

# Books

**THE PRICE OF LAND: Acquisition, Conflict, Consequence** by Sanjoy Chakravorty. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013.

OF the four main ‘factors of production’ that go into determining the cost of any commodity – land, labour, capital and energy – the last two have always been considered scarce and expensive in India. This, notwithstanding government policies to underprice electricity, diesel, cooking fuels and urea, or provide subsidized bank credit to farmers and other select borrower categories. Such measures to keep capital and energy costs below their ‘normal’ market determined levels, in any case, have not been extended to industrial or commercial consumers. Indian firms, in general, pay much more for availing working capital or term loan finance than their counterparts in competing economies. This holds true even more in the case of energy.<sup>1</sup>

The last decade has, however, been witness to a remarkable transformation with regard to the other two factors of production as well: labour and land. Till the start of this century, labour shortages were largely sporadic or localized to certain pockets of the country. But with the Indian economy growing by an average 8.5 per cent a year between 2003-04 and 2010-11, there has been a general tightening of labour markets, as shortages have turned more structural and widespread. Perhaps for the first time in history, even agricultural labourers occupying the bottommost rungs of Indian society have discovered a hitherto non-existent ‘oppor-

1. The average retail price of electricity for industrial consumers in the US was 6.59 cents per unit (kilowatt-hour) in March 2013, according to the US Energy Information Administration. That works out to around Rs 3.7 a unit, whereas industrial users in India shell out Rs 5.50-6 on grid power, which is irregular and has to be supplemented through costlier supplies from diesel generator sets at Rs 15 or more. If the costs due to outages, voltage fluctuations, motor burnouts, etc are added, they effectively pay Rs 10 a unit.

tunity cost’ of transplanting paddy, harvesting sugarcane or picking cotton.<sup>2</sup> During the latest Eleventh Five Year Plan period ended 2011-12, farm wages on an all-India basis rose by an average 17.5 per cent per annum. Even after adjusting for inflation, they went up by an unprecedented 6.8 per cent in real terms.<sup>3</sup>

While the 2000s have, no doubt, been transformative for labour – leading to an increase in overall ‘reservation wages’, below which workers aren’t prepared to accept employment – they have been even more so, though, for land. It is this process – wherein land in India has metamorphosed from just being an incidental ‘factor of production’ to something whose cost ‘can no longer be written out of the production function’ – that Sanjoy Chakravorty’s book captures most lucidly. It is by far the best work on a phenomenon that has huge implications for India’s development prospects, and yet not received the kind of academic scrutiny the capital markets, energy policy or rising rural wages and MGNREGA have attracted.

Till the early 2000s, it wasn’t tough to acquire a few thousand acres of land in many parts of India paying Rs 50,000 or less per acre. Today, that figure wouldn’t be less than Rs 4-5 lakh an acre. For irrigated lands or those in not too remote locations, the starting rate itself will be Rs 10 lakh. In states like Punjab and Kerala, one would have to probably fork out Rs 20-25 lakh an acre for *any* kind of land, going up to Rs 5 crore or more closer to the major towns. Compare this with the US, where the value of farm real estate averaged \$ 2,650 (Rs 1.5 lakh) an acre in 2012, ranging from a low of \$ 560 (Rs 31,600) in New Mexico to \$ 12,200 (Rs 6.9 lakh) in New Jersey!<sup>4</sup>

2. See Harish Damodaran, ‘The Untold Farm Rebound Story’, *Seminar* 641, January 2013.

3. Ashok Gulati, Surbhi Jain and Nidhi Satija, ‘Rising Farm Wages in India: The “Pull” and “Push” Factors’. Discussion Paper No. 5, Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, April 2013.

But the transformation story in land over the past decade isn't merely about prices shooting up ten-fold. It is also, as Chakravorty rightly notes, about farmers becoming increasingly aware of their 'power to refuse to sell', thereby fundamentally changing the very dynamics of land acquisition. The above power is something landowners never had nor could exercise until quite recently. During the first 15 years after independence, the Indian state executed a clutch of massive hydroelectric-cum-irrigation projects (Bhakra Nangal, Hirakud, and Damodar Valley) and integrated steel plants (at Bhilai, Rourkela and Durgapur). Each of these involved acquiring 100,000 acres or more of land. For the Hirakud Dam alone, some 130,000 acres were taken from 22,000-odd families, who were paid Rs 50-200 per acre that works out to a paltry Rs 1,500-6,000 at today's prices.

Such large-scale takings were possible not simply because the state could use its eminent domain powers to acquire land from private citizens for so-called public purposes at prices that *it* deemed as 'fair and reasonable', but also since landowners did not have the right to negotiate or 'refuse to sell' as in normal market transactions. Nor possibly did they have sufficient information on land deals or prices paid for similar transactions elsewhere. In such an imperfect market, characterized both by 'monopsony' and 'asymmetric information' loaded in favour of a single buyer, it is the state that set the acquisition price. And that inevitably was lower than the landowners' reservation price, below which they wouldn't have willingly sold.

Today, the situation is quite the reverse. While the state continues to retain the power of eminent domain on paper, the ground reality is that it just doesn't have the capacity to take thousands of acres from unwilling landowners. An increased awareness of their 'right of refusal' means farmers cannot be compelled to sell land below the reservation price determined by *them*. How they managed to acquire this power in the course of the last decade forms a core theme in Chakravorty's book, the best part of which is the rich empirical material on land acquisitions (including prices paid) in a variety of urban and rural settings across India between independence and now.

