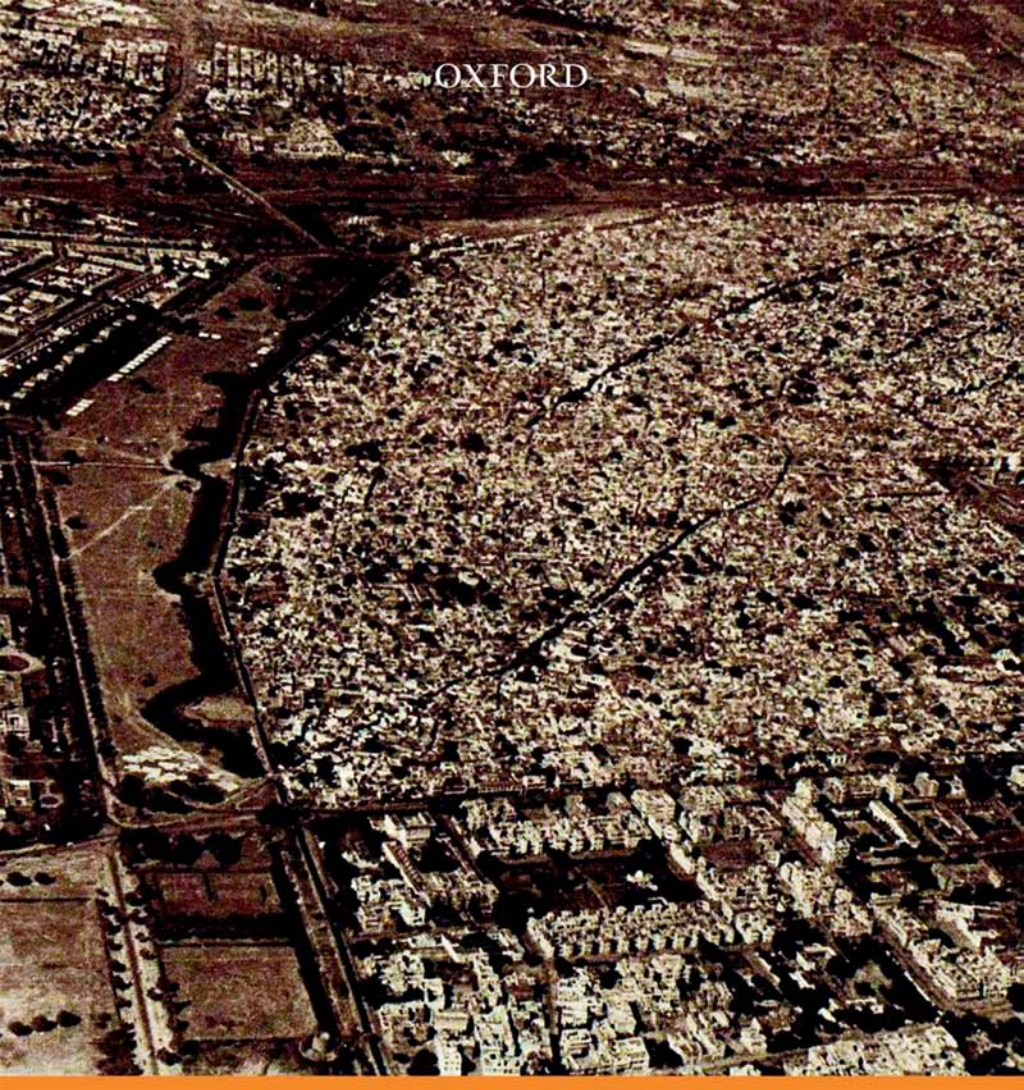

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POSSESSING THE CITY

Property and Politics in Delhi, 1911–1947

ANISH VANAIK

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ANISH VANAIK

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besides. They are both missed. Pasha's formidable intellect, commitment to pedagogy, and ideas have often made me see things in striking new light, and are a model for the best that academia can be. Pam's inexhaustible energy and infectious enthusiasm are enviable, and keeping up with her fiction reading is the next challenge that I intend to take up. Both Pam and Pasha have welcomed me into their home and lives to the point where a time before it is unimaginable. Achin and Pamela created a home in which politics, ideas, music, writing, laughter, books, sports, and TV were necessities. They ensured that my earliest lessons in respect, integrity, and principled activity were not just theoretical. I have borrowed freely from each of their very different interests and personalities, and would not have it any other way. Samar's accomplishments meant that I was the second doctor in the family. As he would no doubt remind me, only one of these is 'real'. His humour, grit, companionship, and compassion have sustained and inspired me at many places and times.

