

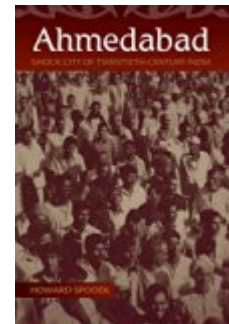


Howard Spodek. *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 352 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35587-4.

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Elites, Labor, and Violence in the “Shock City” of Ahmedabad

In recent decades, studies of South Asian cities have focused on a few major cities at the expense of ignoring others. For example, much is known about the major former colonial centers and metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and to a lesser extent Madras (now renamed Chennai). Substantive literatures have also built up around the holy city of Banaras, and royal centers, such as Lucknow. Yet the paucity of literature on the city of Ahmedabad—a distinct, fascinating, and notable major urban center—is striking. Kenneth L. Gillon’s *Ahmedabad: A Study in Indian Urban History* (1968) was the last noteworthy monograph of the city in English. Apart from filling a lacuna, Howard Spodek’s *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India* is an important contribution to the urban histories of Asia and a must-read for anyone interested in the history of Ahmedabad and Gujarat.

The book’s title deftly draws attention to the central thrust of the book, which argues that Ahmedabad demands consideration as *the* “shock city of twentieth-century India.” Conceived by Asa Briggs to describe Manchester, England, a “shock city” is “a centre of problems, particularly ethnic and social problems, and it provoked sharply differing reactions from visitors.... Every age has its shock city” (p. 5). Interestingly, Ahmedabad was called the “Manchester of India” (second only to Bombay in the manufacture of textiles). However, it is not this appellation that makes it a shock city. Instead, Spodek makes the case that it was a shock city in various ways—in politics, industrialization, as a leader in the

foundation of several nationally recognized educational and cultural institutions, in its nonconfrontational labor relations and high rates of communal violence—in a number of different eras in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

A self-conscious and clearly articulated method used in writing this book is the focus on elites and the use of biography of important leaders. Spodek contends that Ahmedabad’s leadership was crucial in guiding its development. Particularly from the Gandhian era until the 1970s, the city was shaped by a small group of leaders “while for the most part respecting the wishes and needs of the citizens, and that since that time the city has been unable to find leaders who can successfully combine economic progress with social justice and peace, and win at election time” (p. 16). The chapter titles display this shift. Although the majority of the chapter titles have the names of leading figures and movements, from 1969 onward the chapter titles increasingly shift to disturbing events—communal violence, the closure of mills, the weakening of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), the emptying of the coffers of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC)—occasionally interrupted by less palatable but no less fascinating leaders and movements. While the method of biography is effective in “put[ting] a human face” on the city’s leadership, movements, and development, Spodek is not interested in using biography to delve into a deep and nuanced analysis of individuals (p. 15). Instead, biographies are used as entry points to the foundation of institutions, the analyses of move-

ments, and the marshalling of political power. Biography is also used to critique other leaders in a less direct way. For example, the biography, autobiography, personality, political trajectory, and voice of Indulal Yagnik is used to critique the civic leadership of the mill owners and Vallabhbhai Patel. Throughout the book, Spodek pays attention to the electoral politics and leadership of the AMC and also, as relevant, to politics in the state of Gujarat. Apart from some personal interviews, a large number of sources in English and Gujarati are utilized by Spodek, including biographies, autobiographies, published reports, newspapers, and various other literary and secondary sources.

Making the case that Ahmedabad is not only a shock city for South Asia, but also for the world, Spodek book-ends his account of the city with events dominated by two contrasting world famous figures: on one end by Gandhi's taking up residence in the city in 1915 and using it as a base for nonviolent nationalist struggle; and, at the other end, with the aftermath of the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, that was made possible by the tacit approval of Gujarat's chief minister Narendra Modi. Historically, the city of Ahmedabad was founded in 1411 as a new capital for the Gujarat sultans. The sultans and their successors constructed the walled city to the east of the Sabarmati River; to its southeast, the massive Kankaria Lake and its environs were planned as a reservoir and garden, while five miles to the southwest of the city a man-made lake and other structures were constructed at Sarkhej. In 1921, not long after Gandhi had moved there, the city had a population of 274,000, two-thirds of which resided in the walled city. By the early twenty-first century, its population had surged to 4,700,000, the city had expanded far across the west of Sabarmati, and the walled city only contained about 6 percent of the city's population. In 2005-06, Ahmedabad was declared a megacity. Spodek's account grapples with this expanding city, which saw over this period an increase in the segregation of Hindu and Muslim communities, especially after the 1985 communal violence. Where proximate living had once produced friendships and cordial relations between members of various communities, segregated living conditions produced a decline in such relationships. Modi's promotion of "Brand Ahmedabad" and other incentives encouraged businesses and industries to locate in Gujarat. Spodek argues that by 2010 Ahmedabad was a shock city for two reasons. First, in terms of its physical and economic development, it was one of the most successful exemplars of economic liberalization in India. Second, by the early twenty-first century Ahmedabad

was also a national leader in communal violence and segregation and had garnered world notoriety.

