Livio Boni and Marine Carrin-Bouez, *Villes Post-Coloniales en Inde*

Marie-Hélène Zérah

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6246
ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher
Association pour la recherche sur l’Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference
Marie-Hélène Zérah, « Livio Boni and Marine Carrin-Bouez, *Villes Post-Coloniales en Inde* », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Book Reviews, Online since 01 January 2020, connection on 08 July 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6246

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2020.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
Livio Boni and Marine Carrin-Bouez, *Villes Post-Coloniales en Inde*

Marie-Hélène Zéra

**REFERENCES**


1 What is the Indian city, and more specifically, what are post-colonial Indian cities, are the two interrelated questions that this small, informative and unusual volume published by the Presses Universitaires de Provence, uniquely addresses. There is a continuous tension running throughout the book as chapters counterbalance between qualifying the idea of “the Indian city” as a whole, and acknowledging the diversity of “real Indian cities.”

2 The stage is set beginning with the philosophical and psychoanalytical viewpoint taken in the first chapter by Livio Boni and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc. Recalling the manner in which orientalist thinkers (Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Fernand Braudel) classified the Indian city as a singular form of the Oriental despotism that shaped the Euro-centered interpretation of Asia, they underscore the potential of post-colonial thinking to deconstruct knowledge and understand “real” cities and their diversity. This task is taken up by the following four empirical chapters (two on Mumbai by Gérard Djallal Heuzé and Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, one on Ahmedabad by Harald Tambs-Lyche and the last one on Jamshedpur by Marine Carrin-Bouez) that illustrate the fragmented and conflictual spaces of Indian cities through the prism of various subaltern groups (in particular, the intersection of the working class, the slum dwellers and some tribal groups). At the end of the volume, Ranabir Samaddar provides a powerful analysis on urbanism and urbanization, based on his work on Kolkata, authenticating his perspective on the various theories regarding “the Indian city.” His perspective is constituted of three of his previously published texts translated here in
French and a fascinating transcription of a Q&A session held with the authors of this volume and a group of philosophy students at the roundtable that led to this publication. The Q&A discussion is significant in its success in navigating between empirical concerns and larger theoretical reflection. Samaddar goes on to reflect on the neoliberal transformation of Calcutta/Kolkata, embodied in the establishment of new towns, which have expropriated peasants and fishermen and destroyed ecologically sensitive zones. Concurrently, this narrative of Kolkata, which emerges from these three texts, initiates an interpretation of the new frontiers of capitalism (around financialization and the destruction of means of production) and its consequences on social movements. Transcribed in English, it is accessible to a larger audience. Read in its entirety, this volume takes the shape of a triptych, although the fascinating dialogue with Samaddar is listed as an appendix in the table of contents.

Let me now turn to discussing some of the various strands that can be pulled together from these various contributions. I will first engage with the theoretical framing before focusing on the interrelated topics of modernity, hybridity and resistance.

Regarding the theoretical posture of the volume, and despite its interest, there is one core issue left unaddressed. Boni and Sibertin-Blanc provide a synthesis and a critique of the Orientalist thoughts on Asian, and in particular, Indian cities. They underscore some classic stereotypes such as the idea of the inexistence of the Indian city and its exogenous emergence with Mughal and colonial cities (p.23). They criticize the clichéd preconceptions that form the idea that the real “essence” of India lies in its villages. However, they do not directly engage theoretically with the subaltern and post-colonial theorists, such as Gyan Prakash (2002), Partha Chatterjee (2004) or Arjun Appadurai (2000), who have largely deconstructed this knowledge and have influenced recent thinking on cities. Neither do Boni and Sibertin-Blanc empirically explain the impacts of Persian and colonial power on the systems of human settlements. In their text, the term “post-colonial” is both a critical concept as well as an instrument to qualify hybrid and informal Indian cities. As a critical tool, the post-colonial approach enables deconstruction of binary categories such as rural/urban, tradition/modernity, State/civil society that are rooted in European history. In their conclusion, they highlight how the focus on post-coloniality can lead to a profound questioning of Eurocentric knowledge (p.28). That pre-colonialist focus also acts as a shield from other alternative vernacular conceptualization that would lead towards another form of essentialism. Logically, then, the third direction, of the post-colonial as a heuristic tool, is to avoid false alternatives (for instance the hackneyed tension between modernity and tradition) through analytically singular and situated sites of investigation that are not understood through an-historical binaries. Nevertheless, these conclusions, and therefore this introduction, ignores the large body of work in the “provincialization” of Eurocentric knowledge and its more recent ramifications into urban studies in India (Roy 2011a, b; Benjamin 2008; Datta 2015) and elsewhere (Robinson 2006). In a sense, it could almost be seen as a refreshing decision, especially since the term “post-colonial” is often used as a trope to call for a shift of focus in urban studies but does not sufficiently provide methodologies and theoretical foundations for understanding cities across India. This is ironic and gives a very Eurocentric flair to this text (and to the volume in general).

