



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The making of the city of capital: histories of slums and films in Colonial Bombay**

Poddar, S.

### **Citation**

Poddar, S. (2022). The making of the city of capital: histories of slums and films in Colonial Bombay. *Economic And Political Weekly*, 57(3), 30-34. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4302270>

Version: Publisher's Version  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4302270>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

---

---

---

# The Making of the City of Capital

## Histories of Slums and Films in Colonial Bombay

SANJUKTA PODDAR

---

NO one narrator can gauge the true shape of an entity as elephantine as the metropolis of Bombay. Sheetal Chhabria and Debashree Mukherjee, however, in their respective accounts of colonial Bombay, masterfully identify the beating heart of this elephant-capital. Their works, though occupied with two distinct narrative arcs of the city's history, can be discussed alongside each other. They both showcase the power wielded by the capital in urban life and the consequences of such domination on the people who inhabit the city, on their bodies, their livelihoods, their modes of dwelling, and their creative energies. The common grounds for a discussion of these two books also arise from the fact that both are homages to the working-class "humans of Bombay" without whom capital would remain an inert proposition. In so doing, both books engage afresh with the idea of capital and its constitutive role in the economy, society, and culture of the metropolitan life.

In drawing attention to the long history of the "making of slums" in Bombay, Chhabria sheds light on the failures of both colonial and Indian civic authorities. By historicising the processes that led to the outcrop of slums, the author destabilises the given-ness that this ubiquitous urban phenomenon has assumed. Mukherjee's narrative of the "making of the cine-ecology" is a dramatic story of two aspects of Bombay cinema: the material infrastructure that facilitates the making of films and embodies the histories of various cine-workers who labour in this industry.

The difference between the two accounts lies in the issue of agency; while city-making was controlled by colonial authorities and elite Indian stakeholders, film-making was an entirely indigenous affair. While reflecting this difference,

### REVIEW ARTICLE

**Making the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay** by Sheetal Chhabria, *Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019; pp 235, \$30 (paperback).*

**Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City** by Debashree Mukherjee, *New York: Columbia University Press, 2020; pp 420, \$30 (paperback).*

Chhabria employs a Foucauldian and neo-Marxist reading in her historiography of working-class habitations in the city; Mukherjee takes a post-structuralist approach and innovates within the field of biomedica.

Both authors provide centre stage to the histories of certain city dwellers whose narratives might otherwise remain occluded—wage labourers, cotton factory workers, sanitation workers, stuntwomen and stuntmen, "extras," speculators, spectators, etc. To return to the metaphor with which I opened the discussion, both works firmly emphasise the fact that urban denizens are the lifeblood of the city. My discussion of the two works highlights this underlying thread.

#### Slum-making in Bombay

Chhabria's *Making the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay* takes up five constitutive units of city-making—land, housing, famine, disease, and capital. Aiming for a comprehensive analysis of these categories, her temporal lens spans from the 18th to the 20th century. The author shows how the colonial and indigenous efforts to control these material aspects of the reified entity called the "city" were, in practice, a series of inclusionary and exclusionary actions wrought on the bodies of its working poor. The centrality of the entity of "City" (with a capital c) arises from the fact that "Capital" (again a capitalised entity), rather than the "citizen," was the

organising principle and the ideal in the efforts of city-makers. Meanwhile, workers were excluded and pushed into tenements, which became the kernels of the "modern slum." Chhabria exposes the fundamental irony at the root of these conditions—while the working classes were essential to the process of building and producing the city, their lives, dwellings, health, and sanitation were routinely sacrificed at the altar of the deity of capital. The civic institutions such as the municipal corporation and the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT) actively participated in the phenomenon of othering of lower-class habitations and denying them better facilities. As a result, the slum is very much a product of the same modernising process that stitched together a metropolis out of a string of disconnected islands.

