

# Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature

Editors  
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*Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature* explores the multifaceted ways in which Indian cities are represented, contested, and reimagined in literary and cultural texts. Moving beyond conventional understandings of the city as a mere backdrop, this volume examines urban spaces as active presences that impact identities, social relations, memories, and everyday experiences. Drawing on contemporary spatial theories and interdisciplinary perspectives, the essays in this collection investigate the complex intersections of literature, cinema, language, culture, and urban life. The volume engages with diverse themes, including sensory experiences, migration, belonging, subaltern narratives, spatial politics, environmental concerns, gendered experiences, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Through studies of cities such as Kolkata, Guwahati, Mumbai, Shillong, and Gangtok, the contributors illuminate the multiple ways in which urban spaces are imagined, negotiated, and transformed across different historical and cultural contexts. This collection engages with both metropolitan and relatively underexplored urban locations and expands the scope of urban literary studies in India, and contributes to ongoing conversations in literary geography, cultural studies, and urban theory.



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# **Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature**

Volume edited by  
**Dr Neethu P. Antony**  
&  
**Dr Arpana Venu**



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Articles with the authors

Editorial materials with Dr Neethu P. Antony and Dr Arpana Venu

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## **Dedication**

*To the loving memory of our late fathers  
whose love, sacrifices, and guidance continue to inspire us every day.*

## Foreword

Cities are among the most dynamic sites of human experience, spaces where histories collide and converge, identities are forged, and futures are imagined. The present volume, *Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature*, makes a timely and significant contribution to this expanding field by bringing together diverse scholarly engagements with Indian urban spaces and their literary, cinematic, linguistic, and cultural representations. The interdisciplinary nature of this volume deserves special recognition. By bringing literary studies into dialogue with urban studies, geography, sociology, cultural studies, film studies, and spatial theory, the contributors offer innovative methodologies for understanding contemporary Indian cities. Such approaches are particularly valuable in a rapidly urbanising nation where questions of belonging, exclusion, mobility, sustainability, and social justice increasingly define public discourse.

Equally important is the principle of Universal Open Access. We believe that knowledge achieves its fullest potential when it is freely available to readers across geographical, institutional, and economic boundaries. By making this volume openly accessible, the authors, editors and publisher affirm their dedication to the democratisation of scholarship and the wider dissemination of critical research.

I congratulate the editors, contributors, and the publishing team for producing a volume that is both intellectually rigorous and socially relevant. I am confident that *Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature* will stimulate further research on Indian urban spaces.

Editor-in-Chief

Dr Swayam Prabha Satpathy

Bhubaneswar, India.

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## Chapter 1

# Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature: An Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

Cities have traditionally been an ideal ground of literary imagination, serving as spaces for encounter, conflict, aspiration, exclusion and transformation, as well as a source for understanding the complex dynamics that exist between individuals, communities and power structures. As Malcom Miles writes in the introduction to *Cities and Literature* (2019), "Cities appear not only as backgrounds in literature but also take on the role of characters, playing a part in determining the plot" (p. viii). They are not passive backdrops, but active, dynamic forces that shape characters, tint experiences, and drive the plot. They are crucial to the plot and contribute to the meaning of the text through their social, cultural and spatial dimensions. Literature not only reflects urban realities, but also contributes to their shaping and re-imagining. As Malcolm Bradbury (1983) observes, "...there has always been a close association between literature and cities. There are the essential literary institutions... There, too, are the intensities of cultural friction and influences and the frontiers of experience" (p. 96). Cities are sites of encounter between diverse cultures, classes and worldviews, producing forms of friction that are often the subject matter of literary narratives. Such encounters render the city a place where broader social and historical processes are made visible.

Sociologist Robert E. Park (1925) discusses this idea and argues that the city is not simply a physical environment but "a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organised attitudes and sentiments that are inherent in these customs" (p. 1). Park's view is relevant in literary

studies as it draws attention to symbolic and experiential dimensions of urban life in which cities are not only physical structures and spaces, but also collective memories, feelings, cultural practices and social relations. Literature reflects the intangible elements of urban life by depicting how cities are imagined, remembered, and experienced by city dwellers.

Indian cities are spaces of colonial legacies, globalisation, migration and socio-economic contestation and are sites of multiple histories and identities. Thus, literary representations of Indian cities provide insightful perspectives on the changing dynamics of space, identity and belonging. These urban centres are sites of the convergence of multiple identities and conflicting visions of modernity. These complexities are expressed in Indian literature where cities are seen as spaces of opportunity and of exclusion, of cosmopolitanism and of fragmentation, of progress and of displacement. Indian cities in literary texts are significant to grasp the issues of belonging, citizenship, social justice and cultural identity through representations of urban life. Thus, the study of Indian cities in literature provides a fertile ground for understanding the material realities and imaginative possibilities of contemporary urban life.

## 1.2 The Critical Space

Contemporary notions of urban space have been particularly shaped by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Doreen Massey, who moved away from seeing space as a passive setting, and instead recognize spatial configurations as deeply implicated in the production of social relations, cultural identities, and political power. Henri Lefebvre's seminal contribution is his argument that space is not given naturally, but socially produced. In *The Production of Space* (1974), he famously argues that "(social) space is a (social) product" (1991, p. 26). This apparently simple proposition challenges the accepted view of space as a neutral container for social activities. Rather, Lefebvre claims that urban spaces are produced through complex interactions between political institutions, economic systems and cultural practices. He further insists that "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 31). From this perspective, literary representations of cities become valuable sites for examining how power operates through spatial organization. Housing, segregation, mobility and urban development stories reveal the unequal social relations inscribed in urban landscapes.

Michel de Certeau directs our attention away from institutional structures toward practices of everyday life. In "Walking in the City", he juxtaposes the strategic visions of planners and administrators with the tactical movements of the ordinary citizens who fill the urban environment. For de Certeau, "the ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below'" (1984, p. 93), experiencing the city in ways that often escape official representations. His well-known claim that "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language" (1984, p. 97) implies that the ordinary movements of people through the city are forms of expression and acts of resistance. Literary texts frequently document such practices by showing how people negotiate, re-imagine, and sometimes contest dominant spatial arrangements. Drawing on Lefebvre's work, Edward Soja develops the concept of 'Third Space' to highlight the interaction of material realities and imaginative possibilities. He claims that "everything comes together in Third space: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined" (1996, p. 56). Third space

is a helpful framework for literary analysis because it acknowledges the power of narratives to generate alternative visions of urban life. Fiction, poetry and speculative writing provide writers with the opportunity to critique hegemonic spatial narratives and to imagine alternative possibilities for social and political life.