The most obvious reason for a seller's market developing in land in the recent period is accelerated growth and rising incomes, especially amongst those in a position to invest in property. This, alongside the

4. 'Land Values 2012 Summary', US Department of Agriculture, August 2012, [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays\\_Reports/reports/land0812.pdf](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/land0812.pdf)

sheer requirement for more land – including through conversion from agricultural and other existing uses – in order to house new factories, IT parks, power plants and other infrastructure projects, has led to increased demand for a resource whose supply is inherently limited. This fact alone, of the Indian economy experiencing an almost decade-long spell of unprecedented growth rates, would certainly have played a major part in infusing life into what was hitherto a somnolent market for land.

But that still only partly explains how landowners have come to the present position of acquiring equal, if not more, say in setting prices and terms of compensation. Chakravorty emphasizes the role here of civil society organizations, whom he considers 'the most significant new agent in the land acquisition process.' According to him, their activities have 'helped spread and exchange information', resulting in 'better organization and assertion of collective rights' by landowners.

I am not totally convinced about this line of argument nor inclined to give particular importance to 'information asymmetry' as being central to land acquisition by the state. The situation in the past was, indeed, such that even if farmers had all the right information about land prices, they wouldn't have been able to take on the might of the state. Singur and Nandigram became flashpoints not because of 'civil society' spreading awareness among prospective land-losers, but only because of Mamata Banerjee making it a political issue as part of a campaign that eventually brought to an end the Left Front's 34 year rule in West Bengal. If a Narmada Bachao Andolan did not succeed in its goal of stalling the Sardar Sarovar Dam project in the 1990s, the reason had precisely to do with the lack of political backing for the agitation.

This is where Chakravorty probably underestimates the importance of competitive electoral politics in India, especially the compulsions forcing governments and politicians to respond to signals from voters on the ground. Think of it: All countries that have historically achieved high growth rates for sustained periods did so either under formal single party rule (China, Taiwan), *de facto* single party regimes (Japan, Singapore, Mexico) or outright military dictatorships (South Korea). India, in a sense, represents a unique case of an economy trying to grow at eight per cent plus annually (and succeeding fairly) on the back of full-fledged democracy, with every adult citizen – Dalit, Muslim or upper caste Hindu – enjoying the right to vote. The impact of electoral democracy on growth and policymaking processes, including in creating what is

euphemistically referred to as 'policy paralysis', may not be small at all in the Indian context.<sup>5</sup>

The question to ask, therefore, is what has changed so much on the ground to have made *land* a 'hot button' political issue, to use Chakravorty's expression? The simple answer is that demand for land was never as high as it was during the last decade, which also saw the Indian economy register unprecedented growth rates. Moreover, there was a qualitative difference when it came to the drivers of demand. In the past, 90 per cent of land acquisitions were for state projects, whereas it is the private sector that has now emerged as a significant buyer. That, in turn, has introduced a completely new dimension.

How? As Chakravorty points out, the state was a major land taker in India, especially in the initial decades after independence. But at the same time, there was some legitimacy to the exercise of the powers of eminent domain by it. The land losers were, in this case, seen as making unavoidable but necessary sacrifices in the collective interest of nation building. But this logic could not hold with the entry of large private sector land buyers or the state itself becoming an acquirer on their behalf. There was no question of landowners here being expected to subsume their private interests in the larger national good. It was one thing for the likes of DLF, Unitech, Omaxe and Sobha Developers to build large land banks in the suburbs of major cities and large towns across India on their own. These, indeed, helped create a real 'market' for land. What led to acquisitions turning into major political conflagrations, though, was the state's simultaneous involvement as an active buyer for private industry. All the big projects in which land acquisition became political flashpoints – Singur (Tata Motors), Nandigram (Salim Group), Jagatsinghpur (POSCO), Maha Mumbai Special Economic Zone (Reliance Industries) and Yamuna Expressway (Jaypee) – happened to be those where the state was viewed as forcing farmers to sell, thereby violating the rules of the market to promote the interests of private capital.

What the above processes of growth and politics have ended up doing is to fundamentally transform the Indian land market. The new situation, to quote Chakravorty, is far removed from what existed a decade or so ago, 'where the state took land with impunity, because (a) it had the power to do so, and (b) it could afford to do so.'

The downside to this, however, is that if land were to cost a minimum of Rs 10 lakh an acre, it means having to shell out Rs 100 crore for any project with a requirement of 1,000 acres. Cost is, moreover, just one element. In a country with fragmented holdings, purchasing land involves negotiating with multiple owners, not all of whom would be willing sellers. Buying contiguous individual plots adding up to 1,000 acres through the regular market process will not only be an expensive, but also a time consuming affair.

That being the case, one cannot disagree at all with Chakravorty's conclusion that some form of state involvement in land acquisition is unavoidable, even in the new environment. Ultimately, no development is possible – whether it is laying roads, building power plants and irrigation canals, or establishing new factories – without land being bought and put to a different use from its existing (mainly agricultural) form. But acquiring contiguous tracts of land, while minimizing associated problems of holdouts (unwilling sellers), litigation (arising from disputes over property titles) and negotiations (with each individual owner), is something only the state can effectively do. No company, whether private or in the public sector, would be willing to put up a plant anywhere in India without the state either offering land or facilitating acquisition. Chakravorty, on his part, does not suggest specific ways out of the current imbroglio: how to make land available for new uses in ways that ensures its current users 'are better off after the acquisition than they were before.'

