

Cities and Protests

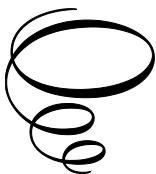
Cities and Protests:

Perspectives in Spatial Criticism

Edited by

Mamta Mantri

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Cities and Protests: Perspectives in Spatial Criticism

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For all those who question!

For all those who protest!

For all those who stand for justice and freedom!

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I am very thankful to my contributors – the young blood – for they have shaped the book to where it is today. This book is also an ode to the vitality of the youth, which leads us through troubling times, such as these. They thought, they wrote, they discussed, they edited, and they did it all during these harrowing times induced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

My friends, my family, this is for you too.

But most importantly, this book is thankful to and a tribute to every single person out there, who believes in justice and freedom and stands till the last moment to gain them.

FOREWORD

As I write this foreword, farmers in India sit in protest for more than 6 months against the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020) outside the borders of the capital city of Delhi. They were in constant communication with the state, but it refused to give into their demands and continues to do so. Now there is no conversation between the two sides.

When I went to the protest site at the Singhu border sometime in December, some 12 kilometers away from Jahangir Puri metro station, the only thing I found myself thinking was, “None of this is fair. Why can’t the farmers be allowed to come to Delhi and protest at the ‘designated’ Jantar Mantar and Ramleela grounds? Why do they have to be stopped at the borders?” The state has used all kinds of spatial strategies to block the farmers from reaching the capital city: roads leading to the capital city at all its three borders were dug up to impede movement, barricades of all sorts were put up across the border, heavy policing was employed, tear gas and water cannons were used, and protestors were beaten up.

Repressive measures not only repress actions but also aid the creation of alternative spaces. When official sites of protest are out of bounds, common people use available spaces to register their dissent. More than six kilometers of road space have been occupied and farmers have settled there in their trolleys and tractors, preparing, eating and feeding food to the poor and ‘fellow urban protestors’ around. Regular traffic has been diverted through other routes by the administration to avoid further inconvenience to the economy and the country, which have been ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. The state’s view appeared to be that because disruption was relatively minor, let them keep protesting and creating alternative spaces. It hasn’t mattered to the state until now!

On January 26, 2021, the 72nd Republic Day of India, farmers arrived in Delhi on their trucks (without trollies) and paraded on the routes agreed by the police and the state on the Outer Ring Road. They said, “Where else shall we go to? Shall we go to Pakistan or to China? This is our Delhi. We all have the right to come here.” But a certain section – the youth, especially – reached Red Fort (one of the oldest symbols of state power) and hoisted their religious flag on the ramparts. This episode ended in violence and later reports suggest that this violence happened in conjunction with the police and state.

Today at least 13 layers of barricades ensure that journalists and common people walk tens of kilometers to reach the other side of the city. The roads have been dug up, and cement slabs and pillars have

been put on the ground. Then are stationed the state police vehicles, Patrolman First Class vehicles, Central Industrial Security Force vehicles, Rapid Action Force vehicles, ambulance, cranes, trollies, and other construction related vehicles. Iron nails have been cemented onto the road, so that tractor tyres blow out if they attempt to enter the capital. Rows of concertina wires, iron barricades, other barricades with cement poured in between them, have spatially distanced the ‘once-favorite-now-terrorist’ farmers and made them understand the authoritarian attitude of the state. These barriers have also ensured that the farmers do not get water from Delhi and therefore have to plan for supplies from elsewhere. What does this mean? Is it a display of power in space? Is the state scared of the farmers? Why doesn’t the state want the common people to interact with the protestors? What does this kind of distancing achieve? Doesn’t the state understand that its repressive measures cause inconvenience to residents’ daily lives?

The protestors haven’t blocked any means of communication. It is the state that undertakes these tasks, but has put the entire onus on them. The Shaheen Bagh protest did not cause any inconvenience, but the road blocked by the police between Delhi and Noida did, as they isolated the protest site by not allowing commuters to pass through. Farmers wanted permission to protest at designated sites, but the state did not allow this. And there is a long list of other protests that did and do not get permissions by the police.