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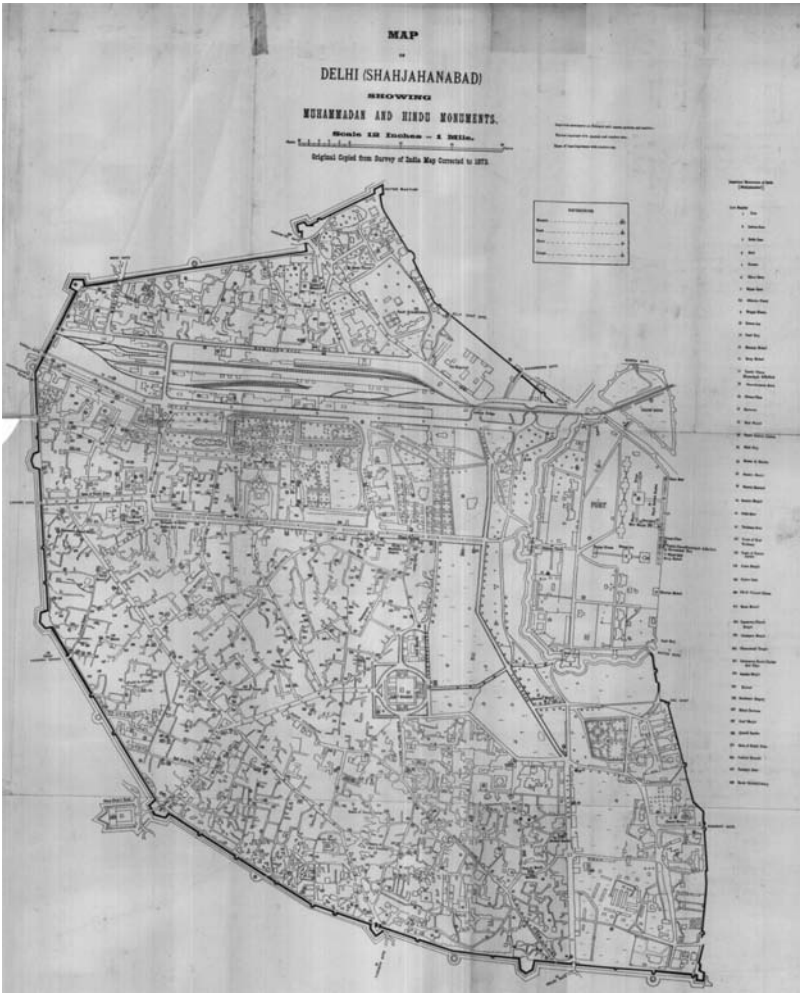
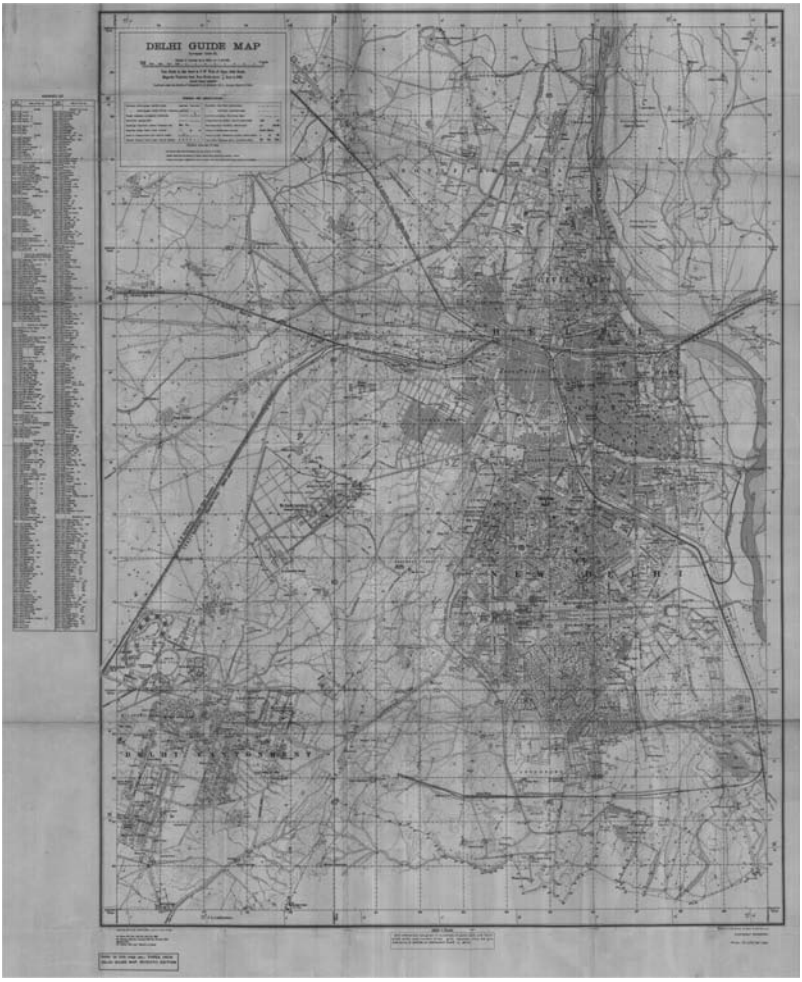


