

# How New Modes of Governance Reshaped Delhi

Nikhil Kumar

**THE (UN)GOVERNABLE CITY: PRODUCTIVE FAILURE IN THE MAKING OF COLONIAL DELHI, 1858-1911**

By Raghav Kishore

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In 1899, George Curzon started from Shimla on his first tour of India as the Viceroy and, made Delhi his first halt. He spoke at a ceremony at the Town Hall, the office of the Municipal Department of Delhi, and extolled them for the ‘great and remarkable development’ done in the city. Delhi, Curzon said, had a central position which always made it a ‘Capital City, now of commerce as once of power’ and that the government’s ‘engineering policy has converted it into the pivot of so many radiating lines of railroad’. Most strikingly he praised the Municipality for their judicious use of finance, which ‘understood not merely when to tax, but when to spare’.<sup>1</sup>

This was before ‘Curzonation’<sup>2</sup>—a term coined by a wit criticizing Curzon for self-serving, splendid pageantry of the 1903 Delhi Durbar that glorified him rather than his sovereign. By the time Lord Curzon of Kedleston had become Earl Curzon of Kedleston, his views about Delhi had crossed the sea like him. The King in one proclamation had revoked the partition of Bengal and transferred the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, infuriating Curzon on both counts. For him now, Delhi was nothing more than a ‘cemetery of dead monuments and forgotten dynasties’.<sup>3</sup> The irony of that thought perhaps never began to dawn on him.

In 1857, Delhi was stripped of its imperial status and subsumed within the North West provinces as punishment. Vast swathes were razed to the ground to make the British feel secure who now ruled from the erstwhile Qila-i Mubarak. The period following the Uprising, considered to be the High Noon of the British empire, was the period of consolidation, bureaucracy, and unconstrained imposition of colonial

power in its greatest might. This imposition extended not only to political and social norms but also to cultural production and had a significant impact on Delhi’s language and its usage there on. Raghav Kishore’s *The (Un)governable City* shows that it was not only a period of consolidation and ‘development’ but of a failure in which contradictions of power and policies fuelled bureaucratization and instability. While this failure was connected to the restructuring of colonial governance, the book also highlights the unintended impact of contradictions in decision-making and confusions emanating from them.

The apparent desire to ‘improve’ the natives passed through endless regulatory corridors, taking inordinate time to begin the initiative, or getting transformed completely from its initial intents towards a different course, mostly guided by Mammon. In an effort to improve the sanitation of the city, for example, the Municipality decided to reorganize and make a system of its own. Professionals in the organization rejected indigenous infrastructure and recommended the creation of ‘scientific’ projects. While the decision was pending, the upkeep of the Shahjehani networks was stopped. Proposals went back and forth while funds were held up by higher authorities. In anticipation, the everyday operations stopped, leading to disputes and problems for the public as well as the government. The book shows how inchoate processes and overlapping jurisdictions led to myriad internal tensions. Curzon claimed in the 1899 speech that advanced application of science and technology had been the ‘greatest triumph of civilisation over prejudice and ignorance’; the truth, though, was far from it. Recent scholarship, as also this book, has added to our understanding that ‘underdevelopment’ in Indian cities is a legacy of the colonial era, arising as a direct result of their failure to provide timely decision-making and local solutions.

The book, in five chapters, presents new materials and fresh insights on aspects of the making of a colonial city. Focussing on

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1. *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Vol. I*

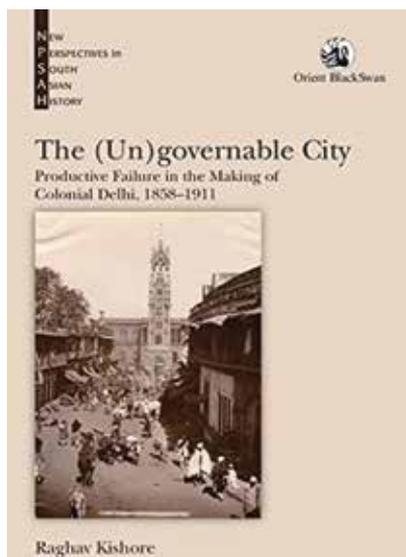
2. This term stuck, like the doggerel that dogged him for life: *My name is George Nathaniel Curzon, I am a most superior person. My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek, I dine at Blenheim once a week*

3. Speech in the House of Lords, February 1912

property, sanitation, public order, traffic, railways, trade and other issues, it explores how colonial interventions apart from apathy, were clouded by a politics of difference. It shows how soon after 1857, when the question of compensation to loyal natives arose, the processes undertaken were rife with tensions of competing priorities and negotiations. The Deputy Commissioner claimed that if property transfers were left with the Indian population, 'the corruption, the intrigue, the savagery and the dissatisfaction which would have ensued', was unthinkable. In fact, the protection of property was the corner-stone of the imperial project and was vital for its self-legitimation. Facing a bricolage of demands, the authorities continually changed the rules to suit them; in principle using the market as a site of veridiction of government practices.

There is a very interesting chapter on the ambiguities of colonial governance over the question of religious street processions and how Saraogi Jains, a wealthy, but numerically not very significant sect used colonial rationale to change the dialectics of petitioning and got their *rath yatra* ban revoked. The book also touches on colonial arboriculture and how plantation projects changed the natural landscape of the city, while ensuring the broader political aims of 'upliftment of the natives' and that plantations remained financially productive.

What comes across from *The (Un)governable City* is that while strategic and political considerations underpinned the colonial decision-making, financial advantages took primacy. Curzon was happiest with the Municipality's work in their having made Delhi the 'great emporium and distributing centre of Indian trade'. Like Rome, Isfahan, Damascus and Kyoto—all capitals of the Empire—the 'modern march of industry and invention' for him had given Delhi the vitality. In this regard, the Railways had made Delhi the commercial entrepot, or the 'Charring Cross' of north India. Indeed, while promoting modernity through movement, Railways were also a tool for the state to control the people through workings of capitalism and ideologies of colonial rule. In Delhi, in fact, the Railways were deliberately made to tear through the heart of the city separating it



into the elite civil lines and the rest. It reminds me of Akbar Allahabadi, who wrote some of his most scathing satires on the themes of the railway engine. For example, in one *shēr*, he says: *Abhi injan gaya hai iss taraf se/ Keh deti hai tareeki hawa ki* (A railway engine passed this way/A little while ago. The darkness/Of the air tells us all). In another seeing the railways as a potent tool for exploitation, he says: *uska paseejna hai aur uske hain bhapare/Europe ne Asia ko injan pe rakh liya hai* (This one

sweats and is softened/By that one's vapour-steam,/Europe has strapped Asia/To the railway engine).

Reading through the book, despite its academic verbiage, I felt that the colonial masters were, in reality, bumbling Wodehousian bozos who jumbled up

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everything they laid their hands on to ‘improve’. For a general reader, it is a demanding book. It expects the reader to arrive to it with deep and contextual knowledge of Delhi of this period. In addition, the reader should have some understanding of governance, its analysis and criticism in academia to have a fuller grasp. Despite that, *The (Un)governable City* is a great addition to the growing knowledge about Delhi and could serve as a companion volume to Narayani Gupta's *Delhi Between Two Empires*.

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