The whole point of the protest – to cause inconvenience and demand attention – has become so diluted that the already divided Indian society gets torn further into two parts. The same attitude of divisiveness was seen during the anti CAA protests (Citizenship Amendments Act) at Shaheen Bagh and other such spaces across India. Pro Right wing and state supporters come up with new anti-national descriptions for the protestors almost every day on the internet or through interviews to the media. And the state remains silent and takes no action to address these labels or bridge the gaps. In fact, the state thrives on it. In fact, the Prime Minister himself has used the word ‘parasite’ to describe the protestors.

A sentiment of unfairness lies in the spatiality of the protests. Democracy requires public spaces to function, but that is undermined and unavailable now, and therefore, freedom and democracy are under threat more than ever. As the state takes decisions without any public consent, the lack of access to public spaces makes it much easier to do so. As people get reduced to just consumers and lose their socio-political roles, spatial arrangements, or the lack of them, pronounce a loss of connection with others’ stories and a sense of ‘we’; and, in turn, the spaces that ‘place’ these narratives. This causes erosion of the fundamental concerns of, and weakens, the democracy in the long run.

No one can tell what will happen next. But many thoughts arise. How do protests occur in discussion and accordance with the state? How

do citizens respect and protest against the state at the same time? What role does violence play in such protests, except for hurting the moral and ethical responsibilities of the protestors, as state oppression reaches new heights every day? What is the meaning of a city now? Who does the city belong to? How does a city get belonged? It is known that various 'cities' can exist within a particular city. Of the many cities in any city, a new kind has also emerged: the protestors' city. These cities, in standing against the state, have created their own socio-economic ecosystems, sometimes dependent on and sometimes independent of the city they are based in, building hopes that a peaceful and just space can be created. As the adamant state (like others all around the world) chooses to not pay heed to the protestors, these city-spaces inspire democracy and liberty, and pave the way for the creation of new forms of arts and culture.

This book is a selection of chapters that understand the various dimensions about the interactions between cities and protests, under the paradigm of spatial criticism. Without delving into the meaning and perspectives of spatial criticism in greater detail here (as it has been dealt with in each chapter), it should suffice to say that spaces, both private and public, facilitate interaction between individuals and communities, and generate a sense of encounter and belongingness. These dynamics are a prolific source for academic, literary and cultural reproductions. When people come together to raise their voices of dissent in these spaces (or newer ones) in the cities, a large

domain of enquiry opens up in urban studies and cultural materialism.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section throws light on the need for protests. Zeba Rizvi's story-illustration opens the book with the biggest question of why protests are required, using the metaphor of a cat and his owner, in *Sorry (Not) for the Inconvenience*. The second chapter, *Understanding the Place of Protest Through Spatial Criticism*, which I wrote, establishes the paradigms in spatial criticism for understanding protests in a city. At least seven paradigms have been articulated to comprehend urban protests as a form of socio-spatial restructuring and reimagining of a nation and identity, with the added intention of reading protests and resistance as texts of spatial history that must be enhanced with literary and creative texts.

Shaoni Pramanik explores the space where most protests begin – in the space of the university. In *Where There Was Noise: Reclaiming spaces across Kolkata during the Hok Kolorob movement*, Pramanik writes about the (in)famous Hok Kolorob movement at the Jadavpur University in Kolkata. In a chronological and linear narrative of how the movement began and engaged the city and its dwellers, she throws light on the importance of people's participation. Kolkata, with its strong protest culture, ensured that the Vice Chancellor of the university resigned after the widespread outcry at the violence

meted out by him towards the students, forcing the Chief Minister of the state to intervene.

The next three chapters are devoted to feminist protests, under Section II – Protests For and By Women. In *Indian Feminist Movements in the 21st Century*, Shruti Sareen writes about the many feminist movements that have emerged in this century. These movements, conceptualized and propagated by women, have spread through social media and found incredible responses in physical spaces. Swati Bakshi writes about the protests that arose in response to the 2012 rape case in Delhi in *Delhi Rape Protests of 2012 From a Spatial Perspective*. She describes primarily how the historical narrative and demographic features of a city interact with a protest and influence the framing of it. Zeba Rizvi illustrates the famous protest song against gender violence – *Un Violadoren Tu Camino* – as a tribute to the ever-resilient spirit of women across the world who raise their voices, register dissent and fight against the patriarchy.