Map 1. Map of Shahjahanabad, Delhi[1]

[1] DDA, Map Collection, S no. 178.



Map 2. Delhi Guide Map ca. 194[2]

[2] DDA, Map Collection, S no. 56.

Introduction

> The agricultural owners [in the suburbs] have not reached that stage of development that marks the desertion of traditional means of livelihood for a general economic outlook. They look askance if asked to pool their properties and . . . [create] a plot of land with a front on a developed road; they don't see in it a building plot and enhanced value but rather a market garden partly ruined.
>
> Personal Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Delhi, 1912[1]

> The completion of the protective 'ring' is clearly a matter of urgent importance; private development has already begun, especially in the northern areas, and unless strict control is established the outskirts of Delhi will be irretrievably ruined.
>
> Chief Commissioner Delhi, 1939[2]

These two statements, just twenty-seven years apart and coming from the same office, tell a story about the treatment of land as a commodity in Delhi. The contrast between the two is striking. The first expresses dismay about the lack of an instinct for turning a profit from urban space in the agrarian outskirts of Delhi, for how could a city 'develop' without such entrepreneurialism? The second laments the existence of that very instinct for nearly 'ruining' the city. Between these two assessments can be discerned the outline of both the ramifying consequences of private enterprise in the property market and the knots into which the state tied itself when confronted with these consequences.

In the three-and-a-half decades preceding Partition that are examined in this book, Delhi's cityscape was shaped by a clutch of crucial transformations

[1] DDA, CC Records, Home, Pt. B., F no. 379, 1915: note by G. F de Montmorency, 14 November 1912.

[2] DDA, CC Records, LSG-LB, F no. 1(44), 1939, CC to Secy. to GoI, Dept. of EHL, 30 March 1939.

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spanning the market, the state, and mass politics. I concentrate on the parts of Delhi that came to be called 'Old Delhi' after 1911 when the declaration of Delhi as the capital dictated that a new city be built. Old Delhi included parts of the city that had a history stretching back to the seventeenth century, and these remained the main population centre of the city throughout the period of the study. More severely modernist New Delhi was developed and maintained largely for purposes of state and administration. Between 1920 and the 1940s, Delhi underwent an economic depression and recovery. In going through and emerging from these ructions, urban administration and the property market were transformed in lasting ways. At around the same time, Delhi also became the site for mass politics—of nationalist and communal stripes. Mobilizational politics (pickets, processions, and riots) and institutional representation (committees, voting, and so on) each emerged as theatres that re-created urban life.