Despite the growing nationalist fervour, both the colonial authorities and Indian elite took part in authoritative forms of colonial urban governance. Chapter 1, "Land," traces how a "calculative rationale" shaped the formation of the city from the 18th century onward. This economic logic was manifest in spatial practices such as the tight-fisted control of land and its subsequent commodification. The aim was to sharply delimit the boundaries of the urban area to regulate access to the city. To this end, agriculture was phased out from areas that were emerging as urban; "indigents," "porters," and small cultivators were pushed out from lucrative areas; famine relief-seekers were discouraged from becoming permanent inhabitants; and multiple land tenures were categorised as private property that could be bought only by the desirable Indians and Europeans. Thus, possession and dispossession of land became the pivots of this new regime of city-making.

In Chapter 2, "Famine," the author shows how the country and the city, as

also the impoverished villager and the poor city dweller were forced into a toxic relationship during times of famines and international crises. The commodification of all aspects of agriculture in the countryside created a cyclical nexus between bouts of famine, agricultural indebtedness, and poverty. Famines were explained away as endemic and as particular to India; and the idea of the city was pushed as the solution to this rural crisis of poverty, hunger, and unemployment.

Furthermore, famine management was leveraged as a strategy of reordering the city, whereby people and spaces were arranged into categories of agricultural and industrial, and rural and urban. When the hungry came to the city looking for aid, rather than focusing on the alleviation of hunger, colonial authorities weighed famine relief against the economy and advocated for the “best use of resources.” Chhabria charts the history of how the city balanced the amounts it spent on famine relief by extracting labour and value from the hungry and monetising their aid funds to turn the funds profitable. As a result, indebtedness grew as poverty was monetised.

The hinterland–city relationship was also affected by international events such as the American Civil War, which led to an increase in the production and export of Indian cotton. Once the conditions stabilised across the Atlantic, the demand for Indian cotton drastically fell and migrant labourers were rendered superfluous to the needs of the city. These booms and busts ended up being inscribed on the physical body of the city and its labouring poor. Through a range of coercive practices, productive agricultural migrants were allowed in during periods of need for labourers and were forcefully confined to the city; and when the demand for workers diminished, the hungry or rural migrant workers were forced out.

### Urban Housing

“Shelter,” Chapter 3, is the central piece of this monograph, logically arising from the two previous chapters that focused on land and the flow of migrants into the city. When the issue of shelter for the homeless migrants arose, the city authorities

offered the solution of housing. In this apparent solution lay the “making of the modern slum.” While such housing schemes did not offer comfortable or durable shelter to the poor city dweller, this strategy enabled the enumeration of the individual as well as space, rendering both into “governmental objects.”

Using a Foucauldian framework, Chhabria convincingly argues that in practice, “housing” implied a strategy whereby a space of dwelling was attached to the taxonomic identity of the individual. This move did not imply genuinely providing tenable housing but enumerating migrants. In the process, “the city” as a historical category of rule—wielding the power to distinguish between the legal and the illegal, between the healthy and the diseased, and between “housing” and “slum”—acquired a physical and conceptual fixity of meaning.

The rich archives on land reclamation and land use in Bombay have been examined by other historians of the city (Kidambi 2007; Rao 2013). Chhabria contributes to this conversation by tracing the entire historical arc of authoritative and interventionist measures and their implications on the conceptual identity of the city. These measures culminated in the establishment of land and housing regulatory authorities such as the municipal corporation in 1865 and the semi-autonomous BRT in 1898. Under these bodies, some forms of housing were connected to regimes of legality and property, while disconnecting others from such claims. For instance, they designated “densely inhabited tenements” (p 88) as “slums,” rendering them as illegitimate forms of habitation in the city. “Pukka” housing, dependent on building material, type of roof, sanitation, and density were prioritised but the definition continued to shift.

Furthermore, the budget required for city management and improvement was tightly controlled and “managed like a business, where revenue ought to exceed expenditure” (p 97). The author shows how the scaffolding of a variety of classificatory and interventionist measures in the name of housing brought everyday life under the rubric of the city’s interest.

