

Juned Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay: City Making and the Politics of the Poor*. Orient BlackSwan, 2021, xii + 227 pp., ₹995.

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In this book, Juned Shaikh engages with the oft-asked, debated, and explored question of how does caste co-exist with and survive under the industrial capitalism and modernity? Although routinely discussed, the persistence of caste and its resilience in contemporary India continue to puzzle and draw responses from the scholars of multiple disciplines, specifically sociologists and social anthropologists. Shaikh probes the question through historians' lens and tools contending 'that capitalism and caste shared a symbiotic relationship: They leeches off each other' (p.5). He argues industrial capitalism and primitive social institutions are not essentially irreconcilable, rather capitalist economy adapts to local institutions as well as conditions to thrive and accumulate profits.

The book provides a detailed account of how seemingly disparate provincial and transnational events and activities—political movements, cultural transformations, and shifting emphasis of urban planning—conversed with each other as well with the industrial capitalism expanding between the late nineteenth and late twentieth century in the Bombay city. It is organised into five chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. Drawing from different archival documents on urban planning and English and Marathi literary forms in circulation at the time, each chapter lucidly depicts distinct aspects—of housing, livelihood, dispossession, political assertion—constituting everyday life of urban poor labouring in the city. Simultaneously, it reveals active and tacit role they played in the making of the city. Importantly, it foregrounds class conditions of urban poor often entangled and overlapped with their position in the caste hierarchy which have had significant implications for refashioning contemporary spatial arrangement of the city and moulding cultural politics of Dalits. Urban administrators and urban poor relied on caste identity in city making and staking claims on it.

Chapter 1 describes the socio-economic transformations experienced by the city from the late nineteenth century. The Bombay province witnessed proliferation of cotton mills, minor factories, and infrastructural development creating surge in demand for the workforce. The period concurred with the catastrophic famine that enveloped the countryside situated in the vicinity of the province triggering massive exodus of people towards the city in the search of livelihood opportunities. The author notes a significant immigrating population to industrialising Bombay were landless labourers from Dalit castes and small farmers. For these new entrants, caste identity became crucial in securing employment and was decisive of the kind of dwelling spaces they occupied in the city. They were segregated and absorbed in the low wage employment in the factories, mills, docks, and sites under the construction. Hired in the city municipality as sanitation workers, primarily the members of Dalit castes (Mahars, Bhangis/Halakhors) performed the tasks of sweeping and scavenging to keep the city clean. Instead of loosening, the interrelationship between caste and ascriptive occupation was further reinforced and entrenched the caste in the city. Also, caste assumed significance for the urban planners to reimagine the city, and for the urban poor, Dalits, to demand housing from the state on the basis of their shared caste identity and experience.

Influx of the people supplied the low waged and pliable labour force to informal sectors, state departments, and enterprising capitalists of the city who were unable to compete with the European counterparts. However, owing to low wages, urban poor struggled to afford decent housing and were forced to live in overcrowded slums and tenements deemed uninhabitable and filthy. Increasing population and escalation in unsanitary dwellings alarmed the colonial administration; it ensued a series of urban and regional planning to decongest and beautify the city. Urban planning bodies and administrators sought to resolve the housing crisis by demolishing unsanitary dwellings and relocating the poor in the planned

settlements: 'Caste and class shaped the spatial (re)ordering of the city as well' (p. 31). Caste became an important index to identify the squalid neighbourhoods/dwellings to demolish and allocate state housing to the poor which not only enabled caste-based spatial demarcation of the communities but also sequestration of the poor in non-elite spaces. Apart from the planners, social reformers and scholars contributed to fusing of caste, class and space by associating the filth and vices embedded in urban spaces with specific caste groups.

Stressing 'language and the built environment are not cloistered from each other; in fact, they share a dialectical relationship' (p. 15), the remaining chapters focus on different literary genres (plays/novels/Marxist–Leninist literature) which reflect the manner in which caste question was obscured and subsumed in class/communist movement, living conditions of Dalits in slums/tenements, formation of Dalit movement and identity, and its contradictions. Chapter 2 discusses the response of Bombay based communists and socialists to the unfolding industrial capitalism. In the quest of negotiating the transformations and challenges under capitalism, they sought to popularise Bolshevism among the urban poor. They clandestinely imported, translated and circulated the communist literature in the city. Since the literature was legible only to educated English speaking members, Marxist literature was domesticated and made accessible to masses through translating the texts into vernacular languages (Urdu, Gujrati, Bengali), importantly in standardised Marathi. Transcending the particularistic differences, the ideology sought to imagine and formation of working class on the basis of shared class conditions. Shaikh notes rather than critically engaging with the caste question, they fiercely attacked and berated the lower-caste/anti-Brahmin movement as parochial which widened the wedge between these political movements. He underlines that caste-based power relations even operated within the party's organisation wherein the intellectual task of translation was assumed by the upper-caste educated men well versed in multiple languages. By adopting the strategy of broadly and loosely defining words like Dalit or *Mavali* these vernacularised texts succeeded in forging unity as *kaamgar varg* [working class] in otherwise tenuously tied and fractured groups embodying distinct subjectivities. A significant portion of the chapter focuses on the travails of acquisition and circulation of the Marxist literature. It passingly provides the glimpses of detestation of communist leadership towards the anti-caste movement. It does not dwell on the nature of exchange and interaction between the movements—the leadership and organisation of the lower-caste movement, which could have convincingly addressed what drew Dalits to communist movement, and on why despite the ongoing anti-caste movement Dalit leaders chose to straddle between both the movements rather than simply committing to anti-caste politics.

