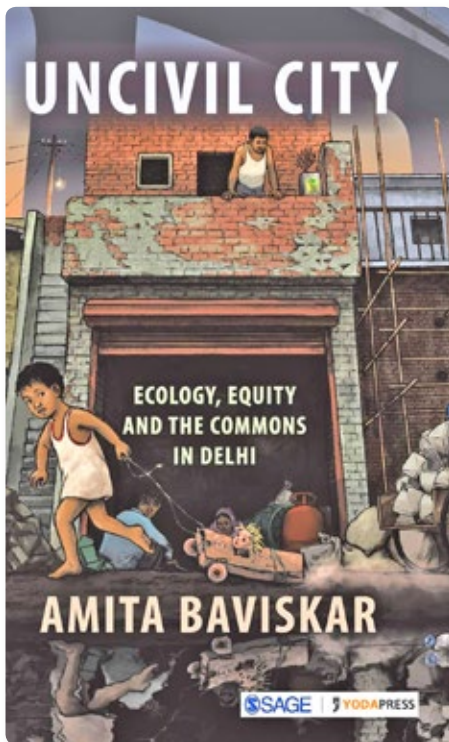


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# BOURGEOIS ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE VULNERABILITY OF THE POOR



UNCIVIL CITY  
ECOLOGY, EQUITY AND THE COMMONS IN DELHI  
Author Amita Baviskar  
Published by SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2020  
Size 146 x 216 mm, 300 Pages  
Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-93-5328-940-9

The modern history of the development of the structure and open spaces of the city of Delhi has seen a number of watershed moments. There are events and times that have challenged, stretched and shaped the city. These include the urgent construction needed to house millions of Partition refugees who came to the city after Independence; the first Master Plan of 1962 and the steps taken to develop the city on its basis; the steps taken during the Emergency; the development for the 1982 Asian Games; the late 1980s DDA-builder partnerships on the city periphery. These and the inevitability of the creation of *jhuggi* clusters and 'slum' *bastis*; the closing of industrial units in the city between 1996 and 2000; the work undertaken to create a 'world-class city' for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, attempts at regulating traffic and pollution in Delhi have all been outlined by Amita Baviskar with the hitherto under-defined sub-texts of their ecological and social costs in her book *Uncivil City*.

'*Uncivil City*' is based on a series of papers written between 2002 and 2018, that have been edited and 'knitted together' in 2018 to form a coherent narrative with close connections between the environment, environmentalism and social inequality. The papers bestride a position that combines scholarship and advocacy, focusing strongly on the human cost of environmental legislations.

One of the first things that strikes one about the book is its' readability. Dr. Baviskar wears her erudition and her international reputation as a social sciences scholar lightly. Her deep affection for the city of Delhi, shines through as she introduces the book in the first chapter. She writes of experiences and memories from her days in Maurice Nagar and the Delhi University campus, a simpler time when one could still find nature as a clearly intertwined part of many areas of the city.

The three main aspects that the book examines are:

- the unequal distribution of power of citizens to define and deal with environmental issues
- the difficulty of understanding 'nature' and ecology when they exist in a complex, fragmented and often degraded state in a city like Delhi
- that ecology and justice have suffered in urban environments due to the middle-class priority of trying to impose social and spatial order

The book also looks at factors that are central to Delhi's identity, its 'republic of the street' and our treatment of the Ridge and the Yamuna river, first as 'non-place' and later as commercial resource. The preparation of Delhi Master Plans over the years have tried to plan the city's growth in a systematic and logical manner but have left significant gaps in their provisions. Where were the people to be housed who would first build and later service this 'new' Delhi?

The author targets the city's 'bourgeois environmentalists' who fail to comprehend the complex inter-relationships of life in the city, and whose initiatives have served neither ecological or social justice. The actions of these environmentalists, the judicial system and governments, though meant in the 'best interests of the public' have often led to judgements that are arbitrary and especially harsh to the poor.

The author critiques the concept of aesthetic environmentalism and its implication that anything looking messy is bad for the environment, which has often led to selective justice through indiscriminating verdicts. She documents the attempt to solve the problem of sewage polluting the Yamuna by clearing *jhuggis* housing 350,000 people; they were contributing only 0.1% of the sewage actually going in. Demolitions between 2000 and 2004 displaced 800,000 people. The closing of all industrial units, polluting and non-polluting, dealt a body-blow to Delhi's economy and the livelihoods of millions of people, just when liberalization had begun to strengthen the city's financial systems. The chronic lack of affordable housing meant that only a small fraction of families was 'resettled'. As the people who depended on the river for their livelihood were excluded, the river banks were commodified. Official encroachments had already been happening for many years, including power plants, sports facilities, depots etc. The book traces the building of the Akshardham Temple, institutional and commercial buildings and the Commonwealth Games Village. A petition against the building of the CWG village was dismissed by the court, since it was situated 'neither on a riverbed, nor a floodplain!' The years hence have shown that the seasonal rhythms and ebb and flow of the river will always have the decisive say on these issues.



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Over the years, it has been the poor of Delhi who suffer the most at the hands of environmental activism, even though of all city-dwellers, they have the lowest ecological footprint. Loss of livelihood, displacement of habitation and other forms of exclusion, lack of basic health and sanitation facilities have affected the fringes [both metaphorical and actual] of Delhi since the building of the city in the early 1950s onwards.

The current angst-filled discourse on the Central Vista strikes a resonance with the issue that is raised in the book, on the lack of democratic dialogue on the city. The single-point decision making for the 'revamp' of this space, without consultations with the people who use it, is symptomatic of the way we 'design' our cities and its sub-parts. The top-down planning approach has created a city that is polluted, congested, dirty, divided and swiftly moving towards unliveability. The author criticizes this approach, but does not whole-heartedly recommend the construct of unplanned, informal cities; she recognizes however, that this '*jugaad*' method of growth creates impromptu, synergetic and important inter-connections between people and systems that develop organically. These organic connections of 'cows, cars and cycle-rickshaws' are also vital in our own city, as threads that keep this chaotic, messy urban-rural conglomeration functioning in its own unique way. As the author says, "...the planned and readable city is a fiction."

Deep inequalities in our civil society have existed for decades. There is no easy solution to these issues; compromises due to political and administrative exigencies have ensured that the inequalities persist and often deepen. The author challenges this unequal and uncivil city, calling for new alliances and new ways of thinking, for connections and discourse that are civil on multiple levels, by recognizing the rights of the poorest on the facilities and spaces of the city. There are social connections that we must all establish between economic levels as citizens who want our city to be liveable, clean and inclusive. Among these connections, it is vital to also find mechanisms by which the poor and marginalized can find ways to voice their opinions and concerns. After all, in most cases of planning intervention, we are modifying places where people already live, work and play. We must find ways of helping the poorest in their quest for lives of greater dignity and fulfillment. We will not be able to achieve everything quickly, but we must make a start on this. It is important to now move beyond what the author calls 'middle-class visions of the ideal city'.

Dr. Baviskar writes from a sociologist's standpoint; her key interests are people of all economic and social levels and the effects that decisions by city-makers have on such groups and sub-groups. This is inevitable, given her background and her message is important for this very reason. There are important things in this book for all of us to think about. As planners, architects, landscape architects and urban designers, ecologists and environmental activists, we must acknowledge that our decisions have social repercussions, and in the case of the uncivil city, these are borne to an unfair degree, by the poorest and most vulnerable of its citizens.

