



Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi

by Amita Baviskar, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2020, 300 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9789353289430

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BOOK REVIEW

Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi, by Amita Baviskar, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2020, 300 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9789353289430

In this exceptionally readable book, Amita Baviskar illuminates the many faces of ‘bourgeois environmentalism’: a political ideology that serves ‘neither ecological nor social justice’ but instead exacerbates inequality in the Indian capital city (p. 19). Writing across 25 years of living and working in Delhi, Baviskar details how elite citizens, claiming to speak on behalf of the environment and the ‘public’ interest, use the court system to displace and dispossess the city’s working classes. This judicial activism punishes the poor for Delhi’s growing ecological devastation, even though middle- and upper-class habits are the primary drivers of pollution and biodiversity loss. Through a series of case studies, Baviskar reveals the multiple contradictions at the heart of bourgeois environmentalism, as well as the myriad ways in which humans and non-humans ‘can radically mess up the place maps that planners and bourgeois environmentalists dream up’ (p. 53). Ultimately, she calls for a new ecological vision of the city, one which takes substantive citizenship and civility as necessary conditions for environmental justice.

A timely complement to her previous scholarship in the rural Narmada Valley, *Uncivil City* reflects Baviskar’s attempt to understand why no ‘environmentalism of the poor’ has taken root in Delhi’s urban milieu.¹ Outlining the history of city planning in Delhi, Baviskar demonstrates how questions of order and capital accumulation have historically taken precedence over environmental or social justice. While bourgeois environmentalists rely on the labour of the poor, Delhi’s Master Plan never made any provisions for the labourers themselves. Baviskar argues that this move was designed to leave the working poor stranded in a legal no man’s land, criminalised by the very fact of existing outside of the prescribed order. She notes, however, that the power of urban planning comes not only from violence but ‘the multiple ways in which it is able to address the desires of different social groups for better lives’ (p. 36). In an excellent chapter on the 2010 Commonwealth Games, Baviskar explores how the spectacle marshalled broad public consent for sweeping changes to urban infrastructure, playing on the desire for a ‘world-class’ city to sanction extreme violence against beggars, migrant workers, street dogs and more. Thus, while bourgeois environmentalism serves elite interests, the ideology ‘can be found in a diffused form even among those it may otherwise marginalize’ (p. 125).

Additionally, while the rural poor have successfully organised around claims to ‘nature’, city dwellers struggle to make comparable claims due to the ‘predominantly *artefactual* aspect of the urban environment’ (p. 18). As capital-intensive projects eat away at Delhi’s remaining green spaces, nature has become increasingly hard to locate. Following Raymond Williams and Bruno Latour, Baviskar rejects the artificial separation between nature and culture, and she shows how a range of more-than-human entities—monkeys, cows, *vilayati keekar*, the Yamuna river and beyond—frustrate bourgeois attempts to secure urban order. Shirking the nature–culture binary, Baviskar’s multispecies approach creates space for a more holistic view of urban ecologies in modern South Asia.

1. Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Uncivil City demands ‘a comprehensive re-examination of the ecological question’ through a lens of equity and civility (p. 27). Baviskar’s notion of civility draws from Suryakant Waghmore’s *Civility against Caste*—a distinctly Dalit challenge to the violence of structural casteism.² Baviskar notes that among Delhi’s lower classes, only waste workers—hailing predominantly from Scheduled Caste backgrounds—have begun leveraging discourses of environmental justice in an attempt to secure labour protections. However, Baviskar cautions that Delhi’s ecological destruction cannot be stopped by any one group, and she calls for ‘new alliances that spark new ways of thinking’ (p. 26). Ecological justice requires a radical reorganisation of social and material relations in the modern city, which necessarily requires abolishing the caste hierarchies that structure inequality across South Asia.

While Baviskar focuses her analysis on New Delhi, *Uncivil City* makes significant contributions to the study of urban South Asia more broadly. Although specificities of place certainly influence the tenor and trajectory of bourgeois environmentalism, the ideology’s defining features can be seen across borders. Take, for instance, the monsoon rains that overwhelmed Karachi, Pakistan, in the summer of 2020. After days without power in the city’s most affluent neighbourhoods, elite citizens filed a petition in the Sindh High Court condemning government agencies for inaction and gross negligence. Citing ecological damage and threats to public safety, the petition renewed calls to demolish all settlements encroaching on the city’s flood plains, in accordance with Karachi’s Master Plan.³ In the weeks that followed, thousands of ‘illegal’ homes and businesses were razed to the ground, uprooting countless long-time residents. The violent displacement of the urban poor, achieved through judicial writ, is part and parcel of what Baviskar terms ‘bourgeois environmentalism’. Empirically rich and theoretically innovative, *Uncivil City* is a must-read for scholars interested in environmental activism, class politics and urban planning in contemporary South Asia.

This book will continue to inspire new scholarship across the fields of urban anthropology, development sociology and labour studies.⁴ As climate change makes catastrophic weather events increasingly common for cities across the Global South, Baviskar asserts that discussions about climate justice in Delhi ‘will closely conform to an enduring social landscape of inequality and incivility’ (p. 218). Taking forward Baviskar’s emphasis on equity, urban anthropologists should examine how climate change is experienced across divisions of class, caste, gender and species, and how efforts for climate justice might bridge, transcend or aggravate these deeply-entrenched divides.

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2. Suryakant Waghmore, *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2013).
 3. Constitutional Petition No. D-1422. 2020, High Court of Sindh at Karachi, Pakistan.
 4. See Sareeta Amrute, ‘Moving Rape: Trafficking in the Violence of Postliberalization’, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (76) (2015), pp. 331–59 [<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2841892>, accessed 18 Aug. 2021]; and Deborah Nadal, *Rabies in the Streets: Interspecies Camaraderie in Urban India* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).