David Harvey's work highlights the connection between urbanization and capitalism. His critique of neoliberal urbanization is a case study of how economic processes shape the distribution of resources, public spaces, and opportunities. Harvey's audacious assertion that "the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (2008, p. 23) has become a touchstone of contemporary urban justice discourse. Displacement, redevelopment, migration and inequality are common themes in literary narratives and often evoke questions that resonate with Harvey's critique of neoliberal urbanization.

These discussions are further enriched by Doreen Massey's relational conception of space. She critiques fixed notions of space and argues that 'space is the product of interrelations' and that 'space is always under construction' (2005, p. 9). Massey theorizes space as produced through the continuous interactions of people, institutions and histories. This notion is especially significant in the Indian cities where alternative temporalities, identities and social forms exist and interact with one another. Literary depictions illustrate that the urban space is constantly negotiated and redefined through everyday practices and cultural narratives. These perspectives together suggest that cities are not just passive geographical entities but active social formations produced through power, memory, movement and imagination. It provides an important framework for understanding the representation of urban experience in literature and the role literary texts play in the ongoing production of urban meaning.

The increasing importance of urban studies as a research field has broadened the horizon of literary studies considerably. As the world is turning into a fast-growing urbanized place, cities have become the centre of social, cultural and political life, and researchers have started to investigate how literary texts engage with and reflect urban realities and spatial dynamics. The spatial turn in the humanities has urged the critics to explore how geography, mobility, location and ecology shape literary narratives and cultural identities. Edward Said states that "we are never outside geography, and no one is free from the struggle over geography" (1993, p. 7). This statement points to the inextricable link between space and power. Literary texts are about places, but also larger struggles over representation, identity and belonging. Urban spaces are places of contested histories and political projects and thus important objects of literary study. Similarly, Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between place and space provides an useful analytical framework for urban narratives. Tuan argues that "place is security, space is freedom" (1977, p. 3), implying that human experiences arise from a constant negotiation between attachment and mobility. The tension has been a recurring theme in literary representations of migration, displacement and urban change, especially in post-colonial and globalised contexts.

Urban studies have also encouraged interdisciplinary conversations between literary criticism and fields such as geography, sociology, architecture, environmental studies, and anthropology. These interactions have provided scholars with the chance to investigate the manner in which literature captures the affective, sensory and experiential aspects of urban life that are difficult to measure

using traditional social-scientific techniques. Literary texts reveal the formation of cities and how they are lived, remembered, imagined and contested. Urban literary studies have gained increasing salience in the Indian context as cities undergo rapid demographic, economic and environmental change. The transformation of urban life is mirrored in contemporary literature that critiques migration, inequality, infrastructure, ecological degradation, and cultural hybridity.

Building on these theoretical interventions, *Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature* examines the multiple modes of representation, contestation and re-imagination of Indian cities in literary texts and cultural discourses. The volume explores the role of urban spaces not only as backdrops, but as active forces in the construction of human life and social relations. It attempts to understand how literature depicts the tensions between tradition and modernity, memory and progress, inclusion and exclusion and local and global forces that characterise contemporary urban life. The chapters in this collection address a broad spectrum of themes such as urban marginalisation, migration, gendered experiences, environmental issues, spatial politics, memory, and imagined futures. Drawing on several theoretical and methodological dimensions, the contributors illuminate the complexities and challenges of urban life in India.

### 1.3 Chapters in the Volume

This volume constitutes eight chapters that do not provide a comprehensive study of major metropolitan Indian cities as often seen in the existing corpus of urban studies. The present chapter makes the case that it is rather an attempt to bring unique representations of known and unknown urban spaces in India to unravel the way the various urban spaces are imagined, experienced, contested, represented and negotiated across different historical, social, and cultural contexts in India. The recurrence of certain cities like Kolkata in the volume does not offer a singular narrative of its urban space. Instead, it focuses on the broader dimensions of the same city with its multiple urban experiences and posits 'urbanity' as an evolving and dynamic process.

The second chapter in this volume is Olivia Joseph's "City as Micro-Narratives of Senses and Everyday Experiences: An Analytical Study of Selected Stories from *People Called Kolkata*." This chapter offers a compelling opening to the volume by providing various insights into the everyday life and lived experiences of city dwellers of Kolkata in the selected micro-narratives from Kamalika Bose's collection, *People Called Kolkata* (2019). The selection of these micronarratives is significant due to its ability to present the city in an unfamiliar past to the present-day inhabitants. What makes this an important contribution to the volume is its focus on the framework of sensory urbanism and how these sensory descriptions in the selected stories shape the urban landscape of Kolkata. The chapter presents everyday lived experiences in the formation of an urban space through subjective interpretations of the inhabitants and immigrants of Kolkata.

The discussion of everyday urban life in India is further extended by Sangeeta Bhagawati in her chapter, "Multilingual Metropolis: The Politics of Language and Belonging in Guwahati Through Sheelabhadra's Fiction". The chapter presents a detailed analysis of Sheelabhadra's (Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury) short story, *Apon Manuh* (2007). With an emphasis on regional language literature of Assam, the chapter focuses on the importance of language in the formation of urban identities in the city of Guwahati. It explores how his fiction reflects the experiences of internal

migrants negotiating the complex linguistic landscape of Guwahati, by a close reading of the linguistic nuances embedded in the Assamese and the regional Goalparia dialect. The chapter highlights how language operates as a marker of identity, belonging, and exclusion within the postcolonial city.

