

# Ahmedabad: a cautionary tale



A city of extraordinary economic growth and innovation, horrendous communal violence and appalling poverty; Howard Spodek justifiably calls Ahmedabad a 'shock city' in his new book *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.

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## 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 commanding 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 develop 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 themselves (...) as well as for their city".

This rosy picture leaves the reader unprepared for the turmoil in the third part of the book. Suddenly all is not well. The former backbone of Gujarat's economy, the textile industry, collapses. The formerly progressive mill owners cheat both investors and their workers out of their money. The textile labour union refuses to represent the mill workers. Massive tax evasion cripples the municipal government. Politicians work in tandem with notorious criminals. Repeated outbursts of caste-violence and Hindu-Muslim violence cause death and destruction. Ahmedabad turns into the 'laboratory' of Hindu-nationalist organizations and prejudices against Muslims become widespread. During the horrendous anti-muslim pogrom in 2002, Ahmedabad's middle class uses the occasion to engage in a festive looting of unguarded department stores. As Spodek laments, there is a "general departure from the ideals of the Mahatma". The feel-good movie turned into a nightmare.

## Failures of the elite

It is this part of the book that illustrates the unproductiveness of the gulf that still exists between historians and social scientists. As his rather factual account generally avoids developing explanations for Ahmedabad's transformation, Spodek fails to provide a convincing account of how Ahmedabad's feel-good movie could turn so sour. With his

idealized, elite-focused account in the first part of the book, Spodek suggests that Ahmedabad's greatest 'shock' lies in the way an enlightened elite lost power to crass democratic forces. The reader closes the book wishing that Sardar Patel and Ambalal Sarabhai were still ruling the city. I suspect this conclusion can be partly attributed to Spodek's method; because much of his material is gathered through interviews with Ahmedabad's cultural and economic elites, he adopts a distinctly uncritical stance towards these elites.

But the shocking aspect of Ahmedabad's history is not that these elites lost power. The real shocker is the callous lack of concern these elites had for the welfare of less privileged citizens. This lack of concern is what led to their own demise, the unravelled social cohesion of the city and the unruly politics that was to follow. To mention just a few aspects of this shocking lack of solidarity – whose import Spodek fails to highlight: the textile labourer strikes,

which led to the founding of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), were called because the extremely rich mill owners refused to pay wages above *subsistence* level. With the impressive exception of Anysabhai Sarabhai, the financial and organizational strength of the captains of industry was (and is) rarely used to do more for the living conditions of their workers beyond building overcrowded and unhygienic *chawls*. While much effort went into the founding of (private) colleges for the elites, there has been a shocking disregard for the quality of public education. The upper-caste leaders of the TLA ended up betraying the interests of the textile labourers and suppressed the development of a class and caste-based political movement. And, more recently, the kind of economic liberalization pursued in Gujarat amounted to an attempt to reduce labour costs to the lowest possible level, as jobs were informalized, minimal wages were no longer upheld and working conditions deteriorated. While the upper-caste businessmen regularly emphasize the importance of merit when criticizing caste-based reservations, they generally refuse to hire applicants with *dalit* names, like Parmar or Macwana. While Gujarat's police force and judges regularly collude with the rich and powerful to dismiss charges of corruption, they routinely fail to adequately pursue the perpetrators of caste-based violence that is still widely used to intimidate the workforce. While fountains are built in the posh parts of the city, inhabitants of the poorer eastern parts still rarely get more than two hours of water per day.

## Struggles of the poor

This lack of concern of Ahmedabad's elite for the welfare of fellow citizens, and the resulting marginalization of the poorer, eastern side of Ahmedabad, can be directly linked to the unruly politics that Spodek laments. Having been served a bad deal by Ahmedabad's early leaders, 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, healthcare, education, sports, etc.) made these citizens susceptible to promises made by Hindu-nationalist organizations; in marginalized neighbourhoods these organizations 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 meet the demand 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 flamboyant 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 development trajectory holds important lessons about the challenges of achieving economic growth without sacrificing other important social goods like social cohesion, the rule of law, and social justice. While the city achieved spectacular levels of economic growth, Ahmedabad largely failed on these other dimensions of human development as a limited sense of solidarity between the city's disparate social groups paved the way for a particular harsh form of economic liberalization. Despite its flaws, Spodek's Ahmedabad invites the reader to think about the important question of how economic development, social cohesion and civic-mindedness could go hand in hand.

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