



## Book Review

Sadan Jha. (2023). *Social City: Urban Experience and Belonging in Surat*. Oxon: Routledge. Pp. 248. Price: GBP 31.99. ISBN: 9781032406459. Paperback

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Studies on Indian cities have proliferated in the last decade or so to such an extent that it can be legitimately claimed that Indian Urban Studies now constitutes its own unique field of study as part of the general field of Urban Studies. This claim is supported not only by the number of monographs and studies produced on the subject, but by the impact it has had on empirically driven theory-building enterprises within Urban Studies. Several books recognized in this field are pathbreaking, winning awards for its contributions. This exciting field of research can also be inserted into wider debates on cities and the unique urban experience of India that has successfully served to transform the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of Urban Studies, making it a more nuanced and rigorous field. If there is a lacuna at all in this brilliant scholarly range, then it is that most of this research endeavours overemphasize the three cities of Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. While other cities are being studied too, especially in recent times, it is not incorrect to critically note the scholarly skew favouring the Big Three. It is in this context that Sadan Jha's *Social City* makes a substantial contribution to understanding a city that is unique in terms of temporal and spatial location. To this end, this review is also slightly different from the other usual book reviews. Instead of going into an extended description of the book's contents, this review discusses some parts of the book which are specially illuminating and generative for future reflection and research. I think this mode fitting as the book also starts with Jha's heartfelt reminiscences of coming to Surat to live and work there. The image of him, his family with luggage on a train teeming with people evokes an enduring image of migration and the charms and travails of any big aspirational and dynamic city full of dreamers. At the same time, the same image also evokes the experience of struggle, survival, and of belonging to a city.

Sadan Jha's *Social City*, not unlike the city it studies, is a book of many parts. As an academic work it has all aspects required to make a rigorous and complexly argued book. In fact, the intellectual traditions it marshals that situates its core conceptual framework is wide in scope and leads readers to interesting results. Its bibliography includes the usual Urban Studies foundational figures such as Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and Georg Simmel among others. However, it is the detailed exposition on "dwelling" as postulated by Martin Heidegger and its brilliant use in the monograph's chapter on Surat's marketplace, that is one of the remarkable highlights of the book. In between these expositions, Jha comes up with other aphoristic propositions as well such as "trust as a spatially located concept" (p. 191). The only quibble one can have in this regard is that these stirring phrases could have been further unpacked and explored for their potential multi-directionality. I am sure that future researchers in the field of urban studies will take these up for further study. As a reviewer I can only implore Jha to reflect more on these concepts in his own future works.

The book is dedicated to one of the pioneers of Indian Sociology late Professor I.P. Desai. Desai was the founder of Centre for Social Studies Surat, one of the most important institutions of Social Sciences in India. Sadan Jha uses Desai's formulation of the "Surat Way" of urbanization and social relations in the city as an initial analytical lens for his book. Important for Jha's study,

this gambit also opens up space to think more about research institutions and their modes of knowledge production, and of the way in which the city is understood. One of the lesser explored themes in Urban Studies concerns how knowledge institutions shape our understanding of places in which they are situated. Of course, while the Bombay School of Sociology or the Lucknow School of Sociology constituted independent epistemic and institutional hubs, their development mostly indicates the approaches these institutions took, and did not necessarily focus on their relationship with the city itself. Jha's book is one of the first major works that indicates this possibly: a profitable way of studying the connection between new approaches to institutional archives, and the location of these great research institutions within the same city.

Jha's book is a major contribution to our understanding of how caste operates in cities. As he rightly points out, while caste has been extensively studied in the context of villages these findings may not be true for cities. He thus makes caste the central analytical focus of his study. Chapter 3, *Dalit Desires and the City* is especially moving in this regard. His interaction with Rita especially brings out, not only a complex intersectionality of gender and caste, but how this intersectionality is at the core of the city's spatial formation. Both through archival research and testimonies from dwellers of Surat the book is a painstaking cartography of how intracity movement occurs, informed by business and caste which are entangled in a complex web of relationships. In fact, it requires a close reading of the book in order for us to appreciate the vicissitudes of business and caste groups associated with each other that lead to temporal and spatial transformation. Intracity movements as a result of caste-work transformation also changes caste spaces in the city, while changing workspaces. As Jha presents readers with a dynamic evolutionary geography of Surat in terms of caste, capital, commerce, and work, one also wonders if it is indeed possible to conceptualize these population movements as migration, and if one does, then how best to situate this mobility within the definitions of migration available in academic and governmental literature. This book offers a tantalizing invitation to explore this intellectual strand further.

Despite Jha's magnificent analytical framework on spatiality, intracity movements, aspiration, neighbourhood and place making, primarily through the production of subjectivities around caste, there are a few things that could have been developed in a more deliberate and expansive way. One of them is the relationship between caste and work. It would have been helpful to understand the trajectory of various caste groups while joining and leaving some forms of work that are included either as appendices or in boxes in the chapter. This would have helped readers to follow the maze of caste-work entanglement in Surat that led to its development as a city. Another question that kept reoccurring while reading of the intricacies of caste and work is, if there was inter-caste competition in work sectors, how did this affect work/ business? And how did this affect the development of the city? For sure, Jha draws a meticulous picture of how different castes entered and exited certain businesses, but a discussion on rivalries between caste groups would have been extremely interesting for understanding the intersections between caste, spatiality, and neighbourhood. Similarly, when Jha discusses 'otherness' in terms of everyday articulations and behavioural dimensions, I really wanted more information on ritualistic aspects associated with caste. While there is some mention in the book about worship and temples associated with certain caste groups, I think a detailed discussion on the production of caste subjectivities would have been enriching. This would have also brought the multi-cultural aspects of the city to the surface, especially given Jha's rich use of literary allusions. However, these observations are more in nature of wanting more than to identify any lacuna. This review ends by declaring *Social City* by Sadan Jha as an essential read for its scope, both in terms of empirical rigour as well as its theoretical contributions.