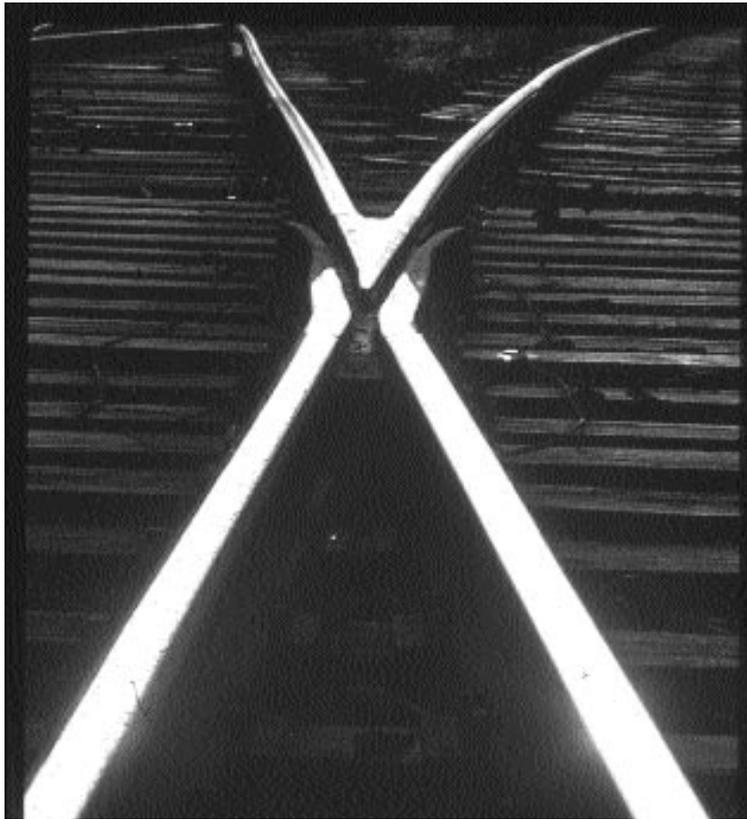


The Urban Turn

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What is at stake in the urban turn? Recent years have witnessed a noticeable surge in the attention paid by scholars and activists to city life in India. This Sarai Reader registers this growing interest. Yet another example is the recent formation and activities of the Mumbai Studies Group. Founded in 2000, it has rapidly established itself as an extraordinarily lively and open forum for discussion and debate on urban questions among architects, historians, anthropologists, journalists, cultural practitioners and activists. Of course, urban scholarship and activism are not novel, but what is new is the sharpened focus on the city as society.

The city occupies an ambivalent place in the Indian nationalist imagination. Most nationalist leaders hailed from towns and cities; and Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were chief centres of nationalist activity. Yet, the urban experience seldom received any concentrated attention. Indeed, the nationalists looked to the village in defining India. Gandhi's exaltation of the village and village communities is well known, as is his view that cities were places of evil and corruption. Nehru, on the other hand, thought of the village as a place of backwardness and ignorance. In a letter to Gandhi in 1945, he wrote "I do not understand why a village should embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment".¹ Not only was the village a place of backwardness and ignorance, but British rule had also robbed it of its organicity and vitality; it had become "progressively a derelict area, just a collection of mud huts and odd individuals".² Yet, Nehru added, the village held something of value, "But still the village holds together by some invisible link and old memories revive". Indeed, despite his distaste for the village and for the hierarchical social structure it represented, Nehru's *The Discovery of India* also contains a powerful sense that the countryside was an authentic symbol of India. Thus, recalling the effect of Gandhi on the Congress and nationalist mobilisation, he wrote, "He (Gandhi) sent us to the villages, and the countryside hummed with the activity of innumerable messengers of the new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell. The effect on us was different but equally far-reaching, for we saw, for the first time as it were, the villager in the intimacy of his mud-hut... We learnt our Indian economics more from these visits than from books and discourses. The emotional experience we had already undergone was emphasised and confirmed".³

The emotional resonance that both Gandhi and Nehru found in the village can be understood in terms of Partha Chatterjee's argument that the nationalists identified the 'inner' as the nation's authentic space.⁴ The village stood for the domain where the nation was sovereign, free from the 'outer' sphere of modern politics, economics, science, and technology that was dominated by the West. What Chatterjee does not recognise sufficiently, however, is that the logic of the 'inner' was overwritten with that of the 'outer'. The very specification of the authentic and sovereign domain of the nation was also an act of outlining strategies of transforming the 'inner' with the knowledge and power produced in the 'outer'.

