D. Asher Ghertner: Rule by aesthetics: world-class city making in Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2015, 272 pp

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<td>As Published</td>
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<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Springer India</td>
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<td>Version</td>
<td>Author’s final manuscript</td>
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<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/110455">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/110455</a></td>
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The demolition and clearance of “JJ clusters” (jhuggijhopri clusters/squatter settlements) in Delhi in the first decade of the 21st century resulted in the displacement of approximately one million people, i.e. about 6% of the total population of Delhi. There can be little doubt that “slum clearance” on such a massive scale was a form of class warfare carried out by Delhi’s elites against the working classes. And yet, the metaphor of “warfare” seems inappropriate to describe events which produced little controversy, except among those immediately affected. How was such a drastic programme of urban cleansing conceived and implemented, and why was the resistance it generated so splintered, weak and ineffectual?

In Rule by Aesthetics, Asher Ghertner argues that this dramatic restructuring of the city could be enacted successfully because state institutions, and the judiciary in particular, set aside the “calculative instruments of map, census, and survey” and instead inaugurated a “mode of governing space on the basis of codes of appearance”. This was made possible by the “dissemination of a… world-class aesthetic”, and the “cultivation of a viewing public that takes part in that very vision.” So powerful was the allure of the “world-class aesthetic” that even the victims of “world-class” city making were instilled with “a will to participate in its discourse and to make its visual criteria their own.” While partaking in this aesthetic discourse did not denote consent for violent demolition, Ghertner argues that it was a response to the constraints of the political environment in which “jhuggi dwellers’ political demands were rendered mere noise”.

Rule by Aesthetics consists of six eminently readable chapters, through which Ghertner traces the emergence and working of a new aesthetic discourse in millennial Delhi. In the first two chapters, he shows how the two main forces behind Delhi’s slum clearance programme – real estate developers and the propertied middle-class – came to occupy important nodes in its governance structure. Chapter 3 attempts to deconstruct boosterist projections of economic mobility in India, conjured using questionable statistics to induce investor confidence in the real estate sector. Ghertner argues that, in millennial Delhi, these projections primarily served an aesthetic purpose by “pointing to the future”. Chapter 2 contains an ethnographic account of the Bhagidari scheme, and its crucial role in consolidating middle-class resident welfare associations as powerful political actors in Delhi’s governance landscape and constricting the “vernacular state spaces” accessible to residents of squatter settlements.

The meat of the book is contained in Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on how jhuggies and their residents came to be seen as a “nuisance,” first in everyday speech, and then in legal petitions and judicial pronouncements. In chapter 3, Ghertner examines how commonplace utterances (e.g. “slums are dirty”) get transformed from “a medium for expressing taste or opinion” into performative statements with the “power to name what is proper and improper”. He argues that participation in these discourses generates legitimacy for “a political and material process of abjection” – in this case a city-wide slum clearance programme. Chapter 4 focuses on the judiciary as an institutional site where the nuisance discourse came to be employed for this purpose. In the first instance, whereas nuisance law had previously applied to objects and activities, courts in millennial Delhi rearticulated the legal provision to turn the “slum” itself into a nuisance category, thus rationalizing the need to remove entire settlements. When these clearance orders ran into bureaucratic delays and manipulations related to the process of resettlement – Ghertner calls this the “crisis of calculative governmentality” – an impatient judiciary argued that the urgent public interest in ensuring a clean environment for “citizens”
must take precedence over the resettlement process. These arguments had the effect of creating a hierarchy of rights; private claims of property-owning citizens were equated with “public interest” while most jhuggi residents were not even allowed to implead themselves into the judicial process through which their fates were to be determined. As Ghertner concludes, these court orders effected “nothing less than the juridical embourgeoisement of Delhi… and the affirmation of a propertied form of citizenship”.

