

## The slow boil: street food, rights, and public space in Mumbai, by Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2016, 232 pp, \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-804-79937-9

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by new groups of actors that Rangarajan identifies as (i) the pragmatic conservationists – mostly field biologists, who see no future for wildlife without insuring the livelihood security of cultivators or stock-keepers, (ii) the constructive workers – who work towards a new agenda of resource use and employment generation for forest dwellers through initiatives that combine traditional skills and modern management techniques, (iii) the urban intelligentsia – who stress on the dual agenda of local rights and wildlife conservation, but often end in valorizing tradition over modernity and (iv) the rural activists – who like the constructive workers have a direct material stake in the outcomes of human–wildlife conflicts and work towards securing a direct participatory role for resource users in common property lands, forests, ponds and pastures. More often than not, these groups overlap and in many places, these efforts have borne fruits.

On a comparative scale, the conservation dilemmas, in South Asia and Africa, as Rangarajan argues, have many similarities in terms of concern but large dissimilarities in terms of existing structures and frameworks largely because of different histories of colonization, different concerns of ecological science in the two landscapes, difference in population density and more importantly, difference in social inequities. Unlike in India, the black voice is yet to emerge as a strong stakeholder in the conservation science of the continent. On the whole, preservation remains a ‘valid’ and worthwhile ideal to strive for and the author reminds us throughout the volume that ‘nature spills beyond borders’ – both physically and metaphysically. In that, ‘[b]iocentric ideologies of *preserving* nature are locked in contest with anthropocentric ideas of *using* nature’ (p. 338).

A collection of essays that span the different registers of wildlife, colonial rule, kingship practices, nationalist dilemmas, market pressures, forest rights, development and grassroots activism cannot capture the entire environmental situation in India. However, Rangarajan succeeds in showing how through two centuries of historical change, commercial interests are in a direct confrontation with traditional livelihoods and how the state is not a monolithic entity, as policies have been made through contestations of a wide range of actors. Such a volume exploring the dialogical emergence of nature and nation could have benefitted from reflections on the voices that have actively challenged the elitism in the formation of both. In that, no environmental history of India can be complete without a sustained engagement with the political history of the Dalits who have followed Ambedkar in their suspicion of ecological romanticism vis-à-vis development, and equally with the rise of a militant indigeneity in much of Northeast and central India, in which resource and identity are intermingled.

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**The slow boil: street food, rights, and public space in Mumbai**, by Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2016, 232 pp, \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-804-79937-9

The two main strands of contemporary urban studies research – studies of culture in the city and studies of urban space as an effect of power – have not adequately addressed the contradictions, contingencies, and sense of incompleteness that animate the city. (p. 37)

The material, political and affective lives of cities in the Global South have drawn much attention in urban studies over the last couple of decades. In the case of India, scholarship that focuses on the political economy of the city – land use, the role of the middle-class activism, the distribution

of resources, the form and function of public spaces, and other such concerns – has very successfully shed light on systemic structural inequality, a process that admittedly gained momentum after economic liberalization. On the other hand, there is also a visibly emergent approach in popular and literary fiction and non-fiction that tends to glorify the precariousness of life on the edge as if it were but an intractable feature of the ‘Third World city’. Caught between these two binaries, it has become difficult to write a narrative of the Indian city without coming across as simplistic and monolithic. In this short but ambitious book, *The Slow Boil*, Jonathan Anjaria aims to correct precisely this dualistic tendency. Taking the case of unlicensed street vendors in Mumbai, he argues that unlicensed food vendors present a case of complex belonging in the city, one that is characterized by a chronic struggle for space – geographical and political – and that this struggle creates generative relationships that involve compromise, co-option and negotiation. Drawing primarily on ethnographic work conducted in intervals between 2004 and 2012, the author demonstrates how the space between precariousness of everyday life in the streets of the city and the possibility of a ‘world-class city’ project offers a creative model for urban ethnography. Most importantly, it makes possible identifying political economic processes that govern urban life along affective experiences in the city without rendering them mutually exclusive. Both the ‘scenes’ that cities present – in all of their sensory stimulation – and the ‘narratives’ of cities – the micro and macro stories embedded in everyday life that reflect several power relations – exist in productive tension with each other.