Chapter 4, “Disease,” brings home the devastating repression that resulted from

the attempts at epidemic management and control. When the plague hit the “city” in 1896, once again, the health of the city—powered by capital—was prioritised over the well-being of ravaged people. Chhabria points to the fact that the authorities identified unsanitary housing as the prime cause of disease and thus targeted the undesirable subject—the working poor—as requiring eradication. For instance, long-term interventions like the eradication of slums effectively functioned to sanitise the city for the smooth flow of capital. These colonial-era measures might remind readers of the “poverty control” drive undertaken during the postcolonial years, in particular, during the Emergency (1975–77). Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s 1971 election campaign slogan was “Garibi Hatao” (Remove Poverty); however, as is well-known, in execution, it implied “Garib Hatao” (Remove the Poor).

Another measure of disease control in colonial Bombay, the quarantine, will remind the readers of the current COVID-19 management in the contemporary time. During the plague of 1896, authoritarian measures such as race- and class-based displacement and segregation had resulted in hundreds of people, largely migrants, leaving the city for the countryside. Chhabria could not have known how close to home this history would hit. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread through the world and in India and an arbitrary lockdown was announced, migrant workers fled from cities en masse, often on foot, to take shelter in the countryside. In the past, just like today, labour was central to the operation of capital. And once the crisis was over, their long-term dispersal or absence could not be tolerated if the city was to continue as the commercial centre, especially the cotton industry. Through this discussion, Chhabria demonstrates an enduring truth about urbanism all across the world—the mobility, housing, and health of the working class continue to be monitored and controlled for the benefit of the city and capital.

With the last chapter, “Capital,” Chhabria brings home for the reader the devious power that capital wielded. Readers get a glimpse into the processes

by which the city was pushed to the forefront as the central character of this narrative. We also see how efforts were made to maintain its “sanitary credit” (its image of cleanliness) for the sake of commerce, even as poor people remained unsheltered. As evidence, the author points to the institutional history of the city’s civic agencies; a key moment of demonstration of the power of capital being the creation of the BRT. She shows that public bodies like the BRT were, in actuality, run as profit-minded business ventures that indulged in speculation about the future value of land and borrowed money from the public for its investment in risky and dubious financial schemes:

Through the Trust, the imperial government reinserted itself more explicitly into local urban affairs, and private capital became enjoined in the task of governance. (p 148)

The pretext behind this proliferation of civic institutions—first, the municipal corporation and the BRT, and then the Bombay Development Department and Bombay Port Trust—was efficient land management and housing solutions. In reality, the BRT was a front deployed by the colonial government and the local elite to ensure their control over the lucrative financial investment—land. Chhabria writes,

In the few decades of the trust’s activities, more people were dis-housed than re-housed, which only served to exacerbate the poor housing problem. (p 177)

Through this in-depth ideological analysis of the foundational infrastructural moments of the city’s history, the author provides an important insight into the processes that fixed the constitutive elements of the city. In turn, what the City as an entity meant, implied, and who it served, also gained fixity. This was the legacy of urbanism inherited by the postcolonial nation and post-independence cities.

### **Film-making in Bombay: A Six-Act Exploration of the Material and the Human in Cinema**

Mukherjee’s history of film-making in Bombay focuses on a crucial and understudied period of Indian film history—the transition from silent films to talkies—that unfolded mainly in the 1930s. Her work has two intertwined objects of

enquiry: (i) she examines the quotidian practices that went into film-making, and (ii) she analyses how the ecology of Bombay enabled cinema to flourish. These twinned histories of cinema and the city come together in her formulation of the concept of “cine-ecology.” Through this lens, Mukherjee examines the fine web of interconnections between infrastructure (finance, technology, and science) and the bodily and affective investments of cine-workers.