Spodek presents this almost hundred-year history of the city with an informative introduction and by organizing the rest of the text in three parts and twelve chapters. The first part deals with the Gandhian era, 1915-50. Gandhi chooses to settle and establish his ashram in Ahmedabad, a city where "British rule rested lightly" (p. 28), and because he quickly realized that "In sophisticated Bombay, Gandhi could cope; in Ahmedabad, he could reign" (p. 25). After some setbacks, Gandhi established a close relationship with Ahmedabad's close-knit community of businessmen and mill owners. A number of them participated in local self-government by serving the municipality. Gandhi nurtured a new group of dynamic young leaders who did not always agree with each other but whose public service and positive influence on the city continued until the 1970s. These included Ambalal Sarabhai, Indulal Yagnik, Vallabhbhai Patel, Anasuyaben Sarabhai, and Kasturbhai Lalbhai. Vallabhbhai's municipal activities, particularly in the field of sanitation, are showcased, as well his building of the Congress political machine in Gujarat. The vision and ideas of industrialist Ambalal's sister Anasuyaben Sarabhai and Gandhi helped in the foundation of the Ahmedabad TLA in a city where approximately half of the population in 1915 belonged to the industrial working class. The TLA favored collective bargaining, and arbitration over strikes and thus offered an alternative model to the more confrontational tactics of Bombay's mill workers and unions. By offering contrasts with Bombay, Spodek is able to showcase the benefits of this model while at the same time highlighting the criticisms leveled at the TLA. In his masterful study *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (1994), Rajnarayan Chandavarkar shows Bombay's centrality to the birth of industrial capitalism in India. Like Bombay, Ahmedabad's textile industry was also initiated and dominated by indigenous industrialists, and in the labor-management relations, spatial and social life of the working classes, and the role of mill owners in the city, Spodek's account reminds us that greater comparisons between the two cities could offer useful insights.

The westernizing city from 1950-80 is the focus of the second part of Spodek's book. In 1935, Ahmedabad businessmen, particularly Kasturbhai Lalbhai, took the lead in establishing the Ahmedabad Education Society (AES) with the goal of laying the groundwork for the foundation of higher education in Ahmedabad and Gujarat, including the possibility a university for Gujarat, distinct

from Bombay University. In the post-independence era, Ambalal Sarabhai, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, and their families were responsible for establishing or helping to establish cultural and educational institutions and/or bringing leading educational institutions to the city. This is an impressive list and includes: the Shreyas School (founded in 1947), Bakubhai Mansukhbhai Institute of Psychology, the Calico Musuem, the National Institute of Design (established in 1961), the Ahmedabad Textile Industry Research Association (ATIRA), Physical Research Laboratory (PRL, founded in 1948), the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-Ahmedabad, founded in 1961), and the Darpana Academy for the Performing Arts (1949). Spodek shows the personal involvement of the individual family members, particularly the Sarabhai family, in the founding, running, and intellectual concerns of Ahmedabad's elite institutions. To give only one example, Ambalal Sarabhai's son Vikram, who had a PhD in astro-physics from Cambridge, helped found PRL. To my mind, what is truly exceptional about Ahmedabad, and probably seen in no other city in India, is this elite's intellectual engagement with a range of institutions. Bombay's elite in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was famous for their philanthropy. Ahmedabad's elite gave their time, money, *and* expertise to the founding and running of a variety of institutions. Even as Ambalal and Kasturbhai were constructing a "company town," Spodek turns the spotlight on Indulal Yagnik, a figure who "even during Gandhi's time ... had fought against establishments" as he returned to the city in 1956 to become a leader in the Mahagujarat movement that argued for a separate state for Gujaratis (p. 141).

The third part of Spodek's book, entitled "Creativity and Chaos, 1969-," begins with the communal violence of 1969. The period of consensus and leadership guided by the moral influence of Gandhi is over. We have the corrupt leadership of Chimanbhai Patel that created its own backlash in the Nav Nirman Movement of 1974. Madhavsinh Solanki's politics of class and caste in the 1980s caused the city to erupt in violence. The mill industry

collapsed in the 1980s, and as a result the membership of TLA also dramatically fell, while the AMC ran out of money. By the 1990s the city had reinvented itself by rebuilding its economy and its major NGO, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a child of the TLA, was one of the few reminders of the city's Gandhian legacy. Illegality abounded in the city, cynically shrugged off by the citizens, who just as easily turned a blind eye to the massive violence inflicted predominantly on the city's Muslim residents in 2002 as Gujarat State became a laboratory for the politics of the Hindu Right.

In the end Spodek makes a strong case that Ahmedabad fits Briggs's definition of a shock city. However, one wonders if it is the only city that could be so defined. Comparisons with other contemporary Indian cities are surprisingly absent. It might be equally easy to argue, for example, that Bombay/Mumbai, rather than Ahmedabad, is India's twentieth-century shock city. One also wonders whether the events witnessed in Ahmedabad could push or problematize Brigg's original definition of the "shock city." In other words, the author could have strengthened his analysis by extending Briggs's definition of the term, adding more nuance to it, and making it his own. More attention could have been paid to how Ahmedabad produced strong varying reactions amongst visitors in the various eras. Such an account would have helped to draw out the contradictions of the city. Nevertheless, this is a compelling account of Ahmedabad, ably written by a historian whose long engagement with and affection for the city shine through without clouding his intellectual insights. Putting a human face on the city's leading figures who built the city and its institutions, caused or led movements, maintained calm or provoked violence, Spodek takes us on an engrossing roller-coaster ride through Ahmedabad's turbulent and complicated history in the twentieth century. He also reminds us all of the diversity and importance of so many South Asian cities which have been heretofore overlooked by scholars .

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