The fourth chapter, "Spatial (re)orientations and Epic structures of the urban in Fareeda Mehta's *Kali Salwaa*" by Elroy Pinto, studies the representation of ordinary urban life through the powerful visual medium of cinema. By analysing structural elements like gesture, lensing, sound, music, dialogue, colour, and movement in Fareeda Mehta's film *Kali Salwaar* (2001), the chapter questions the ways by which urban spaces get reoriented, constructed and represented visually on screen. The chapter makes a profound contribution to the volume by foregrounding the everyday lived urban experiences of Bombay's working-class inhabitants and migrants through the visual language of cinema.

Extending the discussion on visual experience of urban spaces on screen, the chapter, "Between Tramline and Traffic Jam: Mapping Indian City through Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* and Anurag Basu's *Life in a...Metro*", Trisha Sengupta & Dr. Sanghamitra Baladhikari attempts an exploration of the cinematic representation of changing urban spaces in the Indian cities of Calcutta and Bombay. The chapter makes a comparative analysis of the two films: *Mahanagar* (1963) by Satyajit Ray and *Life in a...Metro* (2007) by Anurag Basu. By situating two major Indian cities-Calcutta of post-independence and Mumbai of post liberation, the chapter brings out the shifting historical, socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of metropolitan life; it presents the cinematic imagery of evolving urban spaces. Despite the thematic differences portrayed in these films, the study brings to light how cities are constructed and contested, presented and negotiated in Indian cinema.

Moving beyond the popular literary narratives of urban space, the chapter, "Reimagining Kolkata: Subaltern Narratives and the Colonial Urban Dystopia in *Kalol* Magazine's Literature" by Nandini Gayen studies the role of print culture in shaping urban imaginaries with a focus on *Kalol*, a prominent literary magazine of Bengal in the past. While other magazines of the twentieth century presented the *bhadraloks* of Kolkata, *Kalol* stood out as a voice for the subalterns, and reimagined colonial Kolkata through various representations of the lived realities of the city. The study effectively contributes to the volume as it highlights the necessity for bringing out more meaningful and critical engagements of non-dominant narratives of the city. It helps one understand the fragmented cityscapes where the descriptions of progress are often blurred by those of exploitation and disruption.

The much-debated complex idea of tradition v/s modernity is reflected in the study of the city of Shillong in the chapter, "Walking, Writing and Resisting the City: Spatial Tactics and Postcolonial Reimaginings in Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches*" by Parvin Sultana. Rather than completely indulging in the experience of urban space, the chapter also looks at the rural Mawmalang in the spatial understanding of Shillong as a three-dimensional space. Through a spatial theoretical reading of the novel *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) by Janice Pariat, and the walks of protagonist Shai, the chapter problematizes the cities of India at large and specifically Shillong that undergoes major transformations in the ecological and psychological aspects in the

name of development in postcolonial cities. The probes into substantial ecological concerns and thoughtful ways to engage with space, memory, and decolonial resistance in urban spaces.

The last chapter, "Mimesis, Montage and Mapping: A Spatial Analysis of Gangtok City Scapes In the Select Works of Satyajit Ray and Prajwal Parajuly" by Dr. Sudakshina Bhattacharya, Dr. Sulagna Mohanty, and Dr. Ankusha Bandyopadhyay marks a meaningful culmination to the volume. Through a detailed study of Satyajit Ray's detective fiction *Trouble in Gangtok* (1971) and the documentary film titled *Sikkim* (1971), and Prajwal Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee* (2014), the chapter presents multiple representations of Gangtok, highlighting the city's evolving spatial, cultural, and social dimensions across time. It makes a substantial contribution to the volume as it underscores the need to engage with relatively underexplored urban spaces like Gangtok in the larger context of Indian urbanity. In doing so, the chapter brings out the transformative nature of urban spaces and positions Gangtok as a compelling site of alternative urbanity.

## 1.4 Conclusions

The volume brings together urban narratives of literary, cinematic, linguistic, cultural and sensory approaches with strong footings in spatial theories. Thus, the chapters address the need for more regionally diverse approaches to facilitate meaningful engagement with Indian urban spaces. The collection explores Indian cities as important sites of literary and cultural investigation, extending conversations that tend to be dominated by Western urban contexts. It illustrates how spatial theories can be applied to literary analysis, showing how the theories of Lefebvre, de Certeau, Soja, Harvey, Massey and others can contribute to our understanding of urban narratives. The chapters in this volume invite readers to deconstruct the meanings of urban life and the role of literature in shaping our understanding of space. As Doreen Massey reminds us, 'space is always under construction' (2005, p. 9), and it is through literary representations that we can see the processes by which cities are imagined, negotiated and transformed. We hope this collection will be a catalyst for further interdisciplinary dialogues on urban studies, literary geography and the changing spaces of Indian cities and will make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing contemporary debates on space, culture and society.

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have inspired the discussions presented in this collection. Finally, we express our gratitude to our families for their patience, understanding, and unwavering support during the preparation of this book.

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## Chapter 2

# The City as Micro-Narratives of Senses and Everyday Experiences: An Analytical Study of Selected Stories from People *Called Kolkata*

Olivia Joseph  

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### Abstract

The multilayered fabric of the urban environment brought diverse theories and perspectives into focus. One such perspective is the dynamic everyday practices of inhabitants and tourists. These practices yield micro-narratives from everyday life and are rooted in emotional attachment to the place rather than in the recording of a social issue. This chapter discusses selected stories from the *People Called Kolkata* collection, curated by Kamalika Bose and published in 2019. The study explores how the author engages with the city through sensory narratives and the everyday practices of its dwellers. It also examines how these sensory details influence the emotional responses of inhabitants in a specific city. The study also analyses the work through the lens of everyday urbanism by enquiring into how urban spaces are defined by daily routines such as commutes and the use of resources like water, as well as by strained infrastructure, thereby making it a study of the presence of informal urbanism within the city. It also examines the representation of adaptive practices, such as dwellings visualised in the collection. Thus, the study focuses on two main questions: how the disordered vanishing of inhabitants and vernacular architecture retells the story of a city through the senses and everyday practices, and, as a detached observer, how the curator aesthetically compiles these everyday sensory urbanisms in *People Called Kolkata*.

**Keywords:** Urbanism, Everyday Urbanism, Sensory Urbanism, Flaneur, Spatial Practice, Representations of Space and Representational Space.