Against this turbulent background, this book tracks the changes in the property market at three levels. First, the place of private property development in Delhi's economy. Even as this period was marked by large-scale state initiatives such as the Delhi Improvement Trust, profit-oriented, decentralized, and market-based initiatives of urban construction created the Delhi cityscape to a far greater degree than did the halting initiatives of the state. In order to more clearly delineate the role of the property market, it has been necessary to take up a second issue: the relationship between the state and market in the development of urban property. In particular, I bring into focus a number of mechanisms other than urban planning—driven by aesthetic, sanitary, or security concerns—that shaped the relationship of the state to urban space. What, for instance, might it mean for the state to intervene in urban space during an economic depression? Resolutions of these kind of dilemmas were sought and embedded into the quotidian practices of local government throughout these decades. The third overarching level of analysis is the relationship between the commodification of land and opposition to it. This emerged as a crucial axis of political struggles in Delhi. Rents and prices of urban property were directly at issue in tussles over housing. The question of commodification can, however, also be discerned in clashes that were not ostensibly about economic issues. The instance taken up for extended examination is violence over religious sites in the city.

Concentration on urban property affords a useful frame to connect these levels of Delhi's history: the property market, the state, and popular protests. Both the early historiography of cities in European cities and more recent

urban theory have highlighted the far-reaching implications of the modern commodification of urban space,[3] and the rarity of full-length treatments of urban property in Indian history writing is therefore something of a curiosity. History in South Asia, including urban history, has taken up each of the three levels that this book explores: property relations, the state, and social protests. How, then, can we understand the marginalization of urban property from this body of work?

Property, Economic History, and the City

The theme of property relations and their transformations during the colonial period has been one of the canonical preoccupations of South Asian history. This preoccupation, however, has been overwhelmingly focused on agrarian and forest settings, and a conspicuous absence within this literature has been the fate of urban property in the colonial city. The literature on the history of agrarian property in India is formidable in its scope and complexity. Ranajit Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* and Eric Stokes' *English Utilitarians and India* examined colonial land policy in terms of its intellectual formation.[4] Contending against their approach were accounts that foregrounded administrative officials' experience of existing institutional arrangements in the countryside.[5] The net result has been the excavation of a wealth of empirical evidence about the concrete effects of property arrangements on different social groups across ecological regions. These questions, posed largely in the 1960s and 1970s, were put on the backburner as agrarian history moved onto different terrain. In the 1990s, environmental histories brought back the issue of property relations, with much of the focus being on the displacement of older ways of relating to space and the erosion of rights in the commons. Cities, however, were absent from this historiographical trajectory.

[3] The work of H. J. Dyos is a good example of the centrality of property to early urban histories. Dyos (1968), 'The Speculative Builders and Developers of Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (Supplement: Symposium on the Victorian City), 641–90. For urban theory, David Harvey's work explored here is a key reference point.

[4] Ranajit Guha (1963), *A Rule of Property for Bengal; an Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Paris: Mouton). Eric Stokes (1959), *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

[5] For an overview of the debates, see Neeladri Bhattacharya (1986), 'Colonial State and Agrarian Policy', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds.), *Situating Indian History: For Sarvepalli Gopal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press).

The most likely cause for the absence of urban property amid this interest in land relations is that it does not display the manifest links with imperial revenues characteristic of agrarian property. Particularly for north and central India, direct taxes relating to urban land, such as house tax, were always a far less significant source of revenue than were indirect taxes on commercial activity in the city, such as the octroi.[6] Urban property tended to confront colonial officials in the form of a practical everyday problem, rather than, as was the case in the countryside, as a foundational issue generating polarized opinion and counter-opinion. There is certainly nothing like the debates within the colonial bureaucracy over the Permanent Settlement or other kinds of revenue settlement in the archival deliberations on urban property.[7] History writing seems to have followed administrative deliberations in downgrading the significance of urban property.

