<sup>3</sup> On this specific dimension, one can look at the research of V. Dupont, A. Ghertner or G. Bhan.

us on an exploration of affects rather than a discovery of a theoretical or sociological reflection.

In her introduction A. Baviskar refers to the field of political ecology but she actually draws little from this domain. She disregards the role played by political and bureaucratic elites in consolidating an urban regime based on large-scale projects and land commodification. Although these stakeholders are at the heart of the crony capitalism specific to Delhi, and linked to large public works companies, they are almost invisible in A. Baviskar's framework which focuses on the middle and upper classes, the complicity of the Supreme Court and the English-language press.

Further, her view of this middle class is overly uniform, although many works have shown the complexity of the limits of this group. The often interchangeable use of the terms elite, upper middle class, middle class, ignores the paradox of social changes in the city, for example the concomitant reality of lower middle class social mobility and the great wealth accumulated by the highest ranks of the elite. While one understands her willingness to denounce the gentrification of such a socially diverse city, it leads her to erase a finer understanding of the aspirations of those who are both beneficiaries and victims of this process.

Finally, we can regret that A. Baviskar does not provide more historical depth in her descriptions of the shrinking of the land commons. In North India, the individual rights of landowners stem from a collective organization made up of reciprocal obligations. Common land management tries to reconcile the interests of agrarian and pastoral communities, to preserve resources and to guarantee access rights for the landless. In addition, the community is not confined to the village boundary, but is rooted in a network of villages and clans, most often linked by a common ancestor. These institutions are undermined by commodification, but they have also been weakened by land acquisition policies. Likewise, the idea of non-bourgeois civility as the cornerstone of substantive full citizenship for all is barely touched upon. This civility has nothing to do with hypocritical politeness imbued with an awareness of social differences. Rather, it is a political recognition of the other, who must be treated with respect and reciprocity (p. 29). But, beyond this definition, A. Baviskar suggests few concrete steps towards a more civil city.

Nevertheless, the richness of this collection, which contributes to an abundance of fascinating work on Delhi produced over the last ten years, largely outweighs these criticisms. This book and its seminal focus on bourgeois environmentalism leads us, as readers, to think of the many directions that could be followed to better understand

the place of nature in the city. As Delhi is on its way to becoming the largest metropolis in the world, the need for an interdisciplinary approach combining the social-and ecological sciences, and environmental psychology is all the more urgent. India's capital already suffers from many environmental externalities and, as the conclusion highlights, it will have to face increasing uncertainties related to climate change. Delhi's embourgeoisement is based on pushing its industries, workers and poorer inhabitants out to the periphery. For this future urban region of unprecedented size to have a future, thinking together about ecological and social justice is more essential than ever. For A. Baviskar, this is what we must all commit to.

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