On reading Chakravorty's book and reflecting deeper on the issues raised by him, only one solution strikes me as feasible. Acquiring land for development and ensuring justice for existing users (both owners as well as others dependent on it) should be primarily the *state's* job. What it should be equally responsible for, however, is to see that the land acquired is used for the stated *development* purpose – be it for a school, power station or a car factory – and not for real estate speculation. Such land can even be given on concessional lease terms, provided these are renewable say, every five years. This will ensure that those who have been given the land are not simply 'sitting' on it. Land is too precious and scarce a resource in India to permit such luxuries.

Chakravorty can be credited as being the first scholar to analyze the evolution of land in India through its medieval and colonial past to the post-independence era. The transition in the latter period, from the state being the ultimate 'taker' of people's lands to suffering

5. I have made this point in a different context of analyzing the dynamics of inflation in an electoral democratic set-up. See Harish Damodaran, 'An Alternative "Theory" of Inflation', *Business Line*, 12 June 2012.

an effective erosion of its power of eminent domain, is what makes for most interesting reading. It requires both a historian's insight as well as awareness of current realities to grasp the significance of this transition. And Chakravorty's book truly has these.

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**THE OTHER GLOBAL CITY** by Shail Mayaram.  
Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2013.

CITIES are sites constituted through assemblages of plurality of flows of material, ideas and bodies, which sediment in space and time. Yet, their settlement is never complete, for cities are spaces where the relationship among members of an ethnic group and between different ethnic groups is continuously negotiated. The spaces for such negotiation open to different groups may vary. Contrary to their plural and fluid characteristics, contemporary cities tend to be read through the dominant lens of 'global city hierarchies', 'economic globalization' and 'narratives of conflict'. A reading of cities using such a lens also introduces new artificial hierarchies between cities and erases their histories.

Shail Mayaram's edited book titled *The Other Global City* is a welcome contribution which attempts to (re) position the conceptualization of cities and alterity beyond the current dominant lenses. The different essays organized in three sections in this collection explore the varied forms, meanings and practices of cosmopolitanism in selected cities of Asia and the Middle East. The common denominator between the various essays is that cosmopolitanism is not only about global flow, or world travel. Their authors define cosmopolitanism in different ways ranging from an attitude of being open to strangers, acknowledgement, tolerance and respect for differences, to the Buddhist philosophy of seeing the self in others. Drawing on a diverse range of theoretical and methodological approaches including historical-ethnography to the discursive-post Foucauldian, the book describes cosmopolitanism as constituted in everyday spaces of the city – its street alleyways, bazaars and neighbourhoods. It is here that inter-ethnic relations and boundaries are constituted and continuously (re)negotiated. Further, they illustrate the role of the state, particularly how its technologies of governing space/time may open up or foreclose spaces of negotiation in everyday life.

Inverting the sequence of presentation in the book, this review opens with an exploration of the last section on 'Micro Processes'. The two essays in this section, perhaps the strong point of this book, provide a nuanced conceptualization of inter-ethnic/religious relations. The experience of cosmopolitanism in cities is often a nuanced and differentiated process as illustrated vividly in the essays authored by Asef Bayat and Humphrey et. al. Drawing on thick ethnographic description of everyday life in cities, the essays contour the co-presence of the simultaneous processes of erosion of ethnic boundaries as well as their reconstitution in new ways in contemporary cities. Bayat's essay captures the dialectics of conflict and cooperation between two religious communities viz., the Muslim and the Christians (Coptic residents) in Shubra, a historic quarter of Cairo city. It is marked by the tendencies of an ethnic group to construct an abstract and a generalized hatred of other groups in times of tension as well as selective attempts to 'spare, protect or rescue' them (Bayat 2013, p. 199). The temporal fluidity of social or spatial boundaries between different ethnic groups is illustrated by Humphrey et. al's essay on the post-Soviet city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan. In contrast to the conceptualization of cosmopolitanism, particularly multiculturalism in the European context, as synonymous with diversity and tolerance for difference, cosmopolitanism in Bukhara is based on acknowledgement of, and respect for, differences. Further, the nuanced treatment of cosmopolitanism as experienced at the individual and community level adds to the richness of this essay. The other strength of this essay is moving the analysis of mediations across ethnic groups beyond the locality boundary. The above two essays provide rich case material that could have been mobilized to (re)examine the micro/macro binary categories that dominates reading on cities, an opportunity unfortunately missed.

The essays in the sections titled 'Cosmopolitanism and the City' and 'Cosmopolitanisms: Compromised/Denied' orchestrate the role of the state, particularly the ways by which the governmentality of economy, space and bodies influence inter-ethnic relations. Each of these essays demonstrate the differences in the way rights and privileges for different ethnic groups are enshrined in law and further, reinforced by everyday practices in different cities including Istanbul, Lhasa, Singapore, Beirut, Delhi and Tokyo. Isin's essay, 'Beneficence and Difference: Ottomon Awqaf and Other Subjects' highlights the role of religious institutions in Istanbul in providing a space for negotiating

social differences without erasing them. Awqafs in the Ottoman Empire were founded by both Muslim and non-Muslim groups to perform a range of functions similar to those performed by modern welfare systems. The intersection between sect and the state and the influence of a Buddhist worldview in shaping the meaning of cosmopolitanism is highlighted in Yeh's essay titled 'Living Together in Lhasa: Ethnic Relations, Coercive Amity, and the Subaltern Cosmopolitanism'. Lhasa city is inhabited by different ethnic groups including the Tibetans, Han, Hui, and Kashmiri Muslims. Yeh reveals the manner in which the state uses the technology of *minjutuainjie* to impose a coercive harmony between the different ethnic groups in today's Lhasa. As a result, Lhasa acts as a setting where different ethnic groups live parallel lives without much interaction. The essay sheds light on the fundamental clash between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

