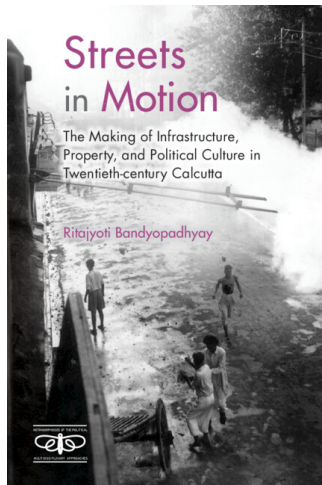

Book Reviews

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay 2022: *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth-century Calcutta*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Streets in Motion is a novel intervention in which Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay explicates how streets have shaped the socio-spatial relationships and the economic geography of the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and offers new methodological pathways for analysing the urban historiography of streets. The key proposition of the book is that the ‘street itself is the product of politics and politics, in turn, a product of the street’ (p. 254). In other words, the author positions streets as a key assembler of spatial production, and argues that the struggles and claims for cities should be viewed via a genealogical reading of their making and un-making, particularly the key role they have in the valorization of urban land.

Theoretically premised on the dialectical interplay of ‘motion and obstruction’, Bandyopadhyay chronicles street-building during the period of British rule, their positioning for capitalist production, and their eventual re-claiming through specific events: independence and partition, the *Jabardakhal* movement, the rise of the leftist state, and neoliberalism post-1991. The author recounts numerous examples of creative obstruction that disrupted the capitalist accumulation in the city and takes us on a chronological tour through the emergence of the engineered street and its transformation into a site for popular action during the country’s freedom struggle, capitalist accumulation, zoning along communal lines, and finally the struggles to reclaim the street. In terms of methodology, he relies on archival records for the historical analysis, while the contemporary analysis is foregrounded through ethnographic work. The book is rich with various conceptualizations of street-building in relation to speculative action, urban warfare and inclusive urban design.

Bandyopadhyay proposes the dialectic of ‘motion and obstruction’ as the book’s conceptual backcloth. Adopting a Marxist interpretation of unencumbered motion (of bodies and objects) as the modality of capitalist conditioning, and human agency as an obstruction to the structural forces of this motion, the author explains how disenchantment arising out of the colonial street-building disrupted the daily life of the local populace and triggered the appropriation of large parks and streets for the freedom struggle. Further, he records that urban renewal and speculative booms in the city benefited large capitalists—usually Hindu *Marwaris* (the *mercantile caste*)—and fuelled antagonism between Hindu *Marwaris* and Muslim workers. Street-building in

the city deepened the fault lines and bitterness and intensified the inter-communal animosities.

Bandyopadhyay conceptualizes that the rational action of street-building, the invisible hand of speculative markets, and crowd action during communal events are all linked to each other. He also argues that the colonial street-building project manifested the tactics of urban warfare and worked as a zoning device which eventually led to the ghettoization of the city. As such, the structure of ghettos, real estate and inter-communal tensions are all entangled in these histories of street-building and urban renewal. Through his study of the archives encompassing police records, details of communal violence and property ownership, the author clarifies that the primary spatial markers of police action or communal-territorial urban warfare in the city are linked to the patterns of the streets. Based on his various ethnographic works, he is also able to relate the majoritarian urbanscape (in spatial, social and cultural terms) in the contemporary city to the genealogies of street-building.

The theoretical framework of motion-obstruction is the author's preferred choice for explaining various acts of human agency and political and social mobilization in the city, including acts of commoning and reclaiming the streets in the post-independence period. The author has meticulously recorded the activities of the *Jabardakhal* movement—a mass encroachment by partition refugees and rural migrants—and argues that this did not simply represent an act of population transfer, but re-claimed 'physical and social infrastructures collectively and made those infrastructures the focus of collective existence in the city' (p. 178). *Jabardakhal* was also a precursor to the proliferation of unorganized street vendors (in other words, the informal sector) in the city. As the author explains, these acts represent moments of frontier urbanization without accumulation within South Asian urban history: an obstruction that realized the people's economy in the city.

Bandyopadhyay presents various examples to show how the streets, initially mobilized by an unencumbered desire for capitalist action, have been obstructed at various times. He notes that in contemporary times, under the banner of law and public policy, the streets continue to be deployed for capitalist accumulation by positioning and privileging pedestrian rights over other uses, and argues that the blueprint of 'creative obstructionism and collective appropriation' (p. 237) offers an opportunity to practise inclusive urbanism.

The book chronicles how the eviction operations that accompanied the rise of neoliberal values post-1991 renewed solidarity amongst people dependent on the street economy—hawkers and vendors—through the adoption of social and political counter-mobilizations and played a key role in the drafting of affirmative legislation such as the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. The author also cautions us about the immediate future, envisaging streets as new sites of extraction via various modes of accumulation using data and surveillance technologies.

Finally, the author reflects on how the motion-obstruction dialectic plays out in other ways as well, when 'authoritarian regimes can also feel still and immobile which democratic politics shakes up into activity' (p. 267). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, when a national lockdown was imposed on Indian cities—an 'act of immobilization and obstruction from above' (p. 265)—migrant workers made their plight known through motion, by breaking the lockdown and moving *en masse*

from the cities to their home towns along the sidewalks. Through it all, whatever the struggles, the unmistakable message of *Streets in Motion* is that the street is here to stay.

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay's work is a novel piece of scholarship that ties street-building together with socio-spatial production in the city. There have been very few attempts within Indian urban scholarship to conceptualize the onset of city-building in the colonial period (as well as various intervening events up to the present day) and the emerging structures of socio-spatial relationships in the city. By chronicling the different modes of obstruction that have occurred, the book offers a template for slowing down capitalist accumulation in the city. While the contemporary focus of urban scholarship has pivoted towards urban land, the book offers a glimpse of how street-building and urban land are inextricably linked in structuring socio-spatial relationships in the form of animosities and solidarities. The book's only significant weakness is the lack of good maps in the analysis—more and better maps of the city would certainly have helped the reader to understand the archival accounts and historical changes more clearly.

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