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## 2.1 Introduction

Urban space is a network of places, spaces, and heterospaces that connect the geographical location to physical, spatial, and temporal elements. Understanding these places and spaces helps to analyse how each factor influences human behaviour and interactions within the city. These behaviours and interactions can be identified through the three concepts proposed by Henry Lefebvre in his work *The Production of Space* as Spatial Practice, Representations of Space and Representational Space. Here, the interactions and behaviours are formulated through their continuous engagement with their daily routines and practices, their conceived ideas about the city and their representation of these spaces through different forms of art, myth, and resistance. Thus, the city becomes a network of locations with physical elements connecting people mentally, enriching the space and place, making it more diverse. One factor behind this diversification can be attributed to the economic upgradation of present-day society. Neo-capitalist and global society create urban spaces as 'melting pots' of diverse cultures, ideologies, beliefs, populations, etc. These diversified urban spaces generate multiple narratives from subjective and objective perspectives, defining temporal dimensions. More than the macro-narratives that focus on the limited faces of a city and indirectly support the power systems, the micro-narratives help project the fragmented realities and temporalities of the city. Through these segmented narratives, readers and observers of cities can analyse the notions of urban and urbanism from different perspectives. These narratives can include the lived experiences of inhabitants, the gazes of the 'walkers' and 'flaneurs', as well as the experiences of tourists. They also generate a social aesthetics that focuses on subjective interpretations of the environment rather than art, thus making the city a "living laboratory" (Evans & Andrew, 2011, p. 1) for further interpretations.

## 2.2 Vanishing Remnants of *People Called Kolkata* and Sensory Urbanism

*People Called Kolkata*, by Kamalika Bose, is a curated collection of fifty-five stories about the city of "Kolkata", not Calcutta, by people from different walks of life. The title itself indicates how the text is read throughout the study. The chapter focuses on the disordered, vanishing remnants of the old city through subjective interpretations by its own inhabitants and immigrants. Hence, this chapter discusses two main questions:

- How does the disordered vanishing generation of inhabitants and vernacular architecture retell the story of a city?
- As a detached observer, how does the curator aesthetically gaze at everyday sensory urbanism through *People Called Kolkata*?

Urban landscapes and micro-narratives are well-known to scholars of art and cities because they show changes in physical and social spaces. This chapter explores these changes through the emotional connections people have with the places where they work and live. It focuses on urban spaces as places shaped by sensory and daily activities. The chapter studies an Indian city with a long history of invasions, specifically Calcutta (Kolkata), as remembered by its residents. The city's history—from monarchy to colonial rule to parliamentary democracy—has deeply affected how people live and see themselves. These experiences vary depending on people's jobs and social status, showing the diversity of city life. Alongside political changes, the city's physical form has

also changed, seen in the mix and conflict between old and new neighbourhoods, and in buildings that have been forgotten or torn down. The study critically looks into how the curator Kamalika Bose has gathered and interpreted memories from different people and how these memories create urban identities linked to the city's geography.

By reading the book *People Called Kolkata*, the chapter connects to the theory of sensory urbanism by McGregor and Hensel, which suggests that a city can be understood through the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and sound—and how these senses connect people to their urban environment. While these sensory experiences are personal, shared experiences help form a collective understanding of the city. This shows how the city is shaped by what people experience every day. Theories by Zukin and Lefebvre, in their important works *The Culture of Cities* (1995) and *Critique of Everyday Life* (1981), help explain how different spaces in a city are formed and how individuals live and interact within these spaces. The micro-narratives about Kolkata help illustrate these ideas by showing how this Indian city becomes a place of identity and representation. Using Western theories to understand Indian cities helps highlight how global cities are unique because of cultural differences. It also shows the pace of transition of Indian cities in the modern era. Micro-narratives are therefore essential for understanding these dynamic urban environments and how cities are seen through history and daily sensory experiences. Some stories focus on small traditional businesses or old Bengali houses that are either surviving or fading away. Remembering the past in the present resists the city's control through urban planning policies. These stories show how the past shapes the present and how the city faces the problem of "placeless" places—areas without identity or a sense of belonging, as described by Seamon and Jacob (2008).

Before analyzing the text, it is important to define "urban" and "urbanism" because the chapter discusses urbanism as shaping a city's identity. Louis Wirth, in his 1938 essay *Urbanism as a Way of Life*, defines "urban" as the physical environment and "urbanism" as a way of life. Urban refers to buildings and structures with social, economic, and historical value, while urbanism is how these structures influence people's lives. For example, a simple yellow ambassador taxi can represent the city's history and people. Thus, a city is more than just physical buildings; it includes economic, cultural, and political influences, and urbanism marks it as a special way of life (Wirth, 1996). Wirth also describes the city by its size, population density, diversity, rapid social and cultural changes, impersonal social interactions, materialism, and informal social control. These features shape urban life. For example, a diverse city welcomes people from many places, and as the city grows, it changes into a metropolis or megacity, which affects how people live. The city's diversity is visible in its food culture. The anthology mentions Chinese dishes (The Chinese Chakkar, p. 223), South Indian foods like sambar and rasam (Old Man at the South India Club, p. 194), and Jewish dishes such as shorshe ilish and aloo posto (Two Women, Two Worlds, p. 186). This shows how Kolkata is diverse and how this diversity shapes its identity, with dishes adapted to Bengali tastes.

At the same time, power structures sometimes destroy or restrict these cultural spaces for city beautification. For example, the South India Club, once serving South Indian food, no longer exists. Those who remember these places are part of a "vanishing generation" resisting this loss. These micro-narratives revisit places that are disappearing. These representational spaces are important because they stand in contrast to "placeless" places. Edward Relph, in his 1976 book *Place and Placelessness*, defined placeless places as those lacking identity, belonging, or uniqueness due to

modernization, homogenization, and consumerism. For instance, in the story “3B Peary Row”, the conversation between a mother and daughter is about the mother’s attachment to the old house and about preserving it. The Daughter remarks on the act of preservation as,

That is not about individual houses but about preserving the character of the city as a whole. These houses, belonging to a certain era, have unique architectural elements, which together define the city’s built heritage and give it a certain flavour. If a city only consists of high rises, it becomes boring and homogenous. It becomes like any other city (Bose, 2019, p 253).