Consider, for example, Gandhi's conception of the village community as the 'real India'. It is clear from the appendix of *Hind Swaraj*, which mentions, among other 'authorities', Henry Maine's text on village communities, that Gandhi drew on European writings in formulating his notion that India resided in its villages. This, in itself, is not significant. But it assumes importance when considered in conjunction with his conception of the village. In 1945, Gandhi outlined his vision of the village in a letter to Nehru, "While I admire modern science, I find that it is the old looked at in the true light of modern science which should be re clothed and refashioned aright. You must not imagine that I am envisaging our village life as it is today. The village of my dreams is still in my mind. After all every man lives in the world of his dreams. My ideal village will contain intelligent human beings. They will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free to hold their own against any one in the world. There will be neither plague, nor cholera nor smallpox; no one will be

idle, no one will wallow in luxury... It is possible to envisage railways, post and telegraph offices etc. For me it is material to obtain the real article and the rest will fit into the picture afterwards".⁵

Gandhi was candid about the idealised nature of his village, but from what position does he idealise it? How should we understand the dream of a village where people did not live "in dirt and darkness as animals"? Evidently, Gandhi was trying to envision an India different from that of Nehru, but it is clear that the imagined village was also a product of the "dreamwork" of modernity. The act of "reclotting" and "refashioning" was to apply to both the old and the new, to both the 'inner' and the 'outer', to both the village and the city. The failure to recognise this double movement of the discourse is to overlook the effects of the mutual imbrications of the 'inner' and the 'outer', and conclude that nationalist politics represented the triumph of one over the other. Such a reading is unable to appreciate the complex moves entailed in the projection of the nation as a modern village, and produces the widely held but mistaken belief that Nehru appropriated Gandhi's concept of the village as the nation's 'inner' sphere and built the nation-state in the image of the 'outer'. Elsewhere, I have argued instead that, despite significant differences, both Gandhi and Nehru shared the discourse of a 'different modernity', that the establishment of the nation-state cannot be understood as the victory of one domain over another but as a historical development fashioned on the site of the intersection of the 'inner' and 'outer'.⁶

What does all this have to do with the urban question? If it is the case, as I have suggested, that the nationalist discourse divided the village from the city while cross-hatching them in projecting the ideal of the modern nation, then it is also in that manoeuvre that we can locate a discourse of the city. Thus, Gandhi painted the city in dark colours in imagining a different modernity projected in his idealised village. Nehru, on the other hand, saw the relationship between the village and the city through a historicist lens; the relationship between the two was a matter of stages of development. In either case, the question of the city was refracted through the discourse of the nation.

Folding the question of cities into a general problem of national development, Nehru stated that "the fundamental problem of India is not Delhi or Calcutta or Bombay but the villages of India... We want to urbanise the village, not take away the people from the villages to towns".⁷ Because urbanisation meant modernisation, which was expected to lift India out of the morass of the past and set it on the road to progress, Nehru approached the city as an aspect of planning and development. His sense of history as a linear story of development and fulfilment, and his confidence in planning as an instrument to achieve progress came together in the building of Chandigarh as a symbol of "the freedom of India unfettered by the traditions of the past".⁸ Though built to provide a capital for the recently partitioned Punjab state, the construction of Chandigarh was an expression of Nehru's confidence in planned urbanisation as a catalyst for modernisation. As Ravi Kalia shows, the architect Le Corbusier's image of himself as an architect of modern urbanism meshed perfectly with Nehru's modernising goals, "Nothing could be more appealing to Nehru, who saw in this modern-day prophet of the Second Industrial Age his own desire of ushering India into the technocratic world without repeating the mistakes of the urbanised nations of the West. What Le Corbusier wanted to produce was an architecture that would be 'neither English,

nor French, nor American', but 'Indian' of the second half of the twentieth century".⁹

Underlying the power granted to technocratic elites and experts, such as Le Corbusier, was the historicist conception of urbanisation as the pinnacle of a nation's social and political development. This framework of thought positioned the state and its technocrats as agents of History, removing planning from the scrutiny of democratic politics. Henri Lefebvre writes that Hegel subordinated historical time to the immanent logic of the state, subsuming history and temporality to the process of realising the space of the state.¹⁰ Something of this Hegelian idea can be identified in the state's deployment of planning and urbanisation as processes outside politics and internal to its role as the agent of reason.

The state has produced a powerful discourse that acts upon the urban space and population, but its historicism fails to grapple with the challenge that cities pose. By this I mean the issue of spatiality that the city highlights. Not only is urban built environment defined by its position as a nodal point in the geographical landscape of capital, the very organisation of the city as society entails spatial divisions and relations, not distinctions between different stages in the march of history. What sets middle-class neighbourhoods apart from slums is not time but space; not just physical space but also the space of power. The historicist discourse organises these differences as distinctions in the unfolding of history. Foucault wrote, "The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of ever accumulating past".¹¹ Modernisation, a product of this obsession, can represent the city only in terms of the "theme of development, of transition from tradition to modernity, as a stage in historical evolution. This language of temporal unfolding and fulfilment cannot capture the lateral, socio-spatial organisation of the urban environment. Is it any wonder, then, that this discourse says very little about the experience of the city? So fixated is the modernising gaze on the city as an object of planning and development that it can approach the urban space as a constellation of problems that require solutions".

