

Kishore, Raghav: *The (Un)governable City. Productive Failure in the Making of Colonial Delhi, 1858–1911*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan 2020. ISBN: 9789390122981; 276 S.

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Due to a large literature that extends back decades in the historiography, the notion that the colonization of the subcontinent resulted in a *failure* to modernize was long a narrative mainstay.<sup>1</sup> As an early nationalist indictment of colonial rule, both anti-colonial nationalists and their historians supplied stories of failure: failure to modernize the economy, failure to install public works, failure to enfranchise the population into an egalitarian citizenry, and failure to operationalize and materialize liberal rights in spite of volumes of texts attesting to liberalism as a goal or horizon of rule. Colonial subjects have also often featured in such stories of failure, either to contest colonial illiberalism or make claims and demands of their own thereby expanding colonial mechanisms and machinery towards their own ends.

Raghav Kishore's *(Un)Governable City* joins this tradition, being not a nationalist indictment of colonial rule but one that attends more closely to how power materializes on the ground. For long a colonial city paradigm has led historians to argue that because of colonialism, modernization and its lessexamined but often used synonym, urbanization, had been thwarted. In such tellings, colonial India witnessed de-urbanization and peasantization; in fact, colonial India failed to urbanize at all. This paradigm, as much as it has been critiqued, is still prominent amongst some scholars, especially those with more direct bearing on projects of contemporary governance like economists. Alongside the failure to urbanize is assumed the failure of the populace to gain liberal rights associated with cosmopolitan urban spaces. But Kishore counters such claims, demonstrating how such "failures" were productive for native assertion of power and control. Kishore explains, "As rules and regulations proliferated, enterprising individuals found in them a considerable amount of ambiguity and inconsistency with which to obtain concessions from governing bodies and authorities." (p. 4) Such a move is not only methodological, imploring us to look at what happened rather than what did not, but also generative of some very important questions, namely to what particular ends did natives deploy colonial institutions and whose agendas succeeded and whose agendas failed?

Through five well-researched chapters Kishore shows us how the failures to actualize colonial goals left open political space native actors co-opted towards their own goals. The gap between power and practice and the gap between planning and implementation created openings for maneuver. In the first chapter, the political aftermath of 1857 leads Hindu property owners to dispossess Muslim ones. By using a "veneer of liberalism," administrators identified loyal Hindus and disloyal Muslims and used what Kishore rightly calls a "political act of property compensation" (p. 26) to take property from the Muslims and distribute to Hindus. In the second chapter, dalals (brokers) are able to resist the reformation of the sabzi mandi (vegetable market) by claiming that household labor is necessary for the health of the city. In the next three chapters we see how a wealthy Jain community uses the colonial state against the Delhi municipality to secure their right to render public space religious, how commons are reclaimed by elite residents, and how the city becomes a site in which to distinguish "good" against "bad circulation" to secure commercial interests. By the end, we are left with a story of how urban planning is no top-down colonial feat but emerges inside the ambiguities and contradictions opened up

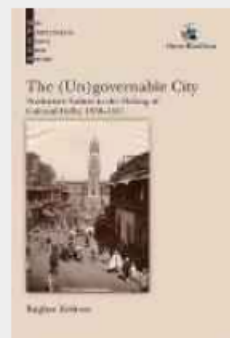
by a colonial rule that is more perfect on paper than in practice. Through this study of the productivity of failure we get a ground-level view on how Delhi's residents interacted with the Delhi Municipality through a series of episodes. A clear social history then emerges of power, resistance, and control over space. What remains to be explored are the larger implications of such a telling. Which patterns guide whose power is materialized and whose is not; in other words which natives manage to maneuver, and which don't? Or is colonial Delhi a case of contingent successes and failures depending on time, place, and community power? Perhaps relatedly, by focusing on the success stories of native assertion of power, we can lose sight of who is left behind. A broader implication might be a clearer understanding of the specific ends and means of power relations that not only exceed colonial logics but depended on them.

Nonetheless, from the way in which the colonial "state had acquired an everyday-ness" even in the great poet Ghalib's life in the 1860s to the way common lands were claimed by elite residents we learn a great deal. Kishore's conclusion does a great job bringing this everydayness of the state up into the present. If in the colonial era "the consolidation of colonial power was linked to its 'instability' and not the other way around" (p. 223) then in the postcolonial period "expansion of regulatory and bureaucratic powers of urban agencies like the municipalities, and along with it, the state, continues" without much impact on its stated ends (p. 227).

What failure, cooptation, elite capture, and redirection into newer institutions of governance produces more than anything is the state itself as an effect, in its myriad self-contradictory and incomplete ways. Kishore's *(Un)Governable City* joins studies of the colonial city that foreground local power so we can see how locals foil projects with at least nominal public purposes such as poor housing or clean water. As such, the book is quite commendable for revealing how power is both colonial and granular all at once. Scholarship of colonialism both within urban studies and beyond will benefit greatly from this perspective.

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## R. Kishore: The (Un)governable City

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1 Mariam Dossal, *Imperial Designs and Indian Realities. The Planning of Bombay City, 1845–1875*, Delhi 1996; Michael Mann, *Delhi's Belly. The Management of Water, Sewage and Excreta in a Changing Urban Environment during the Nineteenth Century*, in: *Studies in History* 23/1 (2007), pp. 1–31.