This creates an aesthetic space for heterogeneous and culturally enriched urbanism and architecture of the past from a nostalgic perspective, where the inhabitants long and talk with emotions.

The micronarratives depicted in the work *People Called Kolkata* represent the everyday routines and practices, as well as the existence of the inhabitants and physical structures. The narratives capture their life, their occupation and their present-day situations. Most of the small-scale business owners began their first step in the city and thrived for a period of time, and due to the economic, social and political changes, they are now in a stage of depletion. The narratives are set in their everyday life and routines, and also recollect their early stages of life. In other words, it can be called everyday urbanism.

### **2.3 Everyday urbanism of *People Called Kolkata***

Before engaging with everyday urbanism, there is a need to understand the three spaces proposed by Henry Lefebvre. In his work, *The Production of Space (1991)*, he discusses the three types of space in an urban environment: perceived, conceived, and lived. The perceived space focuses on the everyday routines, rituals, and interactions of people’s lived experiences in a place. It includes their job, the social and cultural rituals they follow every day, and the community interactions that take place in the three places (First, Second, and Third). The second is the conception or the representations of spaces. This refers to the mental maps created by the residents while living in a city. The images of specific places, streets, and points within the city are often conceived differently by the people. Each person's understanding of the city is different from that of one another, making the city and the narratives about the individual lives subjective. The story collection selected for the study itself is an example of this because each micro-narrative mirrors different lives experienced by people from various strata in a particular city, making the city and its everyday life vibrant and unique. The third space is the representational space or the Lived space. Here, the emotions and imagination of an individual play an important role. The residents’ everyday life is later understood through the memories they create through the senses while living in the city.

Everyday urbanism as a theory rose against the conventional planning and focuses on the everyday lives, lived experiences and social needs of the dwellers. This mode of urbanism celebrates the vernacular styles naturally evolved from human use. The work offers everyday urbanism narratives. For instance, the story titled “Prometheus, Who Does Home Delivery” shares the life of Tarunda as a home delivery agent. “The two of them- father and son would go out on

two bicycles, cartons of books delicately balanced, riding on two wheels from Shyambazar to Alipore and Ballgunge with their wares" (Bose, 2019, p 48). This shows the life of the father and son as book delivery agents. The route map of Tarunda and his father also represents the mental mapping of the city. These routes represent their daily lives and their lived experiences. These lived experiences are emotional spaces that can be recollected through memories. These live experiences are formulated through perceived spaces or everyday practices that share life experiences but also connect and interact with their physical surroundings. For instance, when narrating the life of a Phuckhawallah named Biren Shaw, who came to Bengal from Jharkhand and resides at a place called Khudhirampally, the way to his house is described as, "the pathway was uneven, with protruding boulders, as the mud, which acted as the binder, had been washed away during the monsoon floods caused by the nearby nullah" (Bose, 2019, p 83).

These experiences and representations reflect the hierarchy existing in society. The greyscales within the city, like the slums or informal settlements, are often covered with tarpaulin sheets. Addressing the lives and issues of the informal settlers and migrants within the city limits also comes under urbanism. They also define the city through the lens of urban economy and the need for social inclusivity. In the same story, *Humarlogo ka Gaon Bihar-e Achey*, the author visits the house of a migrant phuckkawallah. The worker invites the author to have breakfast at home. The author describes her experience with the phuckkawallah;

... they offered me tea in a nice ceramic cup, which I had not seen in their house. I came to know it was borrowed from a neighbour just for the day...I asked while drinking tea, sitting on a chair they borrowed especially for me from another neighbour (Bose, 2019, p 84).

The way they borrowed new crockery items from their neighbours represents the social hierarchies existing in the city. In another story titled "Making Home - The Hawkers of Gariahat", the author talks with a hawker named Biren Saha about his life as a hawker in a city. In one conversation, he shares his fear, and the author describes it as "because he has a fear that in the process of becoming an aspiring global city, all kinds of informalities will be curbed down and unorganised sectors will be eliminated from the city's ecosystem"(Bose, 2019, p 126). These everyday struggles and discrimination reflect a different city, far from vibrant and dynamic. This also highlights the need for extra focus on improving the conditions of "informal" people for the authorities, rather than beautifying the urban spaces.

Another everyday reality of older people with old houses is the lack of maintenance. These spaces are unique architectures. The physical spaces that hold the history of many generations are slowly vanishing in the present day. One such incident is narrated in the story titled *Who Lives in Those Houses?*

He smiled. Yes, it has been declared a heritage property, but the government does nothing other than looking at the tax bit on these tagged buildings... and might soon be declared with a board hung outside the building, 'unfit to stay' or 'dangerous house'. The builders/ developers look out for such properties, and soon the house will be run down (Bose, 2019, p 238).

This represents the informal control of political systems and the influence of capitalism over land and buildings. Thus, the physical structures are also diminishing into the backdrops of lived experiences. The demolition of such structures, along with their owners, erases their existence in the future. Thus, everyday urbanism defines the everyday practices of the dwellers by creating a mental map of their city and also creates lived experiences. Through these representational spaces of curated collections of a city, the observer and the narrators ask for the inclusion of everyday urbanism in the conceived spaces of a city.

#### **2.4 Sensory Urbanism in *People Called Kolkata***

Along with everyday urbanism, there is a need to understand how a city can be experienced. This opens the way to understand the theory of Sensory Urbanism. The term itself defines the practice as experiencing the city through the five senses. The visuals, culinary experiences, architecture, and soundscapes offer the distinctive nature of each city. The differences in these sensory experiences make them landmarks on the geographical maps. These are not only enjoyed by the tourists but also by the inhabitants, who also act as agents of creating this uniqueness. This theory of sensory urbanism has a shadow phase, as discussed by Georg Simmel in his work *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. He forecasts the idea of 'intensification of nervous stimulation' that leads to the 'blasé outlook' that levels down the individual impressions and makes them insignificant (Simmel, 1971 p 13). These unique features of a city that distinguish it from other cities result from its cultural influences. For instance, in the short story titled "No Refusals or So They Say", the author talks about the yellow ambassador cabs of Kolkata, which define the city as "the tourist's favourite picture post-card of the city will continue to be a bright yellow taxi going past the majestic Victoria Memorial" (Bose, 2019, p 109). In reality, these cabs are outdated and the drivers are facing many difficulties to make ends meet. However, the image of the city still lies in the historical and cultural influences.

