

Ahmedabad is India's shock city: US professor

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SINCE Mohandas Gandhi made it his home, Ahmedabad has passed through three “shocks” and is in the throes of a fourth one tuned to a “development discourse”, according to American professor Howard Spodek and author of the just-released book *Shock City of Twentieth Century India*.

Delivering a lecture at IIT-Gandhinagar on Tuesday, Spodek — who first came to Ahmedabad to teach at HK Arts College in 1964 — explained “shock city” as a borrowed phrase meant to designate a city hosting changes that are either first,

intense or tumultuous; “in common parlance, (it means) happening place”.

The current “shock”, or which is on way, is heavily dependent on a discourse oriented towards development where city authorities are projecting their works such as the Bus Rapid Transit System, the Kankaria Lakefront and the Sabarmati Riverfront development.

“The cry of Hindutva seems to have diminished, and the discourse has changed from around Hindutva to economics and development,” he said, to which there was serious, emphatic discussion among the small crowd of social researchers and academics

who made up the audience, with one charging this development discourse tries to brush under the carpet a pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment among Ahmedabad’s non-Muslim residents.

Responding, Spodek agreed “people hate each other,” but that they are at least not showing it - “Silence is beneficial”, he said, explaining how in America racism has been curbed partly because people know what they can and cannot express publicly.

“The fact that it is unfashionable to hate, that you’ll get into trouble if you do hateful things, the fact that Nitish Kumar does not like it and the US Department of

State does not like it, all these facts matter,” he said, referring to the Hindutva brand of politics Chief Minister Narendra Modi preferred when he first came to power.

To Modi rebranding towards development and economics, Spodek said, “Whatever people may say about the CM, he is a man who knows what people want.”

Earlier in his lecture, Spodek mentioned how the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) politics of Madhavsinh Solanki “astonishingly” tapered into an anti-Muslim politics — in spite of Muslims never being part of reservation politics

then — because “politicians never saw upper caste versus lower caste Hindus as a good way to get votes.”

This “third shock” was a result of the decline of the features of the “second shock”, which was the time of the “Nagarsheth”, a combination of words for “city” and “leading businessman”. The reply to that decline was KHAM, to which upper caste Hindus reacted adversely.

The “first shock”, of course, began with Gandhi’s arrival to the city in 1915, which was incidentally the same year that, as author Bhimrao Jote pointed out, electricity came to Ahmedabad.