Next, 'Intelligent City: From Ethnic Governmentality to Ethnic Nationalism', engages with the changing bio-political architecture in Asian cities. Though the title suggests a focus on 'cities' in plural, the essay draws predominantly on the Singapore experience, mapping the state strategies for mobilizing the diaspora among ethnic majority to attract intellectual and economic capital into the city. It suggests that these strategies have contributed to fragmenting stabilized modes of governance and, more importantly, created a hierarchy between the diaspora and natives among the ethnic majority. While the author acknowledges the presence of other actually existing cosmopolitanisms, the manner in which the Singapore story has been mobilized conveys a sense of stark binary in the ways the state-society and intra-ethnic relations are conceptualized. For example, the organization of this essay suggests the presence of a rigid, impervious boundary between the diaspora and natives among the ethnic majority of Singapore. Can such rigid boundaries be discerned in the intra- or for that matter inter-ethnic relations as suggested in this essay? Evidence from different contexts suggest otherwise. Mobilization of the state by the Chinese diaspora for setting up businesses in Hong Kong or Shanghai, or even closer home in Bangalore, which this essay mentions in the passing, shows how expatriate networks have often relied on local ties to negotiate with local or regional governments. In the Bangalore case, for instance, the state strategies of mobilizing de-territorialized networks revolved around an alliance of Returnee Non Resident Indians, local ethnic networks embedded in global economy as much as the diaspora. Though the essay

waxes eloquently about the coexistence of several forms of cosmopolitanism, the case analysis deploys a binary frame. Another discomfort with this essay is the use of plurality in the title and introduction, and then narrowing to a single case. In a book that otherwise has a nuanced treatment of the city process, and its respect for plurality, the conceptual treatment of the state as a homogenous block pitted for or in opposition to a particular ethnic group perhaps needs to be re-examined.

Using the lens of 'mundane cosmopolitanism', Yasmeen Arif traces the afterlife of groups affected by sectarian violence in her essay, 'Impossible Cosmopolises: Dislocations and Relocations in Beirut and Delhi'. A common phenomenon observed in both cities is the effect of state interventions in the rehabilitation of affected groups in terms of homogenization of identity and space. While in Delhi, it contributed to creating a homogenized victim neighbourhood and a straight-jacketing of community identity, in Beirut it resulted in the disassembling of heterogeneous spaces. The type of interaction in the two locales mapped by Arif pose a very different scenario from those found in multi-ethnic locales where several groups coexist. The former locales alter between being friendly frontiers during peaceful times and as barricades in times of conflict. As the Beirut case shows, increasingly the state interventions in locales dominated by mixed ethnic groups with mixed land use turn out to be real estate projects in many Asian, African and Middle Eastern cities. The contradictions of state-driven cosmopolitanism versus 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' is illustrated by Yeoh Seng Guan in the essay titled 'Limiting Cosmopolitanism: Street Life, "Little India", Kuala Lumpur' in Malaysia. The space-time geographies of Little India, have been shaped and structured by hybrid flows of capital, people, desires and ideas. The essay delineates how Little India serves as an index for various processes of 'uncanny cosmopolitanism' in motion over the years. What is interesting is the attempt to encapsulate the differentiated experience of various groups inhabiting/frequenting Little India. As the author concludes, not all those who occupy the space have been able to celebrate or enjoy the benefits of cosmopolis in equal measure even though they may represent the spirit of such contexts.

The cosmopolitanism story of Tokyo by John Lie depicts a different scenario. As indicated by the essay title, 'Invisibility and Cohabitation in Multiethnic Tokyo', it is generally assumed that there is an absence of inter-ethnic conflict in Japan. The essay underscores that what is invisible need not necessarily reflect the

absence of inter-ethnic conflicts, but a condition of possibility. John Lie argues that the reality of multiethnic Japan and the myth of monolithic Japan exists in an uneasy relationship which obscures and blocks inter-ethnic tension and contention. This situation is explained by a combination of several factors, including Japan's post War politics, the strength of monolithic ideology, the structural diffusion of minority groups and the absence of ethnically constituted organizations that advocate inter-ethnic interests. That said, as the author concludes, 21st century Japan totters along with the looming possibility of manifestations of inter-ethnic contention.

Perhaps the only substantive critique that may be levelled on this book is that despite a recognition of categorical ambiguities in the editor's introduction, some of the chapters by contrast, display a slippage in terms of reinforcing binary categorical thinking. Does the title 'the other city' itself allow for such a slippage of reinforcing binary categories? Does the positioning of these cities within the frame of 'other' and 'othering' induce a subtle hierarchy implied by Saskia Sassen's theory of the 'global city' that this book seeks to critique, though evoking the trope of 'ordinary cities' in the introduction suggests an attempt to move away from binary categories. This tension between the attempt to blur categorical boundaries and its surfacing in the way case material is mobilized is evident in several essays, specifically, in sections one and two. Another example is the use of 'micro-processes' in the title of third section, even though the two essays present a much more complex picture providing ample evidence to question the micro/macro assumptions. It also raises the question whether the sequencing of the case stories is influenced by academic disciplining of hierarchizing the macro over the micro. Similarly, the mobilization of categories in some essays, which tend to convey a dual frame of state vs. sect, ethnic diaspora vs. ethnic natives, and micro vs. macro process, and the rehearsal of de Certeau's tactics vs. strategies to conceptualize the dialectics of inter-religious conflict are other reflections of the slippage into a mode of binary categorical thinking. Finally, the question, should not the project of developing an epistemology on cities and their culture to counter the dominant European frame of understanding be bold enough to move away from the frame of foregrounding the 'other'? Who or which processes are the rich stories captured in this book 'other' to? They are stories in their own right. Perhaps, a different ordering of the chapters, starting with the everyday practices covered in the section on micro process, fol-