The book answers questions that are worth asking—why did Bombay, and not any other city, emerge as the capital of Indian cinema and the heart of the Hindi film industry? How did its particular mode of urban modernity influence and encourage film-making? What are the strategies for highlighting the histories of cine-workers within the scholarship? Mukherjee’s creative re-imagining and sharp insight into the umbilical relationship between the history of cinema and that of Bombay make this work a significant addition to the scholarship on cultural history as well as urban history of the colonial period.

Ranjani Mazumdar’s pioneering work, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (2007), was the first to draw scholarly attention to the various sets of relationships that this city and cinema share, especially in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s. A crucial strand that binds the “real city” of Bombay with the “filmic city” (the on-screen representation of Bombay) is the exploration of a range of urban subjectivities specific to Bombay. As a result, films from this period, such as *Deewar* (1975), *Parinda* (1989), *Baazigar* (1993), *Rangeela* (1995), and *Satya* (1998), function as the archive of the city. Following Mazumdar’s book, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (2007), Mukherjee’s *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* turns instead to the colonial period and focuses on (1) the archive of cinema as practice (“the work of ideating, acting, writing, dancing, stitching, lighting, and simply waiting on the sets”), and (2) human histories behind the screen. However, as both Mazumdar and Mukherjee emphasise, when it comes to Bombay and cinema, the on-screen, off-screen, and behind-the-screen (in a literal

sense, that is, on set) connections are always intertwined. In the discussion that follows, I draw attention to the sections that delineate the specific urbanism of the city of Bombay that Mukherjee depicts in her work.

Mukherjee’s writing revels in linguistic virtuosity and variety. “Hustle,” the noun and the verb featured in the title, captures the contingent but exciting nature of film work as well as the nervous pushy energy of Bombay. The titles of the two parts of the book—*Elasticity* and *Energy*—gesture towards the animating principles that characterise Bombay’s cine-ecology. The capacities and challenges faced by cinema in the domains of speculative capital, technological experiments, and sound are explored in the three chapters of Part one. Part two, comprising three chapters, dwells on cine-workers and their bodily possibilities and limits: it is their vitality, exhaustion, and breakdown that makes movies come to life. The chapters are accompanied by shadow-titles, drawing on local vernacular phrases like “teji-mandi” and “josh” that pithily convey the precarity of the city and of the process of making films.

Apart from being the film capital of India, Bombay’s claim to fame also rests on its commercial prowess. Chapter 1 examines this aspect. Both Chhabria and Mukherjee indicate how intrinsic speculative finance was to the city. Speculative trading in the futures of various commodities—including land and films—earned Bombay the moniker, “India’s financial capital.” The wild profits from speculative trading in cotton, a reified form of betting and gambling, were pumped back into another speculative arena—films. Lacking any support from the colonial state or private banks, indigenous film-makers could only thrive due to this form of cash flow. Mukherjee examines three studios from the 1930s—Ranjit Movietone, Sagar Movietone, and Bombay Talkies—that exemplify the variety of speculative risks that film-makers took. The danger was, however, that where there was a flow, there could be an ebb. And within cine-ecology, whatever happened in the background, always found a way onto the screen, as Mukherjee shows in her reading of the plots of many

films on financial dealings from this era. While the author does not make this connection, films could be credited with introducing the vocabulary from the financial realm into popular imagination. For instance, from a slightly later period, Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* (1955) taught a post-colonial nation about high-society gambling dens, Ponzi schemes in housing, selling of bad shares to an unsuspecting public, speculation in oil digs, and black markets (shadow economy). Mukherjee's work establishes the fact that this on-screen commentary has a longer history, going back to the early years of the talkies.

In Chapter 2, the author examines a range of technical innovations embraced by popular cinema in this transitional period. The enchantment with technology was an important facet of Bombay's modernity as well as films. These ranged from industrial exhibitions reinforcing the productive "industry" status of films to scientific management techniques like the use of particular kinds of scripts, the simultaneous shooting of two films, and of course, the on-screen promotion of industrial modernity. Through this discussion, Mukherjee demonstrates cinema's

active role in siding with rationalism in the debate on the nation's future. The author's fortuitous recovery of the scripts of the Bombay Talkies studio from the Dietze family archives in Melbourne reveals the impressive expertise of early talkies in the arena of film management. Contrary to the early cinema's popular image as badly managed, the discussion of these scripts attests to the presence of a highly rationalist idiom. Mukherjee underlines this relationship: "Cinema, as a house of scientific magic, thrust the technical together with the social, rendering both slightly muddled from the encounter" (p 142).