In another story titled "Of Paints and Papers", the author talks about the famous stationery shop called G C Laha Stationery Shop, which existed from the pre-independence period. The author describes the shop as having a unique smell of paints and colours, which was and still is a favourite among many famous artists, including Raja Ravi Varma:

When I walked past the shop! The Unique fragrance of paper stocks, ink and paints caught my fancy and I automatically redirected myself with the hope of finding some replenishments for my personal stationery. (Bose, 2019, p 68)

In another part, the author describes the experience as "my olfactory had adjusted with the characteristic smell of the place, so i deeply inhaled one last time before leaving" (Bose, 2019, p 70).

Along with the visual and olfactory senses, gustation also has a significant role in making a city unique and distinct from others. The heterogeneous nature of the city attracts people from other places. They introduce their own cultural cuisines to the people in the city. In the story "Old Man at the South India Club", the narrator introduces a club or a canteen that serves south Indian food to the Bengali and non-Bengali people. He describes the food served as

Madrasi (Tamil Nadu) style food. Andhra food is more spicy, more chilly, more jhal (hot). In Kerala, food is less chilly, but they prefer coconut oil in almost everything. In Karnataka, food is like the Marwaris (the cuisine); they have a sweet tooth - sambar, and rasam is sweetish. In Madrasi food, we do not add much sugar; only slight jaggery, slightly spicy, no chilly and the food (taste ) is very moderate (Bose, 2019, p 195).

The place that introduced and served a variety of south Indian cuisine does not exist today. The building has been handed over to a Modern high-end Cafe. The past it represented and tasted is under renovation. These redevelopments are needed for the urban spaces, but at the same time, they also erase the past that made the city unique and that held the heterogeneous nature.

The fourth sense in discussion is the auditory sense. Any Indian city is often defined through the congestion experienced in the traffic and the sounds of horns. In other words, "The roads are roaring with autos, buses, taxis and trams" (Bose, 2019, p 123). The notion of auditory senses is not restricted to the traffic or sounds from the transportation systems. It extends to culinary, rituals, and even everyday practices. This helps the readers and observers to experience the place through sound. The sizzling, chopping, slicing, crunching and munching sounds combine with the other senses to give a unique experience.

This feeling of the unique characteristics of a city through the senses will only be completed through somatosensation. For instance, in the story "The God Maker", the narrator talks about the idol makers during the time of Durga Pujo. The festival of Durga Pujo lasts for five days, and each day has special rituals to complete. "Mahalaya marks an important day for the artisans, as on this day the last touch is added to the goddess- the sacred ritual of chokkhudaan; the drawing of the deity's eyes and bringing her to life" (Bose, 2019, p 168). In other words, this somatosensation brings life to the city's vernacular physical elements. The vanishing of such structures and elements fails to allow the readers and observers to feel the objects that only exist in the memories of the dwellers. Thus, through these forced and natural vanishings of regionally specific objects, artefacts, and architecture, one fails to understand the interactions that happened between the dwellers and their surroundings. Hence, all five sensory experiences of a city mentioned above, through examples create a uniqueness. These subjective interpretations drew a city that is more flamboyant than homogenous spaces.

## **2.5 The Curator as a Flaneur**

The detached observer can be called a Flaneur, a term proposed by Charles Baudelaire. This figure wanders through the city streets and observes the sights and sounds through a detached curiosity. Later, this term was redefined by Walter Benjamin in relation to arcades. This notion of flaneurie and the role of the detached observer offers dynamic narratives similar to People Called Kolkata to the readers. Such narratives offer a view into the multiple perspectives of a city that connects the dwellers with the environments, creating places, spaces and heterospaces which further lead to the psychogeography of the city.

The curator of the narratives as a flaneur offers an understanding of her role as an observer and as an editor who focuses on projecting the city of Kolkata from its historic and contemporary perspectives. In her own words,

Kolkata is a compelling city of juxtapositions. Loved and loathed, beautiful and enfant terrible, these extremes and contrasts continue to balance the historic with the contemporary. At the heart of the city are its people, who move through these ebbs and flows as witnesses and living archives of Kolkata's realities, stories and aspirations" (Bose, 2019, p 17).

And "A mosaic that binds eclectic histories of diverse immigrants and ethnic communities to leave an indelible imprint on every strand of the city's fabric" (Bose, 2019, p 20). However, the stories she curated focused on the past and present conditions of the inhabitants through their interactions with their physical surroundings. Thus, through the fragmented narratives, she created a mosaic of Kolkata that was different from the mainstream histories and stereotypical representations. Secondly, she depicted a city against the orderly city planned by the power systems, planners and architects. She created, "A mosaic that binds eclectic histories of diverse immigrants and ethnic communities to leave an indelible imprint on every strand of the city's fabric" (Bose, 2019, p 20). The multiple lives of the unstructured and unorganised people offer a different city through psychogeography. More than a third place, these people experienced their daily routines with emotions and memories, where their second places often act as first places. Thus, she aesthetically curated the lived raw experiences of the dwellers as a detached observer.

Finally, as a detached observer, her selection of narratives included the vanishing generation of dwellers along with their surroundings. The people she chose are once part of a city that defined the heterogeneous nature of the city and also the distinctive identity markers of the city. But because of the modernisation and informal control, these people are far from the centre of the city. Discussing these people and their way of urbanism recenters the city ideals from homogeneity and also helps to identify the social needs to restore such lives and vernacular architectures.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, in *People Called Kolkata*, Kamlika Bose observed the city through the lenses of everyday and sensory urbanism and traced the transitions that happened in the urban environment. The chapter tried to understand the heterogeneity through vanishing generations and their vernacular architectures by placing it against the homogenising forces of neo-capitalism. These narratives highlighted the need to address the social needs of the dwellers along with the preservation of identity markers of the city, rather than putting heritage tags and redevelopment. The chapter also focused on how the editor acts as a detached observer to highlight this heterogeneity of the urban fabric. Through these fragmented narratives or micro-narratives, the editor and the reader redefined the city of Kolkata from a retrospective perspective that demands present-day solutions.