lowed by an exposition of the themes covered in the other two sections that underscores the state-sect intersects or the compromises/denial of cosmopolitanism could have provided a different reading and thereby strengthen the key argument of fluidity, plurality of cities and its boundaries laid out in the introductory essay.

Apart from these minor disappointments, this book is a valuable addition to furthering our understanding of cities. The essays place a variety of cities, such as Bukhara, Lhasa, Beirut and Kuala Lumpur on the map about which there is very limited literature. This is critical as studies on cities and their culture are dominated by a handful of metro stories outside Europe and which tend to be understood via a theoretical framework developed in the US/European context. The thick description in some of the ethnographic studies presents an opportunity to develop a situated, grounded understanding of cities. Clearly a book that must be read by students, scholars and policy makers interested in city processes.

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**SAFETY, SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE  
URBAN TRANSPORT** edited by Dinesh Mohan.  
Eicher Goodearth, New Delhi, 2013.

THIS book is a first of its kind, filling a yawning gap, on the related subjects of safety, built form and mobility. It brings together evidence based research work from various interdisciplinary fields examining issues of security and mobility in the urban landscape. The various articles look at the complex questions of how the planning and design of buildings and roads in cities affect the sense of comfort and well-being of the citizens because their behaviour and choices are influenced by the context in which they find themselves. The scholars and experts all agree that design decisions in the interaction between environment and machines (roads, buildings and vehicles) on the one hand and humans on the other, should decrease exposure to risk and increase the safety of the people in the city.

The expert contributors to this book come from various disciplines and various parts of the globe. In a review of a book on a subject that is complex and often counter-intuitive, it will not be possible to illustrate the points made by all the contributors. It would be worth mentioning here that key extracts from the various articles in the book have been separately issued as

a chapbook for the ready reference of the interested reader. Even a casual but diligent reader of the volume will discern an emerging pattern in the findings and conclusions arrived at by the experts in the essays grouped together here. The following are some sample readings chosen at random and presented in no particular order to give some idea of the central concern of these essays.

Bruce Appleyard acknowledges his indebtedness to his father, Donald Appleyard, who first used mapping exercises to study the impact of traffic on street and community livability. Some of his major findings were that as traffic volumes increase, the quality of life factors that lead to healthy and strong communities (eg. social connections, size of home territory, neighbourhood pride and property values) decrease. He concludes by saying, 'Building complete and livable streets that are safe for travel via foot, bicycle and yes automobiles, is especially important if we want our children to establish a healthy sense of comfort, well-being and connection within their own community.'

Dunu Roy in the epiphanic conclusion to his article on the street as a safe social space says that, 'It is obvious from this set of participatory studies that effective and safe road design and transport planning has to address a set of conflicts implicit in the social context within which roads are built and transport provided. For instance, planners think in terms of "mobility" while a majority of road users are concerned about "livelihoods".' Even if stated in an extreme manner, Dunu Roy's statement contains a hard kernel of truth that cannot be ignored.

Allan J. Williams in an article on the limitations of education and driver training makes the point that, 'Politicians, policy makers, and the general public have placed great emphasis on educational and training approaches. However, as indicated in this paper, their potential for changing individual behaviour is limited. Much greater progress is possible through application of a systems approach emphasizing engineering, environmental and vehicle design changes.'

Writing on the impact of planning policies and design interventions on road traffic crashes, Geetam Tiwari points out that when 'road designs include the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists and public transport vehicles, as the Delhi BRT case study shows, the number of crashes can be reduced. Road designs which explicitly address the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians and result in speed control have a major impact on road crashes.' This is largely because, 'Urban planning policies and land use policies decide the location of different activities and the location of residential areas.

Most of these policies have not been very effective in addressing the needs of poor households who locate close to employment opportunities in the city, often squatting on land not designated for residential use as per the master plan.'

In a remarkable essay, Ian Roberts points out why improving public health may lead to more injury and not less. He maintains that, 'The dramatic nature of injury and widespread media coverage (certainly in comparison with coverage of heart attacks and strokes) combined with the use of the availability heuristic in judging risks means that public perception of injury risk is distorted and favours unhealthy choices... We can best improve global health by making sure that walking, bicycling and use of public transport are the dominant modes of travel for people in urban areas.'

Sudipto Mukherjee (together with Sankarabramanian Hariharan and Anoop Chawla) makes a presentation on the limits of pedestrian safety. 'A case is made for a pedestrian safe car that limits the injuries to AIS 3 levels. Methods to achieve the target have been outlined, which include shape optimization thorough an injury cost function, development of newer "skin" material, reducing the overall mass of the vehicle and limiting vehicle speeds to below 40 km/h. Convergence of the optimization process towards one shape suggests the existence of a single front-end profile forming a "universal" front-end.'