Chapter 3, "Voice" explores the transformative effects of the arrival of sound technology and the syncing of sound to the human body. In 1931, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara* inaugurated the "talkies" in India. The author steers our attention to the fact that this speaking-singing-sounding body changed not only Indian cinema but also the entire acoustic soundscape. A need arose for a new breed of actors—those who could emote as well as orate. Actors had to reinvent themselves as sound artists and a whole genre of "abhinetri" (actress) films with argumentative women

leads emerged in response. The audience too needed to equip themselves with novel tactics of listening in turn.

### The Dark Side

With the second part of the book, spread over three chapters, Mukherjee deftly puts into conversation infrastructural histories with the history of labouring bodies. The three chapters, "Vitality," "Exhaustion," and "Struggle," centre squarely on the bodies of cine-workers and on energy, or lack thereof. Talking about the perception of the body in the early decades of the 20th century, Mukherjee writes, "the human body was simultaneously seen as a site of possibility and a site of intervention" (p 187). Given the on-screen/off-screen relationalities that Mukherjee traces as the thread running through the cine-ecology, her reading of what we might call an "energy economy" is convincing. This transfer and exchange of energy takes place at various levels in the cine-ecology—on and off the screen between actors and other cine-workers, and between the cine-workers and the city. The city enters the narrative here in many ways: Bombay as the character or

New

## EPWRF India Time Series

www.epwrfits.in

### Module on Employment Statistics

- Contains 7 Sub Modules
- Periodic Labour Force Survey - Annual
- Periodic Labour Force Survey - Quarterly
- Payroll Reporting
- Population Census
- NSSO's Employment and Unemployment Survey
- Labour Bureau's (LB) Annual Employment Data
- LB's Annual Employment and Unemployment Survey

The EPWRF ITS has 24 modules covering a range of macro-economic, financial and social sector indicators on the Indian economy.

EPWRF India Time Series is an e-ShodhSindhu consortium approved online database.

**For further details, visit [www.epwrfits.in](http://www.epwrfits.in) or write to us at [its@epwrf.in](mailto:its@epwrf.in)**

backdrop during film shoots, its unpredictable and uncomfortable climate impinging during the shoots, and as the place that attracted many migrants who wanted to be a part of the city's cine-ecology.

Chapter 5, "Vitality," dips into various archival sources to showcase how the discourse on energy and good health had a wide circulation in the public sphere. Images of the energetic individual and the vitalised nation were amplified through films and characters in films like *Nav Jeevan* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Whirlwind* (1933), *Rajput Ramani* (1936), *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), and *Jawani ki Hawa* (1935). The ideals of energy were also disbursed through other media; for instance, in a story by Saadat Hasan Manto and advertisements for "energy drinks" like Horlicks.

Historian Charu Gupta (2001) has shed light on the turn of the century when the nationalist Hindu position leveraged the discourse of masculinity, vitality, and the health of the nation to consolidate itself. Mukherjee's forte in these chapters is to highlight another facet on the discourse on energy by focusing on its opposite state—exhaustion. In particular, she ably reframes "exhaustion" as an experiential category and an embodied by-product of the physically demanding work of making movies. Mukherjee anchors this discussion in some brilliant archival gems—the history of singer-actress Shanta Apte's hunger strike of 1939 and her writings, in particular her Marathi polemical text of 1940, *Should I Join the Movies?* Readers will appreciate how Mukherjee, via Apte, threads together specific conditions of labouring cine-workers with a structural critique of class and, less convincingly, the caste. To protest against the maltreatment of cine-workers who were exploited by studios to gain endless profits, Apte went on a hunger strike. In her writing, she referenced Marxist theories of labour exploitation to showcase how studios treated the cine-workers' body as an endlessly resourceful machine. In reality, however, the body experienced depletion and lost its value with such rough use and due to the natural course of ageing. Apte's brave stance as a female actor, as a labour organiser, and as an activist is a radical

one, and in the author's words, "Shanta Apte ... provides us with a vision of resistance" (p 267).