Covering the span between the years 1945–71, Chapter 3 highlights cultural turn that the Communist Party of India (CPI) took in the backdrop of urban planning in which 'Bombay city was transformed in to Greater Bombay through the Greater Bombay law and the Bombay High Court Act of 1945' (p. 87). It takes a microscopic look at the writings and plays (*lok-natyas*) of Dalit-communist leader Tukaram, also popularly known as Annabhau Sathe. His writings astutely portray the routine precariousness to which urban poor were subjected in the city. Housing, antagonistic employer–employee relation, and political actions of urban poor in public spaces are the recurrent themes of these writings. Through his writings, he articulates that the shared class conditions/exploitation of the urban poor and workers create the possibility of transcending the ethnic/ascriptive ties to establish unity to upend the power hierarchies enmeshed in urban space. For Sathe, 'urban space is the key site for contesting power and formulating a politics of the urban poor' (p. 90). The chapter further elaborates on the urban planning in this phase aimed to synchronise urban life with modernity, thereby, rendering slums as unmodern, inefficient and undesired. These plans however defeated the goal as demolition and eviction always outpaced the rate of successful rehabilitation. Thus, despite the vertical and horizontal expansion, the city failed to provide adequate and affordable housing to the urban poor. The proposed plans produced contradictory results

and could not succeed in containing the growth of slums/tenements/squatter settlements. In fact, the policies proved instrumental in sustaining caste by producing caste demarcated settlements. It failed to overturn the pre-existing caste-based social order in the city.

The built environment in which Dalits were bound to live became the source to draw and make Dalit literature. Chapter 4 describes profound influence of rapidly changing political economy, between 1950–1970, on the emergence of Dalit literature (*sahitya*) and the formation of radical politics in the form of the Dalit Panther movement. It is notable that prolific Dalit writers such as Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale lived and grew in the spaces designated as slums. Through diverse literary genres (stories/poems/autobiographies/novels) they consistently depicted humiliation and subjugation Dalits endured both in rural and urban India. The writers sought to craft an autonomous Dalit literature that is not a captive of the canon Marathi literature hegemonized by the upper-caste. Influence of global events and transregional writings such as Russian realism and African American literature is strikingly evident in Dalit Sahitya. As is shown in the succeeding chapter, Dalit literature carries a combined impressions of the communist workers' movement and anti-caste movement of pre-independence India. The blend of Marxist ideology and anti-caste movement produced friction and had detrimental effect on Dalit politics later. Through Dalit literature, the writers desired to revolutionise and upend power hierarchies in literature and beyond—in socio-political domains. The author points 'Dalit literature fashioned its own genealogy and utopian future that would overcome a present filled with misery and shape a new social harmony, a new life and a new Dalit self' (p. 128).

Chapter 5 continues to delineate and engage with the political context and spatial changes that determined the themes/content of Dalit literature and the ultimate fate of the politics it envisioned. Juned situates the ambitions, conundrums, and contradiction of Dalit leaders and their politics in the movement of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS) which demanded the creation of Marathi speaking province. SMS succeeded in receiving an unequivocal support from a wide array of political groups and leaders including Dalits. In 1960 the Marathi speaking state, Maharashtra, came into existence and the newly elected state government took the role of upholding the Marathi literature and culture at a time when Dalits began writing. The chapter specifically focuses in depth on writings of the two icons of the Dalit literary movement, Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul, who are also the founders of the Dalit Panther Movement. Marxist understanding of the writers conjoins in Dalit writings. Their literature centred on the precariat and alienated life of slum dwellers (sex workers, children, pimps, criminals), interprets the human inter-relationships as a tradable commodity. It maintains that 'the city commodifies everything' (p. 156). For overlooking the voices of Dalit women and appropriating their bodies to depict the tribulations of urban Dalit, Juned implicates male Dalit writers of being 'suspended within a power hierarchy' (p. 141). However, Dalit Sahitya introduced the world of Marathi literature to unexplored spatial universe existing in the city, unfamiliar words, and concepts. Dalit Sahitya was recognised by Marathi literati and the provincial government. To prevent the formation of counter-hegemonic force, the state patronised Dalit writers/leaders by conferring state awards/employment/housing. Both Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul were the recipients of the state awards. Further, ideological differences among the leaders and financial dependence on other political groups caused the political factionalism in Dalit politics. As the author concludes 'the broader ambition of these writers ... remained a dream' (p. 177).

To conclude, the book highlights the intricate processes through which caste transforms into class to reproduce both labour and capital in urban space. While spatial segregation of Dalits in cities is not new, the book historically traces the tacit mechanisms reproducing spatial separation in urban settings and how it thwarts the attempts of transforming the entrenched hierarchical social order.

The book is rich in details and offers several novel insights. For instance, it has discussed the way Dalit leaders including B.R Ambedkar pressed the state to provide separate housing for Dalits in the city.

Ambedkar believed separate housing arrangements for Dalits in the city would empower them to grapple with the dominance of upper castes. This is contrary to his argument on village. Ambedkar had maintained that caste-based spatial segregation in villages aids in sustaining untouchability and subjugation of Dalits. Apart from this, the book is important and a valuable contribution for two more reasons. First, it fills the paucity in academic focus on the life of caste in urban settings. Second, it broadens our understanding of Dalit politics which largely remains centred on the political efforts of a few key Dalit leaders such as B. R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. History provides an important entry point to understand the contemporary arrangement of the urban spaces and inequalities in seemingly secular and modern metropolitan cities. The book offers a historical perspective and several insights to rethink urban space, contemporary caste, and urban Dalits. The book is a useful resource for those in the fields of urban studies and caste studies.

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