Book Review: *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, and Urbanism in Dimapur* (2020) by Dolly Kikon & Duncan McDuie-Ra

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BOOK REVIEW


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Throughout the years, the scholarly works and research in Nagaland have primarily focused on its rich culture and tribal affairs; studies about emerging urban spaces like Dimapur, the largest city in the Northeastern tribal state of Nagaland rarely exist. Taking into consideration the importance of contemplating urban spaces and identities in tribal areas, this pivotal work by Dolly Kikon and Duncan McDuiie-Ra presents a contemporary approach to capture the essence of Dimapur as a ceasefire urban city. The book under review presents a series of ground-breaking ethnographic vignettes drawn from an ‘off the map’ evolving city of Dimapur. The book provides a window to comprehend the multiple perspectives of the city’s residents and their relationship and experiences embedded within a myriad of overlapping identities and spaces.

The book's originality lies in several facets. First, by drawing together the outcome of interdisciplinary research and collaborative ethnography through the lens of urban sociology McDuiie-Ra highlights the ‘spatial dimensions’ of Dimapur, while Kikon adopts an anthropological approach to focus on the ‘lived experiences’ of Dimapur’s residents. The book's originality lies in its ethnographic data which moves beyond the traditional notions of research and incorporates ‘purposeful mobility’ to walk around the city and discover the lives of the people. It orients itself through the spatial orientations and the unexpected events that the authors came across. The unique focus on the contemporary ‘visual culture’ of Dimapur through photographs and pictorial representation presents a fascinating addition to the book. The book is organized into two major parts that focuses on ‘Space’ and ‘Stories’. Dimapur is placed in a paradoxical position between tribal and migrant zones, constituting people from different communities all over India seeking refuge and opportunities in the city. The first chapter addresses Dimapur's urban crisis by opening with the 2015 public lynching incident that put Dimapur on the global map, perhaps for the first time through ‘a staple of news coverage all over the world’. The ground-breaking news brought into limelight the central tensions of Dimapur's migrant population and internal tribal conflicts. The chapter also provides a critical outlook on how ordinary spaces and buildings represent more than what they stand for. Churches represent the power of different "communities (tribes), denominations, and the networks and circuits" of the city (p.56), structures like gates represent the customary authority of urban villages, memorials exemplify the constant political
conflicts in the city, and spatial exclusion of military zones highlights the ceasefire status of the city, all these spaces are woven together in unifying and establishing a sense of belonging to the city. The second chapter further navigates the city's internal politics and violent tensions. The chapter provides a critical outlook on how the public and private enterprises intend to create an urban landscape in Dimapur through various developments “in order to look more like a city, to put Dimapur 'on the map’…” (p. 90); the various structures and spaces in Dimapur illustrate the makeshift community infrastructures in the backdrop of showpiece state infrastructures that symbolize Dimapur as a city figure for the rest of India.

In the light of the city, the book argues that it is crucial to learn about the city through its residents and how they navigate their lives through the complex inter-phase of pursuing urban status with traditional identity. The second part of the book which consists of three chapters focuses on ‘Stories’. These vividly recreate the stories and experiences of the residents of Dimapur. Nagas have always been ‘musically inclined,’ and music in Nagaland comes from a plethora of sources, from Christian musicians to rock bands and choirs from the various Naga insurgent groups which unravel different rhythms and meanings of life. Taking this into consideration, the third chapter highlights the stories behind the city's music that builds communities and creates bonds in this city and beyond; this chapter unravels the urban life and lived experiences of Dimapur as an Audible city “….through voices (vocal and conversations) and sound (mechanical and vibrations)” (p.117). The ‘audibility’ that the authors talk about in this chapter refers to hearing and being heard in militarized societies and ceasefire states like Nagaland. The struggles of contemporary musicians over the rigid notions of traditional music, and the sensory experience and connection of music to urbanism exemplify the notion of hearing and being heard. In continuation with the stories behind the urban city, the fourth chapter is fascinating as it connects the practises of tribal hunting with urban residents. The practice of traditional hunting in a presumably ‘modern urban city’ seems quite out of context. However, Dimapur is a city that is unique in its terms, and the residents and space being part of that uniqueness critically highlights the city's boundary and its hunting grounds through the "...political and cultural boundaries of the forest and the city in a frontier region” (p.149). The chapter further illustrates the complex intersections of tribal beliefs, masculinity, and customary laws in the backdrop of fragile networks with the state and the non-state authorities. The questions and emotions of living and dying in a ceasefire city also illustrate the process of place-making and the persistence of tribal identity even beyond life. The final chapter questions the true nature of the residents of Dimapur and how they look at their city as migrants. Interestingly, it takes into account the role of tribal groups and coffin makers in keeping community values alive and how such tribal groups and communities, despite internal differences come together during funeral rites and ‘….become examples of keeping ties and connections with one’s kin groups’ in a migrant city (p.185). The overcrowded burials in the city’s cemeteries also signify that many residents identify the city as their home and their final resting place.
On all accounts the book strives to showcase why it is relevant to study an ‘off the map’ city like Dimapur. The book succeeds in highlighting the relevancy of Dimapur in all its glories and downfalls by capturing the experiences of the residents of the city and illustrating the spaces that manifest the ceasefire city. Through exceptional groundbreaking collaborative ethnography the book critically highlights how Dimapur as a ceasefire city is visibly broken, filled with unlikely identities and spaces yet uniquely coexisting and bonded together for what the ceasefire city offers. However, the perspectives of the non-local migrants in Dimapur who consider the city as their home and how they build and live in a tribal city dominated by tribes provide further room for research in the future. The authors brilliantly connect all the elements that make Dimapur stand out as a growing urban city. The book contributes indispensable knowledge and ethnographic insights for scholars and researchers engaged in ethnographic research on the similar dynamics of urban spaces, militarized ceasefire regions, capitalist transformations in the tribal zones of India and beyond.

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