One manifestation of the problem that the historicist discourse encounters in dealing with the socio-spatial organisation of the city is that posed by the 'unintended city'. Ashis Nandy defines it as "the city that was never part of the formal 'master plan' but always implicit in it".¹² This unintended city consists of the growing number of poor housed in slums and streets, who provide the cheap labour and services without which the official city could not survive. Exploited and disenfranchised, the existence of this other cannot be acknowledged by the official city as part of its self. Seen from the lens of modernisation, the huge mass of India's urban poor appears 'obsolete' in the march of progress. But this 'obsolete' population refuses to "bow out of history", and exhibits an "obstinate ability to return and 'illegitimately' occupy a large space in the public domain".¹³ The refusal to "bow out of history" points to a general problem intrinsic to the nation-state's historicist discourse of modernisation – the inability of its linear narrative to accommodate the spatiality of historical processes, the uncomfortable coexistence of the modern and the 'obsolete', the intrusion of the rural in the urban, the combined emergence of official and unintended cities. The city's historical geography of power, culture, and society resists its representation as evolution and development.

In the West, the problem of representing the city has been closely linked with questions concerning modernism and its relationship to capitalism. The challenge that traditionally preoccupied European writers was how to map the experience of the modern city, what representational strategies were adequate for capturing the opacity, the fragmentation, and the transitory nature of urban modernity.¹⁴ More recent analysts have turned to the city in order to understand it in relation to late capitalism, globalisation, migration, and postmodern culture, and the challenges these pose to classic modernity.¹⁵

In India, on the other hand, the surge in the attention paid to the city, in my view, is the product of two interlinked processes – the erosion in the authority of the historicist narrative of Indian modernity and the emergence of a new politics of urban space. Thomas Blom Hansen's recent study of Bombay provides ample evidence for these two processes.¹⁶ Analysing the historical transformations and conflicts that brought about a crisis in the vision of Bombay as a symbol of secular, capitalist modernity, Hansen provides a fascinating account of the rise of the Shiv Sena as an expression of "vernacular modernity". He shows that the Shiv Sena's emergence was made possible by the erosion of the older elitist political culture that underwrote 'classical Bombay'. Democracy undermined this elitist political culture, and opened the space for the assertion of plebeian identities and politics. The Shiv Sena utilised this space to press its claims aggressively and violently. Combining nativism with anti-Muslim propaganda, its ideal fashioned a new mode of urban politics that drove nails into the coffin of the elite of Bombay as the symbol of modernising India. Hansen focuses primarily on the Shiv Sena, but one could include the emergence of Dalit politics, the movement of slum dwellers, and the growth of the NGOs – all strikingly different in their aims and methods from the Shiv Sena – to complete the picture of the transformed landscape of urban politics.

To locate the urban turn in the contemporary refiguration of the landscape of politics, however, is not to suggest that the city poses a challenge to the historicist discourse only in the present. To be sure, the politics of urbanism has greatly changed between Gandhi and Nehru's idealisation of the village as the nation's authentic space and the Shiv Sena's transformation of Bombay. But there were always discourses of the city that sat oddly with its nationalist representation either as an emblem of evil and injustice (Gandhi) or as a symbol of modernisation (Nehru). For Sadaat Hasan Manto, the contradictory and heterogeneous world of the city, not the organic and familial space of the village, was the chosen site for his fictions about the struggle for modern identity and justice. He treats the city as a place for negotiating social difference, as an emblematic space for the encounter with the other, the different, not as a symbol of progress and modernisation. From a 'minor' point of view, his short stories – several set in Bombay – offer a counterpoint to the dominant discourse of the modern nation.¹⁷ His fiction represents everyday life in the city as a space enframed by capital and the state, but it also identifies traces of other practices, memories, and desires in this arena.¹⁸

The urban turn, then, offers an opportunity to revise the history of Indian modernity, to bring into view spaces of power and difference suppressed by the historicist discourse of the nation.

NOTES

1. "Nehru's Reply to Gandhi", 9 October 1945 in M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other Writings*, Anthony J. Parel ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1946; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 523.
3. *Ibid.* 361-2.
4. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
5. "Gandhi to Nehru", 5 October 1945 in M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other Writings*, 150-51.
6. See my *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), chap. 6 & 7.
7. Cited in Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh: The Making of an Indian City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30.
8. Cited in *Ibid.* 21.
9. *Ibid.* 88.
10. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 21.
11. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16 (1986), 22.
12. Ashis Nandy, "Introduction: Indian Popular Cinema as the Slum's Eye View of Politics" in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, Ashis Nandy ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.
13. *Ibid.* 3.
14. I am thinking here of, among others, Walter Benjamin's "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in his *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 146-62. See also Angela McRobbie, "The *Passagenwerk* and the place of Walter Benjamin in cultural studies: Benjamin, cultural studies, Marxist theories of art", *Cultural Studies* 6 (1992), 147-69 and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
15. For examples, Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975); David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990) and Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
16. Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
17. Saadat Hasan Manto, *Kingdon's End and Other Stories* Trans. Khalid Hasan (London: Verso, 1987).
18. I am referring here to Henri Lefebvre's archaeology of everyday life, his unearthing of practices in the layers of power/knowledge. See his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1: Introduction (London: Verso, 1991).