Writing in consonance with scholarship that attempts to tell a story of urban exclusion, Anjaria strives to also show how layered, involved and resilient narratives of urban belonging are. Challenging the idea that heated spatial contestation in Mumbai is simply a direct product of neo-liberalism, he shows how historically rooted ideas of spatial exclusion and the meaning of public spaces are, and that attempts to invisibilize the urban poor from public spaces is not peculiar to recent years but has been a feature of colonial governance apparatuses as well. Anjaria, through an analysis of historical material, documents how ‘imposing a sense of order on an unruly city’ (p. 61) has been a common concern through time although the various agendas and meanings behind policing public spaces have changed. While narratives of public health and congestion dominated the justification for the social control of public spaces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was concerns about aesthetics in the late twentieth century (pp. 41–42). The author contends that Mumbai’s development has been less a production of linear transformation and rupture – from colonial to postcolonial governance, or from a welfare state to a neoliberal one – but that it is a product of slow accretion, partiality and reappearance. Similarly, in his interviews with hawkers, he finds that they situate their own precariousness in ‘the lingering effects of modernist spatial imaginaries not the doctrine of neoliberal globalization’ (p. 63). This is an important contribution of the book since it historicizes the persistence of certain trends of urban exclusion through time. The fact that street-vendors have remained present on the streets of Mumbai, precariously but resiliently, is testimony to the narratives of not just rebellion but also accommodation.

Anjaria then proceeds to show how contemporary narratives of contentious urban belonging circulate amongst a set of street hawkers in Mumbai. In a beautifully written and insightful chapter ‘Occupied streets’, he walks us through ethnographic vignettes that shed light on how hawkers do not just idly ‘squat’ for policy to erase them but have a genealogical relationship to the street since they cultivate active relationships with the various stakeholders – the state, the neighbourhood and the market. The conceptualizations of ‘appropriate behaviour’, belonging, rebellion and rights, are deeply dependent on how people view urban space, their position in it and how they relate to the city at large. For instance, Syed, a vendor who works outside several mid-size shops notes how shopkeepers depend on him and several other hawkers to catch petty thieves and regulate burglaries in the area. Similarly, Anuj, a vendor who serves chutney sandwiches and other kinds of fast food, finds solace in the fact that his neighbourhood is gentrifying since that would mean more customers for him. He wants to cultivate new relationships with his neighbours – residents or otherwise. Ramesh, a vegetable vendor,

does not see the State as an entity to contend with but one that compels him to find ways to manoeuvre within and leverage for oneself. He contends that the position of hawkers in Mumbai is exemplary of slow suffocation instead of an instant death. Narratives such as these complicate straitjacket theories of exclusion, which tend to overlook the different forms of layered intimacy present in public life. Even the case of Farhana, an activist who fights for hawker rights, acknowledges how her mode of engagement with the 'hawker question' is a means of inhabiting a world. The goal of the hawkers' union and the civic bodies are the *management* of illegality rather than a complete erasure of sorts. The idea of extra-legality is that it may be criminalized but it is not necessarily illegitimate. Questions of rights, citizenship and social justice exist in a productive friction with sentiment, feeling and other forms of affective intimacies when it comes to hawkers in public space.

The recurrent theme in the story of hawkers in the city is that of middle-class involvement in one way or the other. Historically, Anjaria finds that in the early 1900s itself that a visceral dissatisfaction with having a lack of voice in municipal governance was palpable in middle-class newspapers and periodicals. Over time, however, bourgeois dissatisfaction and growing political power was able to manifest in active resident organizations like Advanced Locality Managements and Residents' Welfare Associations. Nevertheless, in a chapter titled 'Estranged citizens', the author demonstrates how middle-class residents voice their estrangement from the nexus between the ultra-elite, the poor and the state. They also, unlike popular perception, are sceptical of consumer culture and its devouring of public spaces in the city. Over time, there seems to be a cognizance of how it is through a series of compromises that power relations manifest themselves in the city. In particular, they feel a sense of unfamiliarity and alienation from a 'game whose rules they did not quite know' (p. 158). The positioning of the middle class too, Anjaria notes, is a matter of slow and ongoing negotiation, accommodation and compromise. The reason that this matters is precisely because middle-class residents also voice conditional empathy for the hawkers. The cognizance of the complexity of the situation, especially since hawkers have historical and material ties to neighbourhoods, manifests in the challenges civil society activists face in coming up with a 'definitive' solution to the question of hawkers in public space. There can hardly be one.

In the concluding chapter, the author takes us through recent discussions in both popular media and academic discourse on how people in megacities in the Global South supposedly use creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness in everyday life, navigating their precarious conditions with panache. Terming this approach 'improvisational city perspective' (p. 162), he finds that while scholars who are less optimistic about such 'improvisation' argue that it obscures grim material realities that people have to deal with on a daily basis, people more sympathetic to the improvisational city perspective counter that this is not something they deny at all. This, leading to an impasse, has made it difficult to talk about urban belonging and urban exclusion without making them seem inimical to each other. Through his nuanced ethnography of street-food vendors in Mumbai, Anjaria has indeed done precisely the opposite: instead of seeing *only* entrepreneurialism or *only* structural inequality, we see how streets encompass a multitude of power relations while also the spark for creative enterprise. We see the friction between urban belonging and exclusion producing the characteristic spark of street politics. This tension is in fact integral to the meaning and function of urbanity in these megacities, how street politics produces urban life.

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