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## Chapter 3

# Multilingual Metropolis: The Politics of Language and Belonging in Guwahati Through Sheelabhadra's Fiction

Sangeeta Bhagawati  

### Abstract

This chapter focuses on the work of Sheelabhadra (Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, 1924-2008), whose writing gives us a critical look at the politics of language and belonging in Guwahati, Assam's principal urban centre. Guwahati, like many other postcolonial Indian cities, is shaped by the merging of migration, language diversity and social hierarchy. The regional language literature of Sheelabhadra portrays these multilingual urban experiences. His Assamese fiction shows us how language becomes a marker of belonging or exclusion. Drawing on his background in Goalpara, a linguistically distinct region on Assam's western borders, Sheelabhadra brings the speech of a marginalised dialect community into his representations of urban life. His short story "*Apon Manuh*" (2007) explores how internal migrants experience Guwahati as a city structured by linguistic hierarchy. Centred on a chance meeting between two migrants from Goalpara, the story reveals how dialect and standardised language operate as registers of identity. In this chapter, I argue that the conversation between the protagonists, where they shift from standard Assamese to Goalparia dialect, reveals two important aspects. First, it allows us to see the need for linguistic conformity in the urban sphere. Second, it makes visible an alternative form of solidarity based on shared marginal speech. Sheelabhadra's work is valuable to understanding larger debates on how urban identities are shaped through everyday acts of language use.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, belonging, Assamese literature, dialect, internal migration

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### 3.1 Introduction

The convergence of migration and language diversity in postcolonial Indian cities can shape how individuals speak, navigate, and belong in the urban sphere. In these contexts of convergence, language interactions are enacted daily, which can both reflect and shape existing social hierarchies, allowing language to function as a communicative tool as well as a powerful social marker. According to Julie Byrd Clark, daily performances of language encode systems of inclusion and exclusion (Byrd Clark, 2009, p. x), positioning speakers in relation to prevailing social norms and dominant linguistic ideologies, which in turn shape conditions of social belonging. Therefore, linguistic practices are key to understanding how forms of belonging are enacted or questioned.

This chapter focuses on the regional language fiction of Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury (1924–2008), who wrote under the pen name Sheelabhadra, to explore how these dynamics of linguistic positioning are reflected in his writings. His work reveals the politics of language as experienced by internal migrants navigating the linguistic environment of Guwahati, a city in India's northeastern state of Assam. Sheelabhadra was born in the region of Goalpara (Assam) and migrated to Guwahati for education and later professional life. His work emerged from this layered positionality; it was shaped by the linguistic textures of Goalpara yet published and circulated within the Assamese public sphere of Guwahati. While the Assamese literary sphere is dominated by a standardised version of the language and its script in print, Sheelabhadra's fiction introduced dialect into Assamese literature. In his short story "*Apon Manuh*" (Sheelabhadra, 2007, pp. 355–357), he portrays a fleeting encounter between two migrants in Guwahati. Their initial interaction in standard Assamese shifts into a shared Goalparia dialect, transforming a transactional moment into one of mutual recognition and affective connection. The hidden hierarchies that regulate urban speech are made visible through this moment in the story, and it uncovers dialect as a mode of belonging that resists normative language ideologies. Here, I argue that Sheelabhadra's fiction on code-switching between standard Assamese and Goalparia dialect exposes the pressures of linguistic conformity in the city. This also asserts alternative forms of solidarity based on shared marginal speech patterns. Instead of presenting Guwahati as a linguistically homogeneous space, Sheelabhadra portrays it as a layered urban region where multilingual lives are exercised every day beneath dominant narratives of linguistic purity. In his fiction, the city becomes a linguistic space where dialect becomes both a marker of exclusion and a site of resistance.

### 3.2 Language, Migration, and Belonging in the Postcolonial Indian City

Cities are produced both spatially and linguistically. Postcolonial Indian cities are, as Rashmi Varma puts it, spaces of "multiplicities" (Varma, 2012, p. 116), where linguistic diversity is a structuring element of urban life. Standard languages and dialect forms coexist, often uneasily, within the same urban geography due to the constant movement of people, cultures, and speech forms in cities, producing multilingual environments. In a city like Guwahati, multiple linguistic publics operate in tandem and in tension, instead of a single and linguistically unified public sphere. This linguistic life of the city is again stratified by class, regional affiliation, education, and access to official institutions. Often, anglophone registers circulate in elite and bureaucratic spaces, while regional languages, themselves internally fragmented, might struggle for representation and legitimacy. This turns the city into a space where networks of language exist both above and below

the surface. The formal registers of education, administration, and media promote dominant language ideologies while a different linguistic life operates in informal settlements, markets, transport systems, and domestic spaces. Language-learning, language acquisition, language-teaching, and language-speaking are all charged with political meaning in this context. What language one speaks and how, when, or where one is allowed to speak it, becomes a question of social positioning.

Migration to these urban spaces thus becomes movements across linguistic terrains. Speech forms that may not align with the dominant language ideologies of the receiving city travel with the migrants. The accents, dialects, and code-switching practices of new migrants can expose them to scrutiny and exclusion. At the same time, these practices can open possibilities for informal solidarities built on the shared marginality of migrant groups. It is at this intersection of migration, language, and urban belonging that Sheelabhadra's fiction intervenes. His story "*Apon Manuh*," as this essay will argue later, offers a literary exploration of how dialect and speech patterns negotiate space, identity, and affiliation within the linguistic landscape of Guwahati city. Before turning to the story, however, we must first consider Guwahati's relationship with its peripheral regions, from where both Sheelabhadra and his protagonists migrate, to understand how language shapes the experience of urban migration in the city.