The last word must go to Dinesh Mohan, the editor of the volume. Arguing from the data presented in the essay he shows that:

1. Fatality rates in cities are not solely determined by income levels or city size. RTI fatality rates among cities with similar incomes or similar population levels can vary by a factor of 3-5. This indicates that city street structure and urban form can have a very significant effect on RTI fatality rates over and above the issues of vehicle design and enforcement.
2. It may be more useful to compare cities with very different RTI fatality rates rather than taking all cities in the sample to tease out the real factors influencing road safety.
3. Cities with a higher proportion of wide streets and low density road networks appear to have a much higher RTI fatality rate.
4. Urban form and street design patterns may have to be given much more importance to improve the safety of pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users.

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**COSMIC LOVE AND HUMAN APATHY:  
Swami Vivekananda's Restatement of Religion**  
by Jyotirmaya Sharma. HarperCollins, Delhi, 2013.

No greater upheaval for the establishment of right and liberty can be imagined than the war for the abolition of slavery in America. You all know about it. And what has been its results? The slaves are a hundred times worse off today than they were before the abolition. Before the abolition, these poor negroes were the property of somebody, and, as properties, they had to be looked after, so that they might not deteriorate. Today they are the property of nobody. Their lives are of no value; they are burnt alive on mere presence.

– Vivekananda, 'My Plan of Campaign',  
2 September 1897, Victoria Public Hall, Madras

LAST September, ahead of the Gujarat assembly election, Narendra Modi undertook a month-long Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra covering all the 182 constituencies. Besides rousing the rabble, the yatra's purpose was to distribute cricket bats and volleyballs to 'youth'. Vivekananda (1863-1902), whose 150th birth anniversary is upon us, did after all seek to goad the nation towards a muscular Hinduism prescribing beef, biceps and Bhagvad Gita to strengthen effeminate Hindu bodies. Gujarat, of course, has imposed the cow slaughter ban, so beef was, and is, out of the question. Cricket bats and volleyballs will do, though Vivekananda seemed fond of football. (Never mind what kind of hide goes into the making of cricket balls.)

What makes Vivekananda, born Narendra Nath Datta into a Kayastha family, beloved of seemingly polarized figures such as Modi, A.B. Bardhan, K.N. Panikkar and Arun Shourie? Why do they all claim that their ideological opponents are appropriating this Hindu apologist wrongfully, and why do they feel driven to resurrect, explain and defend him? These are questions on which I shall peg this review of Jyotirmaya Sharma's *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy: Swami Vivekananda's Restatement of Religion*.

In 1896, Vivekananda founded a journal called *Prabuddha Bharata*, published today by the Advaita Ashrama of the Ramakrishna Math. In the April 1899 issue of the journal, the unnamed editor quizzes Vivekananda on the matter 'of receiving back into Hinduism those who have been perverted [sic] from it.' Vivekananda says they ought to be taken back, for otherwise 'we shall decrease in numbers', and reasons that 'every man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less, but an enemy the more.' This was a good two decades before the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha launched the Shuddhi and Sanghatan movements in the cow belt, and six years before the

first Bengal Partition. Receiving them back into the fold begs the question: Where do you place these reverting 'perverts'? To put it bluntly, 'Of what caste would these people be, Swamiji?' To which: 'Returning converts,' said the Swami quietly, 'will gain their own castes, of course. And new people will make theirs. You will remember,' he added, 'that this has already been done in the case of Vaishnavism. Converts from different castes and aliens were all able to combine under that flag and form a caste by themselves – and a very respectable one too. From Ramanuja down to Chaitanya of Bengal, all great Vaishnava teachers have done the same.'

This man, whom some Indian Marxists accuse of being a 'complex thinker', goes on to say that those reverting to Hinduism should also be given caste-compatible names, and they should marry among themselves. Like Sharma argues in his new book – the third in a quartet on modern Hinduism – Vivekananda lends himself to being selectively quoted out of context, such that the Left and the Right can invoke him with equal and consummate passion. And given that Vivekananda made several sensational, outrageous and contradictory statements all his life, that's a charge that could perhaps equally be laid at the door of Sharma, or for that matter this reviewer. Consequently, at least two things can happen. First, through a string of carefully picked quotes, he can be made to sound tolerant, enlightened and even secular; made to appear an advocate of the salience of all religions; he could even become someone who approached religion with a scientific bent of mind (for he did try to argue that Vedanta 'agrees with modern science'). Second, he can be made to sound like he actually does above: an obscurantist who can easily be cited and appropriated by a Modi, Togadia or Vajpayee.

Let me turn briefly to American scholar Nico Slate's recent work, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (2012), where he looks at Lala Lajpat Rai, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi's opinion on the position of African Americans vis-à-vis the untouchables. Slate looks at how and why these men arrived at conclusions diametrically opposed to those of B.R. Ambedkar. Slate discusses Vivekananda's American experience at length. Predictably, given his belief that Hinduism is the 'mother of all religions', Vivekananda (like Tagore, Gandhi, Lajpat Rai) came to the conclusion that the shudras and untouchables of India were better treated than 'negroes' in contemporary America; but this is to be seen in the context of Vivekananda often being mis-

taken for an African American in the US (and Gandhi being offloaded from a first class compartment in South Africa). Hence, Vivekananda also argued, 'As soon as a man becomes a Mohammedan, the whole of Islam receives him as a brother with open arms.' In contrast, he lamented, 'In this country, I have never yet seen a church where the white man and the negro can kneel side by side to pray.' The latter quote can be invoked to make him sound like he has solidarity with the blacks, and that he was progressive. But then, soon after, when he is back 'home' in Madras recounting his experiences in 1897, he delivers the speech quoted in the epigraph to this review essay.

