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Howard Spodek. *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 352 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35587-4.

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Building India's "Shock City of the Twentieth Century" from the Top Down

The field of South Asian urban history has a rich history of examining India's major urban centers. Numerous astute studies of Delhi, Bombay (Mumbai), and Calcutta (Kolkata), for example, have contributed to our understanding of not only the rapid urbanization (and later suburbanization, as explored in the remarkable collection of essays that appeared in a recent special edition of *Urban History* [February 2012]) of the subcontinent, but the human and economic development that has shaped the region as well.[1] Yet while the field is rich, there are noticeable silences around relatively large swaths of the region. Cities outside of the Indian national border, such as Karachi or Dhaka, rest quietly in the periphery of the historiography; others within the border, such as Ahmedabad, while mentioned in virtually all historical discussions of the subcontinent (being the site of Mahatma Gandhi's ashram after all), have received little focused attention. Howard Spodek's *Ahmedabad* thus provides an important contribution to the field as both an examination of a place conspicuously underrepresented in the urban history of the region and as an excellent piece of urban history that not only greatly informs our understanding of South Asian development, but also has application to a number of cities globally.

Spodek presents a compelling sketch of the last hundred or so years in a city that has been called the "Manchester of India." In Spodek's presentation of the city, we see a microcosm of some of India's major political, economic, and social trajectories: the rise of Gandhi and the independence movement, the drive for modernity and industrialization in postcolonial India, the collapse of the labor unions and the restructuring of the economy within new global markets, and struggles with communal violence and corruption. Spodek successfully balances his portrayal of a city shaped by a concentrated body of power elites within a larger global context, placing Ahmedabad at the center, but recognizing the external forces playing out in the process. In this way, as a case study in urban history, *Ahmedabad* is instructive both in content and method.

The overarching argument of Spodek's work is that Ahmedabad can be seen as a "shock city" from the arrival of Gandhi in 1915 to the present. Spodek explains that the term "shock city" is drawn from Asa Briggs's descriptions in *Victorian Cities* (1963) of Manchester in the 1840s as "a centre of problems, particularly ethnic and social problems" (p. 5). The presence of these conflicts, however, is only the first part of what constitutes a shock city and what gives the concept instructive value; in addition, the ways in which urban dwellers seek to find solutions to these problems and how this quest shapes the city, and, in reflection, how these negotiations were shaped by the city itself, is what makes the concept helpful as a tool for urban historians. In this regard, Ahmedabad's development of civic and labor institutions (and the dissolution of some of those institutions) is a critical component to Spodek's argument that Ahmedabad is the shock city of the twentieth century. Indeed, while the presence of social problems and conflict are an important aspect of the analysis, the problems themselves are generally presented as a backdrop to the attempts at resolving them–a productive and interesting approach that allows the work to provide an understanding of the mechanics of a "shock city."

The book is organized into three major sections, each dealing with an era that demonstrates an important phase in the development of the city. Presented chronologically, the continuity of the phases is clear, but the discrete problems and solutions are also importantly drawn out. The first two sections, covering the Gandhian and the immediate postcolonial periods, respectively, are particularly cohesive in method and use biographies of major business and intellectual leaders as the vessel through which the city is depicted. The third

section, while still rooted in a biographical method shifts perspective slightly. In his analysis of the communal violence, Spodek finds less of a productive role for the institutions and leadership of the city than in the previous sections. The section title, "Creativity and Chaos, 1969-," is indicative of this, and there is palpably less moral authority in the biographies of the leaders he profiles.

In the first section, "The Gandhian Era, 1915-1950," Spodek focuses four chapters on the foundation of Ahmedabad as a shock city, arguing straightforwardly that "Gandhi made Ahmedabad a shock city for India during his tenure by directly confronting four of the most significant problems of his day" (p. 7). Spodek presents a cogent analysis of how Gandhi's choice of Ahmedabad as the location to build his ashram presented specific opportunities for the development of a social and political movement under his leadership. He explains that first of all, "in comparison with other large cities, British rule rested lightly in Ahmedabad" (p. 28). While larger cities, such as Bombay and Calcutta, may have had more population, they also had much less political space for Gandhi's movement. Ahmedabad, while still providing the necessary urban and industrial scale needed for a mass movement, was off the radar of British imperial control just enough. Further though, it was not *so* far removed from Western influences that it was unfamiliar with the tactics and designs drawn from Gandhi's global experience. As a major site of textile mills in the country, the business elite of Ahmedabad was composed of indigenous, Western educated citizens who were already well integrated in politics and had a history of exerting their power when motivated. Gandhi formed an important alliance with the business community of Ahmedabad that enabled him to build a new political leadership in the city. Through biographical sketches of such leaders as Ambalal Sarabhai, Indulal Yagnik, and Anasuyaben Sarabhai, Spodek demonstrates the dynamic negotiations, both cooperative and at times, combative, between different constituencies that the leaders came to represent. The picture that emerges is also one of unsettling concentration of power, even amid an era of mass mobilization. While the population in the city grew considerably, and the industrial working class gained a more politicized consciousness, the actual power elite appears, according to Spodek's account, to have remained quite a small group. In this way, we see how a small body of individuals, while representing different constituencies and perspectives had an enormous impact on the city's development. The negotiations and alliance between the Congress Party, the Textile Labor Association (TLA), and the mill owners during the Gandhian era "served as a model for a national policy," making Ahmedabad the national shock city (p. 114).

