

Claiming the City: Protest, Crime, and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1860-1920

Review Number: 2368

Publish date: Thursday, 30 January, 2020

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ISBN: 9780199464791

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £28.99

Pages: 340pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/claiming-the-city-9780199464791?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

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In the last couple of decades, there has been a resurgence in studying the history of South Asian urbanism with a wide range of monographs and articles being published. The new scholarship has questioned some of the basic assumptions of colonial urbanism, highlighted the role of the colonized people in fashioning the cities they lived in, and has revealed the limits of the colonial state in policing and ordering the people of the cities. Issues of infrastructure and ‘improvement’ have been studied to look into the contestations and negotiations through which the urban morphology was shaped. (1) Merging concerns of postcolonial studies with spatial theories, these histories have unearthed a complex picture of the colonial cities. Anindita Ghosh in her book carries this scholarship forward, with a focus on the role of the lower rung of the population of colonial Calcutta. She shows how the common people imagined and shaped the city. It was not only British fiat or elite Indians’ effort that produced the urban space; rather, as Ghosh contends, the mass of urban poor too had a right to the city and claimed it in their own terms. To elaborate on this theme, Ghosh brings in some common themes of social and cultural history of colonial Bengal—gender, labour, communal relationship—to foreground the ways through which urban experience shaped these histories, and in the process, how the city was being constituted by their complex practices and negotiations. In her words, ‘The work studies how the ‘colonial urban’ was not just born out of the ordered institutional and structural spaces inscribed by public parks, libraries and courtrooms, sewers and water supplies, roads and tramways, but also the more plebeian imprint of their circumvention by the city’s inhabitants.’ (32) One can read Ghosh’s work keeping in mind Michel de Certeau’s distinction between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’, where state’s intention gets subverted by everyday practices of ordinary folks. (2)

The book has six chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. In the first chapter, Ghosh discusses the ‘relationship between space and material culture in colonial Calcutta.’ (37) She highlights the contrasting urban visions of the colonizers and the colonized and shows how western notions of urban planning sat at odds with indigenous ideas of space and habitations. While the state wanted wide roads, rectilinear street-schemes, and open spaces, the local population was more accustomed to alternative imaginings of urban layout with highly localized spatial settings and communitarian living areas. The efforts of the colonial state to create a modern city with the help of technology emanated fears and anxiety among the *bhadraloks* (genteel folks). There was both an acknowledgement as well as critique of the reordering of the urban space by new

technologies of piped-water, drainage schemes and broad thoroughfares. For them, technology was antithetical to *dharmic* or religious sentiments, disrupting traditional ways of life, caste rituals, and social composition. On the other hand, the lower orders had a more ambiguous relationship with the technological innovations introduced in nineteenth century Calcutta. They marveled at the ways of taming the nature. And the disruption in older ways of life opened up public sphere for discussion and debate creating space for various groups to participate in fashioning the city. But it was an 'imperfect aggregation of civil society' and did not mean the complete erasure of earlier ways of life; rather, there were pockets of caste, region, and religion-based identities that came to the fore in moments of crisis. In this chapter, Ghosh also discusses the experiences of the migrants to the city and brings up the issue of belonging/unbelonging. Calcutta was never an exclusive Bengali city, and migrants from neighbouring districts and provinces created ethnic localities with distinct cultural ethos. The Hindi- and Urdu-speaking up-country labour immigrants and business communities challenged the exclusive claim of the Bengali-speaking population to define the urban culture of Calcutta. The tension between the Bengalis and the 'non-Bengalis' (a curious term invented by Bengali-speaking population to define any other person who does not belong to their exclusive set; still in use, and often in a pejorative sense) brewed over Calcutta, but Ghosh contends that 'over the latter half of the nineteenth century, in literary rhetoric and popular culture, the city was being claimed back by Bengalis themselves. In an intensely competitive economic environment, enterprising and prosperous migrant communities came under attack.' (82) This idea of 'claiming back' by the Bengalis sits at odds with the larger project of the book as it gives a sense of 'triumph' which reproduces the Bengali hegemony over the history and historiography of Calcutta. Also, as the sources consulted are mostly in Bengali, we hardly get a view of the Hindi- or Urdu-speaking migrants and their ways of negotiating with the city and its residents. One would have liked to have some sense of the experiences of these groups as well.