So if there's anything that binds the Left and the Right in their admiration for Vivekananda, and the selective use of pull quotes from him to suit their respective agendas, it is this: the Left in India has a quintessential 'Hindu' core; it believes in a certain 'good Hinduism' that needs to be saved and defended from 'bad Hindutva' and its votaries. Which is the reason why the secularist discourse in India is also tolerant of Gandhi, notwithstanding his unrepentant self-proclamation as a 'Sanatan Dharmi', and his upholding of varnashrama. It was left to radical outfits such as the Dalit Panther to lambast Gandhi as 'deceitful, cunning, an orthodox casteist ... who gave shelter to those who wanted to preserve class rule.'

Let us now turn to the Left's love for the man who bequeathed to scores of urban middle class children the idea of a safe 'fancy dress' in school competitions.

Two voices that ring in my ears are CPI's A.B. Bardhan and JNU professor and Marxist historian K.N. Panikkar. The latter addresses him reverentially as 'Swamiji', and says he stood for 'religious universalism', and that 'Vivekananda hardly had anything in common with the sangh parivar, except being Hindu by birth.' He underscores this: 'None of his observations on Hinduism, unless taken out of context, seems to give credence to the proposition that he had a communal outlook' (in 'Vivekananda's legacy of universalism', *The Hindu*, 10 April 2013).

A little back in time, post-Babri, Arun Shourie – the Arvind Kejriwal of the 1990s who did not break sweat and did not have to use autorickshaws to display his face – had this to say of the Left's newfound love for Vivekananda in the cleverly titled 'Quotable Quotes' (*Sunday*, 13 February 1993): 'Stray quotations cannot be set up to counter the entire life and work of such a man. As that life and work is the exact opposite of what you have been propagating, the more you lean on Vivekananda, the more he will recoil on you.'

Now juxtapose this with what Sharma outlines as a market for Vivekananda's perceived 'liberality with respect to other faiths.' In a world that 'constantly has to contend with religious strife, and violence that is the inevitable consequence of such conflict', such as, say, post-Babri communal tensions: 'such words and thoughts can be seductively reassuring. This is especially so when quoted out of context, selectively and without attention to fine print.'

So each interlocutor – of the Left (Bardhan/Panikkar), of the Right (Shourie) and the one occupying what looks like the middle ground (Sharma) – warns us against using Vivekananda's 'sayings' selectively to suit our agendas. But this being the 150th year of this man's birth, the Left and the Right (and the ever-clueless Congress) seem to be coming together to celebrate. In Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, leaders of the Congress, CPI(M) and the BJP attended a function to launch *Swami Vivekananda and Prabuddha Keralam*, a book edited by RSS ideologue P. Parameswaran. Declaring Vivekananda 'the first socialist of India', CPI(M)'s V.S. Achuthanandan shared the dais with BJP leader O. Rajagopal and Congress leader and culture minister K.C. Joseph.

In his 2003 book, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Sharma discusses how both A.B. Bardhan and A.B. Vajpayee would quote the much-lauded Chicago address (1893) of Vivekananda and claim him for themselves. In fact, in 2003 Bardhan authored an official CPI publication called *Vivekananda's Message: Communist Reply to BJP/RSS to rescue the Hindu monk from the 'tirades of Singhal, Togadia and Katiyar.'* In the 32-page booklet, Bardhan even regrets the Left's neglect and poor assessment of Vivekananda and, as a corrective, seeks 'to draw attention to the real Hindu ethos that stands in shining contrast to the Sangh Parivar's Hindutva.'

In stark contrast to all this, Sharma's book is a meticulous study of Vivekananda's restatement of religion. The book, like his earlier two works on the RSS ideologue M.S. Golwalkar and on Hindutva, makes this brave point in no uncertain terms: 'There is no distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. If anything, Hindutva is the dominant expression of Hinduism in our times, though not the only way in which Hinduism articulates itself. Vivekananda's forceful and substantial articulation of Hinduism as religion also makes him the father of Hindutva.'

With this premise, Sharma scrutinizes Vivekananda's unique brand of 'Practical Vedanta' and idiosyncratic use of concepts and categories. Before

he tackles Vivekananda, Sharma examines the world of his mentor and guru Ramakrishna (born Gadadhar Chattopadhyay), steeped in tantra- and bhakti-induced mysticism and ecstasy, and how Vivekananda, especially after Ramakrishna's death in 1886, severed himself from this devotional universe and veered towards masculinist monism. He constructed a Hinduism that appeared sane, normal, orthodox and nationalist; a religion where all kinds of sectarian differences would be steamrollered to create a fierce, confident, modern religion based on Vedanta. Sharma first sets himself the task of telling us how the 'rupture' between the worlds of Vivekananda and his guru Ramakrishna, whom the former both claims and disavows, is an act of simultaneous patricide and filial love. 'Vivekananda deified Ramakrishna but was never obliged to follow either's his guru's life or thoughts.'

In the first part of the book, Sharma walks the reader thorough Ramakrishna's psychic world, to which he seems a little too beholden. Sharma does not ever hide his partisan approach, and rarely ever uses a judgmental adjective while describing the most bizarre of his idiosyncrasies. The priest of the Dakshineswar Kali temple while worshipping Kali also held women to be abominable creatures; he believed that a man and woman should live like siblings after producing one or two children (I had no idea Ramakrishna advocated some kind of family planning); coitus 'must stop after the birth of children.' Woman, for this sanyasi who also had a wife, is either Divine Mother or a Whore; she is 'raging forest fire' or 'a black cobra'.