There is another reason for the marginalization of urban property in mainstream economic history. Scholarly treatment of property relations had derived from wider formulations of the relationship between colonialism and capitalism. This meant that research into property forms was closely tied into larger debates within the economic history of the colonial period. The central thematic progression within Indian economic history—the 'Drain of Wealth', deindustrialization of traditional crafts, commercialization of agriculture, and the rise of modern industry—was a narrative of India's integration into the wider colonial economy. Agriculture, the revenue settlements, and consequently the property forms evolved in the countryside were central to the economic history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The economic history of the twentieth century has been traditionally dominated by discussion of international financial arrangements, international trade, and its impact upon Indian industrialization.[8] The classic narrative, in fact, sketches out connections between these three processes. It takes up the issue of tariff barriers, the need to maintain exchange rates between Britain and India, and, post-World War I,

[6] Hugh Tinker (1954), *The Foundations of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan, and Burma* (London: Athlone Press).

[7] William Glover makes a similar point. William J. Glover (2008), *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 32.

[8] Prasannan Parthasarathi suggests that the dominant influence of the themes of agriculture and industry in the economic history which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was largely an outcome of the canonical status of the earlier pre-1930s nationalist economic history. Parthasarathi Prasannan (2015), 'The History of Indian Economic History', in Daniele Boldizzoni and Pat Hudson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Economic History* (London: Routledge).

the hesitant, contradictory, and sometimes confrontational rise of indigenous Indian-owned industry from out of the ranks of those engaged in domestic trade and finance. Since it did not contribute to industrialization or agrarian revenues, urban property and real estate have received scant attention in the overarching plot lines of economic history.[9]

An exemplary instance of the effect of these emphases can be found in the colonial history of Bombay. Urban histories of the latter have been able to draw on economic history far more than is the case for Delhi. However, this has been an economic history shaped by the overarching question of industrialization.[10] The results have been paradoxical. On the one hand, certain kinds of connections between the economy and urban space have been central to accounts of Bombay: the role of business and commercial elites in city development are well etched, and an interest in industrial labour has led historians into working-class localities. On the other hand, what might be seen as the most direct projection of the economy onto urban space—the property market—has until fairly recently been marginal.[11] A. D. D. Gordon's work, for instance, dwells for the most part on the fortunes—economic and political—of the traders and industrialists of Bombay.[12] Somewhat incongruously, a central chapter on the progress of municipal politics introduces 'landlords' as a crucial set of actors with distinct political motivations, only for them to disappear again in the rest of his book. Without an account of their economic activities comparable to the one about traders and industrialists, landlords remain an undertheorized

[9] Tirthankar Roy's survey of the post-1983 historiography underlines the important role played by regional studies (usually village and agrarian) in illuminating broader themes in economic history, but does not even identify history of urban land as a significant direction for future research, let alone noticing its absence. Tirthankar Roy (2004), 'Flourishing Branches, Wilting Core: Research in Modern Indian Economic History', *Australian Economic History Review*, 44 (3), 221–40.

[10] More generally, it is striking that industrial towns—Ahmedabad, Kanpur, and Calcutta for instance—are able to draw upon much more well developed histories of the (local) economy than those cities where industry was relatively marginal. Anindita Ghosh's complaint that 'urban histories of colonial India have traditionally been considered within the rigid framework of political economy or dominant colonial ideologies' is therefore more applicable to Calcutta or Mumbai than to places such as Delhi or Lucknow. Anindita Ghosh (2016), *Claiming the City: Protest, Crime and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta, c.1860–1920* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

[11] Nikhil Rao (2013), *House, but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs, 1898–1964* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). Mariam Dossal (2010), *Theatre of Conflict, City of Hope: Mumbai: 1660 to Present Times* (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[12] A. D. D. Gordon (1978), *Businessmen and Politics: Rising Nationalism and a Modernising Economy in Bombay, 1918–1933* (New Delhi: Manohar).

group, and consequently their interests are read straightforwardly from the supply and demand of housing stock.