The next three chapters are an exploration of how spaces enable or disable resistance, under Section III – The Spatial Politics of Protests. In *Subverting Mainstream Space: How Shaheen Bagh enabled resistance*, Himalika Mohanty writes about the crucial role of the location of Shaheen Bagh in getting the women to sit in protest for more than three months and citizens from all over Delhi coming to show solidarity with them. Sumedha Chakraborty, in *Protesting Peripheries: Exploring the determinants of protest space in three*

neighborhoods of Delhi explores the role of the history and location of a protest site in engaging its citizens to raise their voice. The history of the Turkman Gate encouraged its citizens to keep the traditions of protesting alive; Seelampur and Shaheen Bagh, neighborhoods that are now home to citizens from Old Delhi and Jamia, have kept the old traditions alive there too. The locations of the protest sites have also been explored in great detail. In the chapter titled *In Search of Alternative Spaces: Reconstructing dialectics between space and protest*, Anoop Kumar and I explore, using the examples of Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, how ‘designated’ protest sites undermine the nature and intensity of protests, and why it is so urgent and imperative to create alternative spaces for dissent. Cities, such as Lucknow, Bangaluru, Mumbai and Thiruchirapalli, have been used as examples.

Under Section IV – Expressions of Protests, the last four chapters explore the creative side of the protests. In *A series of Illustrations on Protests Around the World*, Zeba Rizvi draws from protests around the world and creates a series of illustrations about them: Tahrir Square, Baghdad; Beirut and other cities in Lebanon; St Martin’s Square in Lima, Peru; Trump Towers in Manhattan, New York, USA; Santiago, Chile; Pussy Riot in Moscow, Russia and farmers protests in Delhi, India.

In *Cities of Protests and Poetry: The Rhetoric of Urban Dissidence*, Sreejata Roy connects poetry and cities in two ways: showing how

poetry is a means of protest against the inequalities of the city, and how poetry becomes an instrument and expression of resistance in any protest through a series of examples from India. Poets writing about their cities – the Hungryalist movement in Calcutta and Dalit poets from Mumbai – are discussed in the first section, and slogans and poetry from the anti CAA protests are critiqued in the second section. In *Hindi Cinema as a Theater of Protests: Some observations*, Devapriya Sanyal and I write about Hindi cinema as an instrument of protest against the backdrop of the city, through the discussion of three films: ‘*Main Azad Hoon*’, ‘*Shanghai*’ and ‘*Haider*’. When protests are shown in the cinema, or when a particular film uses dissent and protest as its subject matter, it can change viewers’ perceptions about politics and power, and build a better understanding about the role of peace and justice. The chapter also showcases various instances where cinema, cities, and protests merge to create a certain cultural product. A protest can and must have various stories and narratives, apart from the central storyline. Every protestor has a unique story with personal motivations while also having shared aims, and these narratives hold much potential for the understanding of a protest, as seen in these films.

Nayanika Chatterjee’s illustration and note (written by both of us) – *Shaheen Bagh Saunterings* – is a creative expression of our experiences at Shaheen Bagh. Stories, such as this, narrate personal experiences at protest sites. Calling ourselves *flâneuses*, we wish to invite everyone who participates in a protest, to share their own

experiences. These narratives require just as much attention and deliberation while looking at protests through the lens of spatial criticism. All stories matter!

Once again, I am very thankful to the young contributors to the book!

I do hope that you enjoy reading the book, just as much as we all did in its making!

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Mamta Mantri

Dr. Mamta Mantri explores the idea of ‘space’ through different media, in both theory and praxis. She writes about Mumbai and its place in art and culture, especially theater and cinema. Her articles have also featured in prominent Indian journals, including *Cinemaya*, *The Muse India*, and *The Criterion*. She has also worked as a research lead for various historical and architectural engagements, including scenographic museums and heritage conservation projects in India. Following her belief that ‘space’ is also personal, she has created engaging living spaces using Indian crafts and design sensibilities. She has a Ph.D. in English Literature and a Masters in History from the University of Mumbai.

Zeba Rizvi

Zeba has a tough time writing bios as she doesn't like to limit people by mere words. She is an artist and in 2019 she decided to live in different countries in exchange for her art. She was successful in living in four different countries before the pandemic struck. She is on the move but doesn't like to call herself a traveler nor does she enjoy traveling – the intention was to ‘live’ in different countries and not merely travel. She loves meeting people from different cultures

and people with varied perspectives and takes it as the biggest school that the world has to offer. People and their art of expression is what interests her the most and being able to tell the same in different stories, and be told further, is her passion.

