

Crowley, T. *Fractured forest, quartzite city: a history of Delhi and its ridge*. YODA Press SAGE Select, New Delhi. 2020. (pp 368). Paperback (ISBN 978-93-5388-554-0) ₹ 795.

### ***Re-enchanting the Delhi Ridge***

21<sup>st</sup> century India is on a fast track path towards urbanisation. In Indian cities, the biggest driver of change is the price of real estate. Every square inch of land is fiercely contested, being sought after by governments, businesses and individuals to build over. Places of ecology are particularly intense sites of conflict between people and nature. While many argue that Indian cities should just give up the fight for nature within the city, instead seeking to convert cities into places for people and commerce—others fiercely maintain that cities cannot survive without spaces of nature. Indeed, they argue that places of nature are essential not only for the long term sustainability of Indian cities, but also for the mental and physical health and wellbeing of the hundreds of millions of people who live in cities, and pour into them each day.

In *Fractured Forest, Quartzite City: A History of Delhi and Its Ridge*, Thomas Crowley draws our attention to a part of Delhi that is so essential to the city, but which has rarely been written about. In doing so, he provides a critical contribution to the very sparse literature on spaces of urban nature in India. While there have been many excellent popular books on Indian cities, including *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, and *Ahmedabad: A City in the World*, the ecological history of the Indian city rarely receives sufficient attention. Urban scholars, planners and theorists rarely consider ecology to be of even marginal importance, while ecologists prefer to focus on areas that are as far from human settlements as possible. While this trend is slowly changing globally, in India, there are very few books that delineate the ecological history of cities.

And yet, one cannot write an accurate history of Delhi over the centuries, without mentioning the fractured forests of the Delhi Ridge. India's capital now contains over 20 million people crammed into, and spilling out of, its administrative boundaries. The Ridge is the high point of the city, both literally (topographically) and figuratively. As Crowley says, the Ridge therefore provides a vantage point from where you can view the spatial, ecological, economic, cultural and social interconnections that keep the city moving along a pathway towards aspirations of development and progress. Standing at this high point, you can close your eyes and imagine the massive political changes that have taken place over centuries of expansion and decline, which shape the many Delhis that exist today—from the Old Delhi of Mughal times to Lutyen's New Delhi, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Delhi of gated farmhouses surrounded by migrant slums at the foothills of the Ridge.

The Ridge is a confluence of many kinds of approaches to urban development, and bears testament to the many

ways in which various people imagine, shape and interact with the city's social-ecological fabric. Crowley brings the patchy landscape of the Ridge to life with malls, commercial complexes and a five-star luxury hotel cheek-by-jowl with informal settlements, temples and Sufi shrines, prehistoric stone age sites, a biodiversity park, and the crumbling ruins of Lal Kot—the oldest walled compound in Delhi. The park is frequented by aspiring real estate moguls, naturalist groups on bird watching trips, young college students hunting for a place of privacy for romance, wealthy school kids having drunken parties, religious godmen, and men seeking relationships with other men. In the tussle for land and space, the powerful—those with money power and political connections—win out. As he describes with empathy, there are many at the losing end. These include groups like the Od community, brought in as migrant labour for their experience with mining stone, who have been in the Ridge for over 75 years. While they are being pushed more and more to the fringe, they continue to fight a valiant battle for their rights to this land, using instruments like the Forest Rights Act which were originally designed for a different context, in innovative ways.

Crowley covers a vast ground in this book, moving from old stone-age records to shoddy Environmental Impact Assessment reports, archival records and political controversies, and interviews with all kinds of people, from the influential to those at the margins. His position as an outsider—he moved to the city in 2010—and a partial-insider, through close engagement with scholars and activists in Delhi, including stints at the Centre for Study of Developing Societies, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, gives him a unique vantage point on the city. He writes with empathy and demonstrates a deep knowledge of various marginalised groups, based on personal interactions and interviews with them—complementing this ably with gossipy deep-dives into the politics and intrigue that shaped, and continues to leave its mark on the Ridge. The book is richly illustrated with a series of creative representations by Deepani Seth that brings many of the complex issues discussed to life.

While the book delineates a broad canvas of issues, tighter editing may have helped, especially towards the second half of the book. At times the book seems to deviate from its main course, moving so deep into digressions that one fears whether the author will find his way back. Overall, though, it is a book well worth reading—for everyday readers interested in understanding the ecological history of Delhi, as well as urban researchers and students, activists, planners, architects, and anyone else interested in the ecological fate of Indian cities.

It points to many questions of relevance for ecologists—in particular, demonstrating the falsity of the widely held idea that the Delhi Ridge is a vestige of past, pristine nature, uninfluenced by human presence. The book examines ways in which we can imagine a different future for Delhi, one that is not only connected to the ecological history of its past, but also one that is socially just and democratic. In doing so, Crowley offers us a critical view of the present, but also a utopian path for the future, one that integrates current democratic movements of various kinds. In his own words, as he ends the book, such a vision would enable, “A Ridge re-enchanted, its riches redistributed and enjoyed by all.”

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