In the second chapter, Ghosh focuses on the notion of 'everyday' to reveal the contested terrain of urban social space. Through an elaborate discussion of street songs, popular plays, and ephemera, she shows how the Bengali population experienced the city. Two distinct views emerge from the sources—for the *bhadraloks*, the city seemed to be an alien space, they were not at home in the city. They lamented the passing of old times. The lower echelons, (and to some extent, the women), on the other hand, found avenues of social ascendancy and freedom in the anonymity of the big city. In them, the author found expressions of 'joyous celebrations of city life'. (89) Thus the Bengali public sphere was marked with tension and ambiguity, with the contending claims of these groups. The songs often portrayed the decadent culture of the wealthy, ridiculing the elites of the society. Particularly focusing on the genre of 'kobi songs', Ghosh shows how the rural form of the art got transplanted to the urban milieu. These songs, according to her, 'represent a microcosm of social and caste aspirations, as well as the miseries and joys of urban living.' (103-04) The popular songs had pastoral and moral sensibilities, with standard tropes of decadence and material rot. Women featured prominently in this literature where they had to 'bear the burden of sin, guilt, and atonement'. (113) One of the running themes of the chapter is to explain the urban living in terms of class experiences. But both the groups shared the gendered discourse of the urban life where 'male anxiety of rampant female sexuality' was present, as both the *bhadralok* writings and the street songs were mostly authored by men.

The third chapter looks more closely at the figure of the women in the city. It talks of sexual crimes and associated scandals that rocked the contemporary urban scene. Analyzing some of the major scandals of the time, Ghosh delves into the question of conjugality, fidelity, and transgression, and how they featured in the emerging public sphere of Calcutta. She shows how moral values associated with different classes informed the legal as well as public debates around these cases. Scandals give a window to study the nature of conjugal relationship in the city. Often the absence of family or wife was held responsible for the sexual crimes of young residents. Ghosh notes that, 'Wayward youth was a recurrent theme of an entire category of street and reformist literature of the period.' (141) The figure of the prostitute was another target of the street literature. Representations of the prostitutes were generally negative but, according to Ghosh,

such approaches have masked other and more positive contributions of these women to the urban culture and economy that so vilified them. By servicing and supporting both service and wage labour with their own

domestic and sexual labour, the institution served as ‘illegal marriage’ and prostitutes as ‘proxy wives.’ (142)

The presence of prostitutes, in middle-class minds, defined certain localities of the city, especially the mill-towns and working-class neighbourhoods. The state, too, became wary of the prostitutes and passed the Contagious Diseases Act (Act XIV of 1868) to bind them in medical and legal discourses. The city was particularly startled by the series of prostitute murders in the second decade of the twentieth century. The violent deaths, however, were attributed to the depraved lives and livelihood of these women. The violence also helped reconfirming both patriarchal and class control, and extending the ways of marginalization of women’s sexuality within the domestic sphere to the public arena. In a way, the chapter talks about both the presence and absence of women in the city. While the men were excused for their aberrant behavior as it was cast as the particular product of the urban environment, ‘lowly women were regarded as predictable victims of the unstable social environments that had produced them.’ (161)

In the next chapter, Ghosh deals with the streets of the city. She shows the contending claims of various groups on the public space in the city, more specifically the fraught relationship between the residents and the municipal government regarding new laws and regulations that sought to control the everyday existence of the people. They had to deal with traffic laws, new codes of hygiene, conduct, trading mores, and domestic regulations. The municipal regulations sought to announce a modern city which, however, had very different consequences for the people. The constant tussle between the government and the residents over usage of streets and thoroughfares, markets and public spaces, especially during times of boisterous festivals, form the crux of this chapter. From the 1870s, ‘street offences’ became a new category of crime in police records. These were mostly for violating sanitary rules, driving without lights after sundown, and obstruction of roads. The roads also became the site for protests and strikes. Ghosh contends that unlike Delhi or Bombay, in Calcutta the authorities struggled to enforce municipal regulations as there was a tradition of protest, dating back to 1827 when palanquin bearers struck work. Later on in the century, the hackney carriage drivers protested against the Hackney Carriage Act of 1864. There were successive strikes by carters, milkmen, and butchers against municipal laws and taxes. Scavengers of conservancy department protested in 1867 and 1877. Through these protests and demands, an urban public was forged and new sense of space and rights was articulated. These claims, however, emanated from a very different context and vision of modern ways of living as oppose to the notions articulated by the state through municipal regulations.

The next chapter extends the focus on various criminal activities in the city to look at the ways through which new normative civic and moral order was being challenged. They also bring into light the association of class and criminality in the official and popular discourses giving rise to *bhadralok* anxiety regarding safety and security in the city. Ghosh notes that the anonymity offered by the urban order often fostered criminality among the impoverished and marginal groups. The colonial government, prodded by metropolitan understanding of crime and underbelly of the society, started identifying the *budmashes* —‘habitual criminals’. Introduction of anthropometric calculations (1892) and fingerprint analysis (1899) helped the police in classifying native urban criminals along ethnological lines. But Ghosh contends that these disciplinary mechanisms in the city could not establish themselves prominently, because the police lacked ‘more accurate and sensitive operational knowledge of their environs’ (221), unlike other cities like Delhi or Bombay. However, the most fascinating part of the chapter is the detailed discussion of the police fiction written by a detective of the department. Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, a Bengali policeman, published *Darogar Daptar* [The Office of the Detective, or ‘Inspector’s Files’] from 1892 to 1904 as a serialized fiction—based on actual events encountered by him on his job. The stories gave a unique sense of the seamier side of the city, and these ‘less glamorous’ locations give his tales a mooring and social consciousness, which are absent from his fictional counterparts. He analyses the changing nature of social relationships in the city, foregrounds the urban space as a site of poverty as well as moral and material uncertainty. But he was also influenced by colonial typologies. These tales also give us a comparative cartography of safe and unsafe areas in the city. This mapping of the city was based on the

presumption that the city could be mapped via intense local knowledge of crime and criminals to render it

secure and knowable, and mechanisms of surveillance and disciplining distributed accordingly lay at the heart of colonial urban policing in India. (241)

