

Kidambi, Prashant. 2007. *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920*. Aldershot: Ashgate, Historical Urban Studies. 268 pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 5612 8 (hardback)

Bombay on the brink of modernity



Bombay, Kalbadevie Road, 1890.

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The core of this book covers a rather short period of Bombay's social history: 30 years that spanned the turn of the 20th century and included the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Using an enormous amount and variety of primary and secondary sources, Kidambi analyses important changes in the relationship between society and local government.

The plague and the poor

After an introductory chapter on the 19th century, the author addresses three areas of governmental action: its responses to a major outbreak of plague, attempts to engage in social housing and restructuring of the local police. In Chapter 4, on fighting the bubonic plague epidemic of the late 1890s, Kidambi describes the two prevalent ways of approaching and fighting plague. The first addressed the disease as a product of locality-specific conditions of filth and squalor, while the second emphasised the human body as a disease-carrier that required quarantine. Kidambi presents a thorough, impressive and sophisticated essay on these two approaches, but he fails to point out the obvious role played by rats (and fleas). As Tindall writes in her book on Bombay, 'the generally accepted view was that...it was rat-borne' (page 253).

The plague epidemic made local elites realise that the miserable and unhealthy living conditions of the urban poor had to be improved. That meant demolishing dilapidated slums and building social housing, a responsibility that fell to the Bombay Improvement Trust. Kidambi concludes, after another impressive and detailed analysis, that the Trust largely failed to improve housing and sanitary conditions of Bombay's poor; it functioned more effectively in demolishing dilapidated houses than in creating new housing units. Hence the urban poor became more vulnerable in 1920 than they were a few decades earlier, while many remaining houses became even more overcrowded. Kidambi shows how the Trust became powerless in the power politics of a wide range of local elites, notably the propertied Indians.

Though social housing proved to be woeful, Kidambi shows how sanitation practices, housing and the creation of a restructured police force transformed Bombay into a modern city according to the British model. The key to success was the increasing interventionist approach in urban governance in contrast to the erstwhile apathetic attitude among local rulers towards the growing 'unintended' city and its inhabitants.

Civil society and the pre-Gandhian roots of social service

The author next addresses the growth of civil society and its institutionalisation. Many of the clubs, societies and trusts that proliferated were of what Kidambi calls a 'hybrid' organisational nature, combining voluntary and ascribed membership criteria. Some dwelled on caste or religion, while others were built upon Western norms of association and goals. Thus the emerging civil society showed a remarkable hodgepodge of organisations, through which Kidambi skilfully pilots the reader. He discusses a novel aspect of civil society: its educated elites began to participate in forms of social activism aimed at uplifting the masses. The term 'social service' is used in this respect, a term that is normally associated with Gandhi but that should also invoke its pre-Gandhian roots, such as those in Bombay. Moreover, Kidambi

observes that the emerging practice of social service was undertaken not by members of empowered sections of local society, but by outsiders: the Anglophone intelligentsia took charge of this new social reform movement.

Present-day societal characteristics and comparisons appear (surprisingly) in the conclusion. Comparisons of the failures of the Bombay Improvement Trust can be made with attempts by (semi)public bodies in independent India to house the urban poor, say, from the 1950s onwards. The tragic failures to act beyond demolishing the houses and huts of the urban poor and provide some sort of social housing reveal a macabre comparison to the failed civic consciousness of present-day local elites with those of Kidambi's Bombay.

Kidambi's book is an excellent study. Bombay emerges as a modern Indian city ruled according to the Western norms and ideas of running a city and shaping its civil society. Any student of Indian urban history should read it, though it is not entirely without its faults, however minor they might be. Bombay was obviously not made between 1890 and 1920. It is even debatable whether these three decades form a 'watershed era in Bombay's evolution as a modern city', as Kidambi claims (page 9). The city's social history began in the 17th century, and the mid-19th century was a dramatic episode of industrialisation, technological development and adaptations to changing societal conditions. Dossal and Albuquerque show the impact of the Industrial Revolution on Bombay society, including the emergence of an industrial proletariat. The author could have given more attention to earlier economic foundations that influenced subsequent social changes. Nevertheless, Kidambi has written a fascinating book.

References

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