The last chapter focuses on a category familiar to all who hold even a passing interest in Bollywood—the "struggle." This infamous but ubiquitous experience is a sort of rite-of-passage for newcomers into the field. While success stories are widely publicised, the countless heart-breaking failures are rendered invisible. Mukherjee's attention in this narrative is on the cine-fan who aspires to be a cine-worker, traced through the careers of the actress, Sulochona, and her fan, actress-dancer, Azurie. At a time when safety protocols and "body-doubles" were unavailable, actors, stunt-actors, and cine-workers faced serious bodily hazards. Here, the author brings to life another facet of the Bombay cine-workers' struggle.

Mukherjee's breathtaking and bold portrayal of Mumbai cinema and the city of Mumbai can be best summed up in her words:

One of the central arguments of *Bombay Hustle* is that cinema responded to and shaped urban transformation not only through on-screen fantasies of modernity but also through the material presence and circulation of a varied and visible cinematic workforce. (p 314)

### Whose City?

Both authors pay close and empathetic attention to the voices in the archive and prioritise the stories of human agents as embodied subjects of urban experiences. Drawing upon the writings of Marxist scholars of urbanism such as David Harvey and Manuel Castells, the scholarship on the contemporary Asian cities has shown how the displacement of the poor and the eradication of the working-class tenements or "slums," supported by middle-class aspirations for "world-class cities," has now become the standard practice within governmental policy (Baviskar and Ray 2011; Roy 2011; Ghertner 2015).

Chhabria's work is a significant addition to this scholarship since it highlights the long and deep historical roots of bourgeois ideology and practice in the Indian cities. In addition, Chhabria contributes to the historiography of colonial India through her critique of the capitalist logic that drove urban planning and spatial organisation of Bombay—a

crucial metropolitan city of colonial India and, thus, a model for many other Indian cities. Readers who wonder about the socio-economic processes that led to the formation of "slums" in urban India will find an engaging and satisfying answer in this book.

This longue durée infrastructural and materialist history of Bombay, shaped by the British authorities and the Indian elites, presents a complimentary background to Mukherjee's work—a cultural history of the cine-ecology of the city during two specific decades led entirely by Indians who belonged to a wide variety of class backgrounds. Her book will garner the attention of and engage scholars from many subfields: history of cinema, popular culture, biomedicine studies, and urban history. This book presents new modes of watching cinema and seeing the city through its material and human histories. Mukherjee's writing adds to the nascent scholarship in this field and, alongside Mazumdar and Manishita Dass's (2015) works, draws attention to the intersection of the urban, the filmic, and the embodied histories of Bombay's pioneering cine-workers.

Sanjukta Poddar ([sanjukta.poddar@gmail.com](mailto:sanjukta.poddar@gmail.com); [sanjukta@uchicago.edu](mailto:sanjukta@uchicago.edu)) is a doctoral candidate at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago.

### REFERENCES

- Baviskar, Amita and Raka Ray (eds) (2011): *Elite and the Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, New Delhi and New York: Routledge.
- Dass, Manishita (2015): *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ghertner, Asher (2015): *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, Charu (2001): *Sexuality, Obscenity, and Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kidambi, Prashant (2007): *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Mazumdar, Ranjani (2007): *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rao, Nikhil R (2013): *House, But No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs, 1898–1964*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Roy, Ananya (2011): "The Blockade of the World Class City: Dialectical Images of Indian Urbanism," *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (eds), Wiley-Blackwell.