A city of extraordinary economic growth and innovation, Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth Century India. But the reason for its shocking nature does not lie in the demise of its enlightened, civic-minded elite. The roots of Ahmedabad’s shocking politics lies in the shocking lack of concern of this elite for the welfare of less privileged citizens.

Ward Berenschot

Reviewed publication:

Feel-good movie turns nightmare
Ahmedabad’s twentieth century started upbeat as some of India’s most prominent businessmen and nationalist leaders – including Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel – worked together to turn a regional backwater into a political and commercial beacon for the rest of India. But as economic liberalization and Hindu-nationalism swept through the city, the result was far from a happy ending. Ahmedabad in the early twenty-first century combines high levels of economic growth with the social marginalization of a sprawling underclass, strong segregation between caste- and religious groups and high levels of Hindu-Muslim violence.

Spodek used his extensive familiarity with the city and its inhabitants to tell this story of decline – his first visit to Ahmedabad was in 1964 – and has produced a well-documented and engaging account of how a well-educated, civic-minded elite gradually lost their command role as Ahmedabad became a “capitalist city out of control.” In the first and second part of the book, Spodek appears in awe of his subjects as he describes how Ahmedabad’s relatively progressive textile barons cooperated with some of India’s finest Congress leaders to forge the city’s infrastructure and establish important cultural and social institutions such as the Textile Labour Association (TLA), the Indian Institute of Management and, later, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). With chapter-titles such as Ambalal Sarabhai and Kasturbhai Lalbhai Build an Industrialized, Westernized, Prosperous, Cultured, World-Class Company Town? Spodek paints an alluring picture of an enlightened elite who, because of their wisdom and civic-mindedness, spurred economic growth, prevented Hindu-Muslim strife and avoided labour militancy. “By providing such mutual support for each other, the Ahmedabad leaders (...) reaped benefits for others, it is not surprising that common Ahmedabadi’s have been trying to use their advantage in numbers to replace these upper-caste elites by electing their own kin. In this, Ahmedabad mirrors the "silent revolution" that has taken place throughout India (in general Spodek makes too little effort to show the parallels and relation of Ahmedabad’s history with other (Indian) cities). Secondly, the disregard of Ahmedabad’s elite for maintaining or developing strong institutions that could address the everyday struggles of poorer citizens (e.g., legal aid, health care, education, sports, etc.) made these citizens susceptible to promises made by Hindu-nationalist organizations in marginalized neighbourhoods that have developed their popularity by offering inhabitants much-needed access to healthcare and other (state) resources. These organizations gain popularity through the lack of alternative organizations offering these services. Furthermore, in the light of the precarious nature of their livelihoods it is not surprising that access to governmental jobs and other state resources are considered very valuable – which makes poorer neighbourhoods even more vulnerable to manipulation by politicians who promise to provide these resources. The failure of Ahmedabad’s municipal corporation to compete with Ahmedabad’s municipal corporation in catering for basic amenities, like water and sanitation, have stimulated poorer citizens to nurture clientelistic ties with local politicians. In the absence of adequate public service provision, citizens need to use their vote instrumentally to reward whoever promises to provide, for example, an electricity connection. Finally, as particularly lower caste citizens and Muslims have felt the biased attitude of Gujarat’s judiciary, it is not surprising that their respect for the rule of law (let alone the tax system) is limited and that flambouyant criminals are held in awe. 

Cautionary tale
It is unfortunate that Spodek has largely missed this connection between Ahmedabad’s ‘shocking’ forms of politics and the social outlook of its elites. Ahmedabad deserves scholarly attention because its rising economic elite who, because of their wisdom and civic-mindedness, spurred economic growth, prevented Hindu-Muslim strife and avoided labour militancy. “By providing such mutual support for each other, the Ahmedabad leaders (...) reaped benefits for others, it is not surprising that common Ahmedabadi’s have been trying to use their advantage in numbers to replace these upper-caste elites by electing their own kin. In this, Ahmedabad mirrors the "silent revolution" that has taken place throughout India (in general Spodek makes too little effort to show the parallels and relation of Ahmedabad’s history with other (Indian) cities). Secondly, the disregard of Ahmedabad’s elite for maintaining or developing strong institutions that could address the everyday struggles of poorer citizens (e.g., legal aid, health care, education, sports, etc.) made these citizens susceptible to promises made by Hindu-nationalist organizations in marginalized neighbourhoods that have developed their popularity by offering inhabitants much-needed access to healthcare and other (state) resources. These organizations gain popularity through the lack of alternative organizations offering these services. Furthermore, in the light of the precarious nature of their livelihoods it is not surprising that access to governmental jobs and other state resources are considered very valuable – which makes poorer neighbourhoods even more vulnerable to manipulation by politicians who promise to provide these resources. The failure of Ahmedabad’s municipal corporation to compete with Ahmedabad’s municipal corporation in catering for basic amenities, like water and sanitation, have stimulated poorer citizens to nurture clientelistic ties with local politicians. In the absence of adequate public service provision, citizens need to use their vote instrumentally to reward whoever promises to provide, for example, an electricity connection. Finally, as particularly lower caste citizens and Muslims have felt the biased attitude of Gujarat’s judiciary, it is not surprising that their respect for the rule of law (let alone the tax system) is limited and that flambouyant criminals are held in awe.

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