The second section, "The Westernizing City, 1950-1980," concentrates on the postindependence development of Ahmedabad and continues the analysis of the city's development via biography. In the two chapters of this section, Spodek describes the establishment of a bounty of Western-oriented educational and cultural institutions as well as a period of massive and rapid industrial growth. The imbalance of resources and power in the city between the actual rank-and-file workers and the powerful elites are again strikingly stark. Spodek argues that the alliances and leadership built during the Gandhian era cooperated over the next fifty years and "created a new form of shock city: a scientific and artistic center of international renown on one bank of the Sabarmati River and an industrially productive, unequally served company town on the other" (p. 139). These inequities surface through municipal neglect of the working class and rapid growth of slums, reshaping the geography of the city into a site of brewing discontent. Spodek presents Indulal Yagnik's post-independence biography as representative of this discontent. Having radicalized after his time in Bombay, Indulal's changing perspective on socialism, militant action, and revolution offers an important counterbalance to the notion that the power elite were simply benevolent philanthropists. Spodek explains, "Indulal's many campaigns revealed that the masses of Ahmedabadis were not necessarily made in the austere, controlled images of Gandhi ... or even in the compassionate, domestic mode of Anasuyaben Sarabhai. The middle classes of the walled city were inflammable, and the industrial workers in the *chawls* and slums had grown resentful of being patronized by the TLA, even though the association brought them considerable benefits" (p. 163). An interesting component of the middle section in the work is that while the argument of a shock city remains and Ahmedabad is shown as the representative model for the national scale, the city is also clearly absorbing influences from other places and reacting. For example, there is a focus on westernization and a Western notion of modernity in the new institutions, some of which are directly modeled on and drawn from the elites' foreign educational experiences, and Indulal is radicalized in Bombay and brings that radical ideology back to Ahmedabad. It is in this section though that the concept of shock city could have been fleshed out a bit more and raises questions of whether the idea of the shock city might be more nuanced than Spodek gives us.

In the third section of the work, "Creativity and Chaos, 1969-," after describing the communal riots of

1969, Spodek explains, "the city was being transformed into a different environment–more harsh, more violent, more criminal, more divided, less tolerant–than they had known before.... Ahmedabad had become a shock city not only to the rest of India, but also to its own citizens" (p. 180). While this section overlaps in coverage in terms of period with the previous one, the focus changes and the flow of the narrative makes this overlap work without feeling repetitive at all. As the section progresses, much of the institutional strength built in the first portion of the century collapses under the weight of corrupt leadership and the changing landscape of global capitalism. The 1970s and 1980s were particularly tough on Ahmedabad and the disintegration of the textile mill industry served as keystone for the social and political unraveling of the city. Indeed, by 1987, as Spodek points out, citizens had to ask, "Is Ahmedabad Dying?" (p. 226). Yet as the author demonstrates, in the face of the challenges of the new era, in the 1990s and 2000s, Ahmedebad once again served as a shock city, but now for the entire world, not just for India. The city's economy shifted to a wider, even chaotic, number of industries and grew to recovery from the mill collapse within a few decades. Ahmedabad became a poster child of sorts for the liberalization of the economy in India, but also in a larger scale. At the same time, the city became deeply divided and provided soil for the growth of harsh communal violence, condoned and even encouraged by the political leadership of the Hindu right. Spodek argues that "Ahmedabad's experience of rapid growth, in a sprawling city, with many centers and subcenters, with great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, moderate growth spread more widely, and only minimal economic progress at the bottom, accompanied by the suppression and exclusion of important minorities, resonated with that of many cities in an age of globalization" (p. 270). Here he demonstrates his particularly strong capacity to balance a regional perspective and a larger global context, at times implicitly but also explicitly when needed.

Overall, the work does successfully make a convincing argument that Ahmedabad is a shock city, although that may not be the most compelling part of the work. While Spodek applies Briggs's theory perfectly soundly, one is left feeling a bit like a template was in place, and the details are in fact more interesting than the framework. For example, in the process of proving the overall argument, Spodek provides a fascinating case study for the role of leadership in urban development. Further, in his use of biography as the driving narrative device, he has very effectively conveyed an image of a city populated by individuals rather than monolithic citizenry. Methodological details such as these are what makes this a particularly valuable work for scholars of urban studies. That said, readers unfamiliar with the national context of Indian politics may find aspects of the work difficult to hook into–Spodek assumes a fairly high level of regional and historical expertise and in doing so, limits the audience of the book. Thus while for urban historians overall this book is a valuable contribution in many ways, it will ultimately appeal most acutely and in the most rich sense to those with an interest in Indian urban history specifically.

Note

[1]. See, for a few examples,Jonathan S. Anjaria, and Colin McFarlane, eds., *Urban Navigations: Politics, Space and the City in South Asia* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2011); Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Nandini Guptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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