The final two chapters offer significant additional insight on the process of “world-class” city making based on a thought-provoking ethnographic account of Shiv Camp, a JJ cluster that was trying to come to terms with the inevitability of displacement at the time of fieldwork. In these final chapters, Ghertner examines how the world-class aesthetic works its way through residents of the same “slums” that it seeks to remove and how these residents “make sense of their unbelonging”. Chapter 5 contains a bold and extremely disquieting account of how “marginalized populations are compelled to speak through, identify with, and perform aesthetic dispositions that reinforce their own subordination” by repeating many of the utterances that Ghertner had encountered in middle-class localities (e.g. “slums are filthy”). Ghertner carefully parses the language employed in these forms of speech to show that the aesthetic dispositions of the middle-class had come to occupy the position of the “abstract public” – “the universal nobody who is disgusted by slum bodies”. Throughout this analysis, Ghertner rightly insists that this willingness of jhuggi residents to implicate themselves in the nuisance discourse must not be mistaken for consent or false consciousness; instead, they must be seen as attempts to secure social recognition by “speaking sensibly” within the limits of the existing discursive field.

Chapter 6 argues that imaginations of a “world-class future” for jhuggi residents came to hinge on acquiring a piece of residential land as part of the resettlement process. Jhuggi residents, whose life and labour had been devalued because these weren’t consecrated by property in land, came to enthusiastically believe in “property’s promise to transform the inner tendencies of its possessor.” With most of Delhi’s population joining the bandwagon, the transformative agenda of world-class city making had already become hegemonic.

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Ghertner’s main achievement in Rule by Aesthetics is that he has unpacked the different meanings that “embourgeoisement” and “world-class futures” take on for different social classes based on rigorous fieldwork and analysis. He is at his best when he is dons the role of a linguistic anthropologist (chapters 3-5), analyzing what people say, how they say it, and what they seek to achieve through these speech acts. This methodological rigour has allowed Ghertner to make significant contributions to a field prone to overgeneralizations and a lack of conceptual clarity. One hopes that, rather than being reduced to catchphrases, Ghertner’s novel theoretical formulations will benefit from careful empirical and theoretical scrutiny by scholars of Indian urbanization. Towards this end, I conclude this review by discussing two concerns that I have regarding Ghertner’s theoretical claims.

First, it appears to me that Ghertner exaggerates the noveland disruptive character of “world-class” city making in millennial Delhi, given that the use of aesthetic discourses by elites and state institutions to justify spatial exclusion is a recurring theme in India’s urban history (Beverly, 2011; Sharan, 2006). Second, I believe that Ghertner overstates his case when he argues that calculative instruments of government were replaced by what he calls “aesthetic governmentality”. While he amply demonstrates that the nuisance discourse played an important
role in rationalizing slum clearance, it does not follow that the classificatory regime by which “JJ clusters” were distinguished from other settlement types based on these aesthetic qualities. The place of a settlement in the official classificatory regime was determined based on the more prosaic question of land ownership.¹ In other words, while the aesthetic discourse did indeed play a role in justifying the programme of slum clearance initiated by the judiciary, it does not seem to have congealed into a form of governmentality Ghertner’s assessment, that aesthetic discourses were mobilized by the judiciary to reaffirm the bourgeois rule of property, while the accoutrements of planning (aimed at securing the appropriate arrangement of land uses) and social welfare (aimed at providing for those without access to property) were conveniently swept aside, is highly convincing. However, there is a need for investigating these political shifts in millennial Delhi from a variety of other theoretical perspectives. For instance, regardless of the shifts in discourse and subjectivity that Ghertner has highlighted, a sustained programme of slum clearance would have been unimaginable without the shifts in judicial procedure that allowed Indian courts to acquire such far-reaching powers. The fact that no other Indian city has experienced programmes of urban cleansing on the same scale as Delhi, first during the Emergency and later in the 2000s, suggests that Delhi’s peculiar class structure, political organization, and modes of interest representation might also require further investigation. The fact that such a counter-revolutionary programme could be organized by the judiciary must compel us to look more carefully at the phenomenon of judicial authoritarianism in India, as well as Delhi’s particular susceptibility to these episodes of authoritarian rule.

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References:

¹Ghertner may object to this claim by arguing that the actual ownership of land was, in many cases, unclear. But GautamBhan(2016: 72) estimates that more than 95% of JJ clusters occupy land formally owned by public agencies. Further, Ghertner’s own account of negotiations by Shiv Camp leaders suggests that where public ownership of the land was not clear, summary demolition of the settlement could be avoided, regardless of its aesthetic qualities (chapter 5).