Broadly speaking, interest in the history of Indian trade and finance has usually derived from the contribution (or lack thereof) of commerce and finance to the emergence of industry. Such a paradigm, relegates urban property to the footnotes. In pointing this out, I do not mean to argue that the links between commerce, finance, and industry are unimportant. There are, however, economic processes that the economic frame just outlined has neglected. Prominent among these must be counted the links between finance, real estate, and the development of urban infrastructure. David Harvey's theoretical work points to the centrality of these connections, for the circulation of capital in general quite as much as for the production of urban space. With respect to economic history, then, urban property acquires significance only with a more careful integration of the spatial dimension into accounts of the economy. In short, the dominant perspective that makes the countryside and industrialization the key economic questions about colonial India has conditioned a silence on urban property. A better understanding of colonial urban development must incorporate new theoretical perspectives on the political economy of urban space.

Power, the State, and Urban Space

Where the conventional interpretation of economic history has been marked by a silence on urban real estate, a quite different marginalization of urban property can be seen in the literature on state power in the South Asian city. In this body of work, urban property has, in fact, been ubiquitous. Ironically enough, however, urban property's inclusion has been eclectic, rarely extending to an analytical understanding of the linkages between the state, the market, and urban space. The result has been a resolutely static relationship between the state and the urban property market.

Urban histories of South Asia have brought the state into their discussions in three broad ways. First, as the site of competition among Indians for institutional control of urban politics—municipalities in particular.[13] Second,

[13] The urban in these texts is important as a setting for schools, administration, and trade. For all their intricate tracing of the politics of groups and factions in urban areas, these are analyses that separate politics from spatial practice. Christine E. Dobbin (1972), *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City, 1840–1885* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). C. A. Bayly (1975), *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad,*

as developing, articulating, and executing plans for urban development. Third, in the form of the coercive presence of the police to put down strikes and nationalist protests or quell communal riots. In the first body of work, urban landlords appear as important political actors with little analysis of either their property holdings or their impact on urban space independent of municipal agencies. In the third body of work, symbolic contestations over space, or strategic deployments of the coercive apparatus of the state, have been foregrounded.[14] Most directly concerned to link the state to space, however, are approaches that take up urban planning.

Two classic histories from the 1980s by Narayani Gupta on Delhi and Veena Oldenburg on Lucknow investigated the post-Mutiny reorganization of these north Indian cities in terms of an almost Hausmannesque state-directed transformation of urban space.[15] Oldenburg encapsulates the authoritarian exercise of power at this moment through a series of imperatives that formed the titles of her chapters: 'The City must be Clean', 'The City must Pay', 'The City must be Safe', and so on. The underlying assumption here was the plasticity of space to the aims of the ruling elite.[16] The decisive transformations of the cityscape were ultimately shaped by the decisive actions of the colonial state.[17] These explanations, on one hand, leave little room for other forces to mould urban space. On the other hand, they rely on a unitary understanding of the state, its planning apparatus, and its ability to translate ambition into reality.

More recent accounts of planning, such as that of Janaki Nair, have rejected such a unitary understanding, tending to present plans as heterogeneously conceived and often ineffective. They instead choose to highlight

1880–1920 (Oxford: Clarendon Press). Rajat Kanta Ray (1979), *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875–1939* (New Delhi: Vikas). Howard Spodek's work—rooted in the actions of leading Ahmedabadi personalities—might be considered a recent reanimation of this approach. Howard Spodek (2012), *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan).

[14] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (1998), *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c.1850–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[15] Narayani Gupta (1981), *Delhi between Two Empires, 1803–1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth* (Delhi: Oxford University Press). Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1984), *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[16] Narayani Gupta's work, less closely focused on statecraft and empirically richer, is nevertheless framed by the plans of the colonial state.