And this was linked to the cognitive structures of race, community and class. Through this discussion of crime, criminality, and colonial police practice, Ghosh actually lays bare the experiences of the teeming urban population, where the anonymity offered by the city furthered a rootless existence, 'heightening the sense of social dislocation among a chiefly migrant population in the city.' (246)

The last chapter focuses on collective actions of the urban poor. Ghosh chooses moments of crises and transgressions to look at the ways in which the poor protested against the harsh living conditions. She sees these protests—against police repression, municipal regulations or poor state of public health—as fundamental to urban living experience of the marginalized groups giving them a common cause which moved beyond the familiar narratives of caste, community or religious identities. During the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, anti-police sentiment fostered among the lower rung of the city, which came to the fore at moments of riots and protests. There was a racial angle too in this anti-police mood of the people, argues Ghosh. She also shows that these disturbances were not particularly communal; rather they stemmed from common experiences of being a proletariat in the city, forced to cope with various municipal regulations that were quite novel for them. For her,

the disturbances arose out of a clash between the imposition of modern standards of a uniform civic code and the numerous customary ways of living practiced for generations in their original locations in north India by the city's immigrant residents. (264)

Riots often took place due to the inability of performing ritual sacrifices in densely packed urban surroundings. Reinforcement of communal and regional solidarities through rituals often generated tensions between the religious communities but this more of 'an assertion of ritual rights in tight urban spaces and the challenging of a purportedly secular municipal administration than being narrowly 'communal' in nature.' (267) It was mostly experience of deprivation and social marginalization that lay at the heart of these moments. They were, according to Ghosh, an articulation of their rights to the city by the urban poor. The Plague Riots of 1898 also brought forth the anti-government sentiment of the people. The irreverence towards administration took a 'political' turn with the mass agitation against the decision of dividing the Bengal province (1905). Known as the Swadeshi movement [one of the main aims of the protest was to boycott foreign merchandise and use locally-made articles], the public took to the streets and parks of Calcutta to demonstrate against what was seen as an administrative ploy of weakening the growing anti-colonial mood of Bengali intelligentsia by dividing the province along communal lines. These protests forged new relationships with the space of the city, with the emergence of new wave of anti-government nationalist protests and fresh actors on to the political scene.

The book foregrounds three crucial issues that can be elaborated in future histories of colonial urbanism of South Asia. First, it talks of a circularity and connectivity between the village and the city. The colonial cities thrived on the efforts of people from surrounding areas and the hinterland. But more often than not, to these people, the city represented a temporary abode, with their roots in their ancestral villages. This was true for both the educated, middle-class lawyers and students as well as the urban poor engaged in various formal and informal labour sector. And they resided in and claimed the city without forsaking these identities. The 'colonial urban' in India was not produced by a linear transformation from the 'traditional'/agrarian to 'modern'/industrial society; rather, it was an outcome of a complex set of processes generated by colonial mode of production with concomitant reworking of existing ideas and values. Secondly, the book critically evaluates the contribution of the lower rung of the population in shaping the urban space. They often had a much more positive outlook about the city than the middle-class. Again, this can be traced back to the life in the countryside with rigid caste and societal norms which often got relaxed in the anonymity that the city offered. This made the upper- and middle-caste population anxious, which got reflected in the negative portrayal of the urban life. Thirdly, stemming from this negative image, we can trace the conflation of the nation and the village in nationalist imagination, where it was maintained that the

true essence of the nation could be found only in the traditional village life of India, and not in the teeming metropolises. But, as Ghosh shows, the cities gave various groups of urban lower class an opportunity to stake a claim to their living space. They were 'not passive consumers of urbanity and modernity' (297). And with the anti-government sentiment manifested during the protest movements, we can think of the ways in which the 'colonial urban' figured in nationalist practices forged by ordinary people, if not in the thought and rhetoric of the leaders.

The book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on south Asian cities. It forges critical connection between diverse strands of scholarship on colonial Bengal. Cities are messy. To understand the complex terrain, we perhaps need a capacious methodology that Ghosh has employed in her book.

Notes:

- To cite a few, Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*, (London: Routledge, 2005); Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Preeti Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta c.1800-c.1940*, (Delhi: Tulika, 2012).
- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (transl.) Steven Rendall, (Los Angeles, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

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