So what does Ramakrishna do to overcome his pathological aversion to women? He becomes one, assuming the guise and attitudes of one, sports women's clothes, and even wears jewellery. When he longs for 'Radha bhava', Ramakrishna even claims he menstruated; at other times, he 'worshipped his own penis as shivalingam'. Once, approximating the 'dasya bhava' of Hanuman, Ramakrishna admits to 'tying a cloth round his waist so that it might look like a tail and moved about jumping.' In such a state, he spends much of his time on trees crying 'Raghuvir, Raghuvir', and such is the intensity of his feelings that 'the lower end of the backbone (coccyx) lengthened at the set time nearly an inch.' Lest we should seek proof using mundane rationality, we are told the elongation – the development of a nascent tail – ceased after the bhava or mood elapsed. While about the same time that Charles Darwin was talking of humans evolving from apes, Ramakrishna managed to turn the clock back, at least for himself. For such ecstatic delusions – what in

ordinary mortals are hallucinations caused by mind-altering substances – many people in India and across the world are unfortunately treated as mad or addicts, and subjected to all kinds of torture; but in Ramakrishna's case, all this has to be understood, if we are sympathetic like Sharma is, as 'divine madness'.

There's a cataloguing of many such excesses in the book, but Sharma understands these as part of Ramakrishna's tantric phase – acts the 'rationalist' Vivekananda would come to be embarrassed about. This phase apparently lasted between 1856-57 when Ramakrishna was into Shakti worship. This was the same time when the hardened Satyashodak (Truth-seeker), Jotiba Phule, a shudra-kunabi peasant, was intellectually active in faraway Pune lambasting brahmanism, merrily ridiculing what Vivekananda was to later uphold. As the brahmin priest of Dakshineswar was happily eating fish cooked in a human skull and putting a piece of rotten human flesh in his mouth to overcome aversion, in central India, brahmins like Mangal Pandey were afraid of ritual pollution that may be caused by beef or pig tallow on cartridges that they had to tear with their teeth before loading them on their Enfield muskets.

Sharma refuses to dissect the reasons why a man who espoused tantra should be so virulently afraid of women who appear to him like tigresses and she-monsters out to devour him. Reading between the lines of Sharma's book, it did occur to me that Ramakrishna was restating tantra and bhakti fused with his own brahmanism, just like his disciple Vivekananda went on to restate a masculine Vedanta as Hinduism. If there's one weakness in the book it is that it casts Ramakrishna as the 'good guy' and Vivekananda as the 'baddie'. After all, it was Ramakrishna who spawned Vivekananda and anointed him successor despite disagreeing with his disciple on several fronts. And without Vivekananda, there would not be the multi-crore, real estate empire that Ramakrishna Mission today is. Hence, a more critical approach to Ramakrishna would have enhanced the book's appeal.

After delineating Ramakrishna's world, Sharma turns to Vivekananda and tries to make sense of the contradictions that abound in his work. Vivekananda believed that too much of Chaitanya-style bhakti had made most of eastern India effeminate. Sharma charts for us how Vivekananda rejects every philosophical system and every strand of thought as unorthodox if it does not 'obey the Upanishads'. The monk seeks to establish the paramountcy of the Vedas and Upanishads and rejects 'petty village customs' and anything that did

not adhere to 'our scriptures'. On a global scale, he debunks all prophetic and revelatory religions and proclaims Vedanta as the only true universal religion.

After the eighth century Advaitist monk Sankara, Vivekananda, who died young like him, was perhaps the biggest revisionist seeking to establish a pan-Indian orthodox creed. While Sankara's enterprise can be called a restatement of brahmanism (in response to the challenge of Buddhism), Vivekananda's was a repackaging of Vedic and Upanishadic concepts as modern Hinduism (in response to colonialism and Christianity).

I will end with a few quibbles over Sharma's otherwise excellent effort. Sharma always quotes from *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* published by the Advaita Asharama; but only random reprint publication dates are given as 1936, 1999, 2002 etc. Given that Vivekananda made several contradictory statements, it would have been useful if Sharma traced some kind of a timeline for his thoughts, and how, if at all, they evolved. Instead, there are scores of instances when Sharma juxtaposes a tissue of Vivekananda quotations from many different volumes. On pp. 261-2, for instance, we get quotations from volumes 1, 2, 4 and 5 in succession as Practical Vedanta is discussed. Examining Vivekananda's views on eating meat (p. 272), Sharma jumps between volumes 4, 3 and 5. But rarely do we get a sense of the context and time of these bizarre utterances. This methodological problem is compounded by the shocking absence of a bibliography.

Another sore point is that Sharma, for some strange reason, refuses to situate Vivekananda in his times. We do not get a comparative sense of the thought-worlds of his contemporaries like Ranade, Tilak, Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Iyothee Thass, Gandhi or Aurobindo Ghose, or for that matter if and how Vivekananda was aware of these strands of thought. There is a reference to Vivekananda's debt to Kant, Berkeley and Schopenhauer, but only in passing.

What the book does not do is another matter; what it surely does is leave us with this conclusion: that Vivekananda was perhaps the subcontinent's first modern Hindu, a man who played no small role in cementing a term that finds no mention in any of the scriptures (the Vedas, Upanishads, the smritis, Ramayana, Mahabharata or Bhagvad Gita) of a people who have come to believe that they can be called Hindu. Sharma's project in a relentless critique of this forged identity.