[17] Partho Datta's account of colonial Calcutta is a throwback to a relatively unproblematic account of official plans shaping urban reality. Partho Datta (2012), *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c.1800–c.1940* (New Delhi: Tulika Books).

sites of contestation and often failure.[18] Urban planning itself, especially in the twentieth century, saw the emergence of a variety of intellectual currents whose relationship to the colonial project and state power was not univocal.[19] More generally in this literature, competing visions of space—both within state institutions and between state and non-state actors—are presented as transforming the meanings of planning. With all this complexity, however, histories of planning in Indian cities have tended not to open onto the workings of property markets. Even where plans and planning are seen as constituted by complex and cross-cutting factors, the mechanisms of planning have not been linked to the dynamics of the economy. In doing so, the crucial connections between the state, economy, and urban space are made into black boxes rather than objects of enquiry.

Awadhendra Sharan's statecentric account of housing in his pioneering environmental history of Delhi presents an illustrative contrast to the approach of this book.[20] Sharan points to the discourse of 'congestion' that became a key reference point for planners in the Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT) from the 1930s onwards. Public housing was envisioned by the state as a response to congestion, and congestion remained a useful stick with which to beat the poor after the failures of public housing. In Sharan's account, a key role in planning failure is played by the fiscal conservatism of the colonial state.[21] Unwilling to subsidize housing for the poor who needed it but could not pay, only a quarter of the housing planned by the Delhi Improvement Trust was ultimately built. A secondary cause of the failures of DIT was the gross underestimation of the population that streamed into the city. In Sharan's account, these two factors—fiscal conservatism and inadequate demographic projections—remained the root cause of the inability to address urban congestion well into the post-colonial period. The lack of any dynamic relationship between the market and the

[18] Janaki Nair (2005), *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press). Preeti Chopra (2011), *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press). Swati Chattopadhyay (2005), *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny* (London: Routledge).

[19] Peter Hall (2002), *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell).

[20] Awadhendra B. Sharan (2014), *In the City, Out of Place: Nuisance, Pollution, and Dwelling in Delhi, c.1850–2000*, 1st edn. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

[21] Stephen Legg's account of the failures of DIT plans also cite fiscal conservatism as the chief cause. In his account, colonial aesthetic considerations are also given significant if subsidiary weight. Stephen Legg (2007), *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell).

economic considerations of the state is characteristic. In fact, as will be demonstrated later, spikes and troughs in the property market elicited different kinds of responses from the colonial state. Again, as illustrated in the epigraph at the beginning of this Introduction, the very action of planning layouts was sparking speculation in the areas in which the Trust operated. We hear little about this from Sharan's account, and, consequently, even the comparatively late institution of an Improvement Trust in Delhi is unsatisfyingly attributed to the rise of a discourse of congestion.[22] The political economy of property, as this book will demonstrate, played an enormous role in the establishment and ongoing operations of the DIT. The market in urban land threw up specific dilemmas with which urban administration had to grapple.

It is not only the political economy of property that is ignored in Sharan's account, however. The provision of housing and the ability of the state to deny provision, defer it, or supply it promptly, was also determined by the political strength of the mobilizations that occurred (or did not occur) around the issue. Sharan's sole referencing of an exchange between the Chief Commissioner and the Congress Municipal Councillor Asaf Ali is not part of a wider effort to track how popular politics grappled with commoditized urban land.[23] The scant mention of housing, or the commoditization of urban land in the extensive literature on urban protests, is a lacuna complementary to the stilted approach to urban property in the work on planning and state power in the city.

Protest, Mobilizations, and Social Conflict in the City

The literature on social protests in the city shares, with the work on the urban economy, a tendency to invisibilize the property market. That literature can be thought to have a number of components. Histories of labour and the urban poor have added a dynamic sense of urban space to their exploration of mass politics.[24] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's history of working-class Bombay

[22] Most colonial cities—Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur, and so on—had already begun to establish Improvement Trusts in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Delhi's Improvement Trust in 1937 emerged well after this cycle.

[23] Stephen Legg's account of resistance to the Delhi Ajmere Gate Scheme of DIT is only slightly more elaborate.

[24] The term 'urban poor' is designed in part to avoid the imputation of a class as the organizing basis for the mobilizations, politics, and culture of groups below the middle classes. Gooptu's work is a pioneering instance of the employment of this category. Nandini Gooptu