This, however, is not the case of the contributions by R. Samaddar. He does not necessarily engage with these dominant authors in urban studies since all his work has
been rooted in the larger questions of rights and politics for a long time. However, his contribution does speak very clearly to the contemporary debates in geography and urban studies. Taking Kolkata as the site of discussion corresponds with the argument in the critical urban literature that any site is a site of theorization. He also argues forcefully against the perception of the slum as a pathology and an aberration (p.108) taking the position that the slum is at the heart of the city and urban life as argued by Roy (2011b) as well. Samaddar prefers another term than the one of subaltern, which he argues is more productive for anthropologists than political scientists. In his own words: “I used the term ‘multitude’ instead of the word ‘subaltern’ because I thought the former expresses in a more effective way the categories I mentioned above, their respective agencies, their interrelations, and the spectrum of indeterminacy ” (p.126). His interest for the “the multifaceted collective subject” finds resonance with the four earlier empirical chapters.

These chapters are all linked by the categories of modernity and hybridity. Though it is not made explicit, the idea that hybridization is consubstantial with the Indian city(ies) dominates. The notion of hybridity is not defined but it implicitly refers to the imbrication of logics, practices and identities that are always in motion and recomposition. This idea of hybridization also refers to the creative process that straddles categories and identities (the rural vs. the urban, caste vs. class, the worker identity vs. the tribal identity). This becomes apparent in the various empirical chapters that draw our attention to different aspects of this diverse urban world.

A first analytical lens is concentrated on life in the city with a focus on subaltern groups (with the exception of Tambs-Lyche’s chapter on Ahmedabad that looks at the mercantile elite) and the diversity of subaltern voices is very rich and finely characterized. Through material and immaterial circulations, these chapters demonstrate how the city enables construction of new and complex identities that intersect with dimensions of caste, class, regional and linguistic identities. The clearest answer to what can be hybrid is in the article by Djallal-Heuzé: “It is neither modern nor traditional, it is at work” (p.44). In other words, hybridity is the constant daily social churning at work in cities. In many ways, the subaltern groups exhibit an extraordinary inventiveness (Appadurai 1996) and ability to combine multiple dimensions of being urban, thus creating complex cities where variegated identities co-exist. Marine Carrin-Bouez’s text provides a very good illustration of this process. She traces the manner through which the identity of the Santal tribal group is contested and recomposed by the creation of the industrial city of Jamshedpur, built on their ancestral territory. With a fascinating focus of the role of writers and poets, she underscores the manner in which the making of a working-class does not obliterate the resilience of a specific tribal identity shaped through work but also through cultural practices. The cultural strength of Santal literature is helping to resist the erasure of the tribal identity.

This question of struggle and resistance is another central theme of the volume. The chapter by Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky is a very good synthesis of her work on Dharavi (the largest slum of Mumbai and India) where its inhabitants have been able, through different forms of protest, to fight eviction and remain in place. However, she also emphasizes that the multiple identities within the sector create a potential for fragmentation that weakens larger social mobilizations. Indeed, various texts in this collection refer back to the lost battles of factory workers in Mumbai and Ahmedabad.
and on the decline of trade unions. They do not shy away from describing how the complex social fabric made of various social groups creates difficult conditions for a sustained long-term effective form of resistance beyond localized sites. As a consequence, although this is not stated directly, all these texts forecast an intensification of future conflicts over urban resources.

Finally, access to urban resources, such as means of livelihoods for instance, does not in isolation, offer an understanding of the source of this new social fabric. In fact, the importance of maintaining links with the village communities and rural life (in terms of support and networks, as well as lifestyle and representation as well) is noted in the three texts on Mumbai and Jamshedpur. They point to the importance for slum dwellers and working class to maintain connections with the village generating a hybrid form of “being urban,” that does not correspond to the idea of anonymity and alienation which the Chicago school has emphasized. This fine analysis of the relationships between the urban and the rural (both as categories and as lived experiences) opens up a topic of urbanization that only Samaddar engages with directly. He goes beyond discussing the multiple identities of urban citizens and extends the debate to the structure of the complex urban system of cities of various sizes and towns with diverse functions and origins (Mughal towns and their bazaars, port towns and temple towns among others). By doing so, he calls for a balanced development that takes into account small towns. I can only subscribe to his line of argument since I have argued, with others, of the importance of this other facet of Indian urbanization, that is also central to understanding the real diversity of cities (Denis and Zéra 2017).

To conclude, as with any edited volume, coherence is never easily achieved. In some sense, the construction of this volume works as a triptych. The empirical chapters constitute a good introduction to the diversity of Indian cities. The two chapters on Mumbai by Heuzé and Saglio-Yatzimirski are comprehensive syntheses of their large body of work. The chapter on Ahmedabad is also a sound introduction to the socio-history of this industrial and trading city even though the author does not dwell enough on its increasingly exclusionary nature, despite its rapid growth and resulting increase in demand in terms of workforce. The chapter on Jamshedpur provides a very original angle but would have gained from a better connection with the city question per se. Finally, apart from the very interesting dialogue with Samaddar that engages with the theoretical debate on post-colonial cities, students and scholars would have welcomed an original (and critical) reading of the very vibrant literature produced in the last ten years in the Global South as well, leaving a disappointing loophole in this otherwise valuable volume.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. One of them was first published in English in this very same journal: (https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3230?lang=en)
2. Held in Toulouse on May 28, 2014
3. For a good summary of the ongoing debate in this field, see the article of Robinson and Roy (2016) defending post-colonial urban theory and the nuanced critique of Schindler (2017).

AUTHORS

MARIE-HÉLÈNE ZÉRAH
Research Director, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), UMR CESSMA, Université de Paris