Shaoni Pramanik

Shaoni Pramanick is an entrepreneur and business analyst with a background in International Relations and Heritage Management. She tries to balance both her professions, and in between, devote time to academia through her research papers and conference presentations. Her paper in this book *'Where there was noise – reclaiming spaces across Kolkata during the Hok Kolorob movement'* is a personal firsthand account when she was a student of the Jadavpur University during the course of the movement and thus knew it in and out. Apart from this, her interests lie in the various aspects of heritage and its subsequent management which are particularly what her start up 'Khayaal' works with.

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Shruti Sareen, born and brought up in Varanasi, studied at Rajghat Besant School, KFI. Graduating in English from Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, she later earned a PhD in *'Indian Feminisms in the 21st century: Women's Poetry in English'* from the same university which is now forthcoming as a book from Routledge in 2022. She has had over a hundred poems and a handful

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Sumedha Chakravarthy is a researcher at Sarai-CSDS, an urban and media studies lab in Delhi. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from St. Stephen's College, Delhi and Masters in comparative literature from SOAS. She is interested in the lived histories and presents of postcolonial cities as they are variously experienced, constituted, and imagined. At present, her work explores how a range of media, from billboards to cinema, shape life in contemporary Indian cities.

Sreejata Roy

Sreejata Roy is a PhD research scholar in the Department of English, Rabindra Bharati University. She is also engaged in teaching as a State Aided College Teacher in Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College, affiliated to the University of Calcutta. She has been teaching English language and English literature in various capacities for the last five years. Her research interests include urban studies, culture studies and gender studies. Work apart, she tends to be a flâneuse dabbling in visual arts and poetry.

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Devapriya Sanyal has a Ph.D. in English literature from JNU. She is the author of *From Text to Screen: Issues and Images in Schindler's List* (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011) and *Through the Eyes of a Cinematographer: The Biography of Soumendu Roy* (Harper Collins, 2017). When she is not teaching she is usually busy writing and watching world cinema, Bollywood and Bengali cinema. She also loves reading and has a lively interest in sketching, photography and travelling.

Nayanika Chatterjee

Nayanika Chatterjee is currently pursuing her masters in animation at the Royal College of Art, London. She is especially interested in personal narratives in the form of documentary animations. In her free time, she likes to annoy her dog, Stark, and attempt impossible CrossFit workouts.

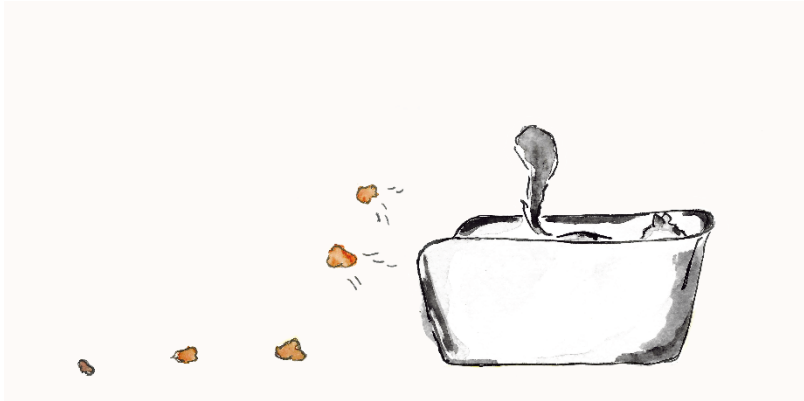
SECTION I –
THE IMPERATIVE FOR PROTESTS

SORRY (NOT) FOR THE INCONVENIENCE

ZEBA RIZVI



Once there was a peace-loving cat. She didn't do much except for grooming herself and taking long naps. She was a good cat.



Until she stopped being a good cat. You see, her person had forgotten to clean her litter box; something he was supposed to do the day he decided to be her person. So the cat started throwing her shit outside the box to protest against the negligence.



Her person noticed the mess that she had made but he could ignore it for some time.



Until he could ignore it no more.



Left with no other choice and not wanting to have his balcony covered in cat shit, finally, he decided to clean it up, thinking to himself, “So... protesting does work after all.”



Of course protests can be inconvenient, they are meant to cause inconvenience because comfort has never made change happen.

We can either get distracted and cry over the burnt buses or try to empathise with the cause.

For Aria.

The 4th smartest cat that I had the pleasure of knowing!