### 3.2.1 Guwahati and Goalpara

Through infrastructural transformation and administrative reconfiguration, Guwahati emerged from pre-colonial military headquarters of the Ahom kingdom to a major urban centre during British rule (Hazarika 2022, p. 49). Economic factors have largely driven migration to the city. Post-independence Guwahati has witnessed inflows of people from rural Assam as well as other parts of India. The scale of migration to Guwahati has consistently outpaced that of Assam as a whole. Between 1901 and 2001, the city's population grew from 11.7 thousand to 818.8 thousand, which is an increase of about 8.3 times, compared to an 8.1-fold increase for the state during the same period (Deka & Datta, p. 241). The proportion of migrants within Guwahati likewise exceeded that for Assam overall, with rural-to-urban migration constituting a key dynamic. The city's fringes have become sites of settlement for daily-wage labourers, including rickshaw and thela pullers (ibid, p. 246, 252).

The increase in migration to the central city has also meant that political unrest often incorporated the migrant and 'outsider' figure as a political issue. The non-Assamese in the city were targeted in the past by job-seeking locals, as exemplified by the *Bongal Kheda* (Drive out the Foreigners) movement in the 1960s. The language identity of the Assamese appeared as a deciding factor in this movement, as reported by KC Chakravarti in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, where he detailed the organised nature and the mass-scale of violent mob activities against the non-Assamese, specifically the Bengali communities, in Guwahati (Chakravarti 1960, p. 1193-1194). This, however, was not the only time when language identity became a deciding factor in the politics of belonging in Assam.

Historically, language in India has never been divorced from politics. In the colonial period, vernacular languages became markers of cultural identity, legal recognition, and territorial claims.

Lisa Mitchell, for example, has extensively traced such transformations in South India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mitchell 2009). These dynamics were intensified by public demands and state policies in the post-independence years, as they sought to fix official languages for states carved along linguistic lines. In Assam,<sup>1</sup> for example, where the question of an official language was already tenuous under the British administration,<sup>2</sup> the post-independence period saw the Language Movement (1960) and the Medium of Instruction movement (1972) that attempted to establish Assamese as the official language in administrative and educational spheres. These events brought new political dimensions to the relationship between language communities, specifically between the Assamese-speaking community and their relationship to the Bengali and the ethno-linguistic groups within Assam's territory.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, several political movements, featuring language-based identity at their core, have taken place in post-independence Assam. This includes the violent episodes of the *Bongal Kheda* movement in Guwahati in the 1960s, which were symptomatic of the region's fraught politics of language and identity. The Bengali-speaking community increasingly came to be framed as the "other" within the Assamese public sphere during these events. The Bengali-majority communities resisted<sup>4</sup> the imposition of Assamese as the sole official language of the state, a resistance that further widened the rift between language groups. Between 1979 and 1985, during the Assam Movement against perceived "outsiders," the figure of the Bengali "illegal migrant," particularly from Bangladesh, again became the focal point of socio-political contention. The Assam Movement and its far-reaching effects have been examined elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> and it is not the purpose of this chapter to revisit in detail how the Bengali migrant has been constructed within the Assamese public imagination. The discussion so far serves to highlight the complex reception of migrant communities within Assam's economic fold, and to provide context for understanding the positionality of migrant protagonists in Guwahati in Sheelabhadra's fiction. It will also help our next discussion on the background and language politics in Goalpara, the region from which Sheelabhadra's protagonists migrate.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on how the state re-organisation process affected Assam and its internal politics, see: Dhar, I. (2011). Assam Through the Prism of Reorganisation Experience. In A. Sarangi & S. Pai (Eds.), *Interrogating reorganisation of states* (1st ed., pp. 282–303). Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> See: Majumdar, P. (2006). Introduction of the Bengali Language in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Assam: Role of the British. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 67, 787–792. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147998>.

<sup>3</sup> To understand the context of Assamese linguistic nationalism and how it managed to alienate other communities in Assam, like the Bodos, see: Sarmah, B. (2023). Identity and aporia of autonomy: The Bodo movement in retrospect. In K. Kikhi & D. R. Gautam (Eds.), *Marginality in India: Perspectives of marginalisation from the Northeast* (pp. 142–157). Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of the '*Bhasa Andolon*' (1961) or language movement by the Bengalis of Assam against the imposition of Assamese as the official language, see: Chakraborty, D., & Paul, P. (2024). Protest in the poems of *Unish*: A study of women's poetry from Barak Valley. In *Female Narratives of Protest* (pp. 52–64). Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see: Baruah, S. (n.d.). *The politics of noncitizenship in Assam*. Seminar. <https://india-seminar.com/2022/749/749-SANJIB%20BARUAH.htm>.

While Guwahati developed into Assam's primary urban centre, Goalpara, a district situated on Assam's western border with Bengal, became culturally and economically marginal at first under the colonial administration and later to the post-independence Indian nation (Misra 2011, p. 2). This peripheral status was shaped by both geography and history. This westernmost border district had an "uneasy" relationship with the rest of Assam since its addition to the state in 1874, as the leading landlords (*zamindars*) of Goalpara strongly contended to join neighbouring Bengal (Saikia 2023, p. 167). This indicates that the cultural influence of Bengal was strong among the reigning *zamindars*, influencing the social and linguistic fabric of the region. Goalpara, in Sheelabhadra's childhood, was both linguistically and culturally distinct from the central and eastern parts of Assam. Sheelabhadra notes in one of his autobiographies that in his hometown of Gauripur in Goalpara, they lived 'between' two separate cultures and their relationship with Kolkata (West Bengal) was integral due to familial, economic, medical and educational purposes (Sheelabhadra 1997, p. 4). His autobiographies further shed interesting insights into the middle and upper-middle-class population of Goalpara and their culture, which was significantly different from the Assamese-speaking parts of the state. In addition to these historical factors, migration patterns in the early twentieth century brought significant numbers of people from Bengali-majority regions such as Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Jalpaiguri to Goalpara (Ahmed 2004, p. 573). The cumulative influence of Bengali culture and language meant that Goalpara's speech forms reflected what Sanghamitra Misra describes as a hyphenated "proto-Bengal" and "proto-Assam" status (Misra 2011, p. 137). The significant overlaps between dialects spoken in western Assam and northern Bengal (Baruah 1995, p. 2783) placed Goalpara's linguistic practices at odds with literary Assamese, and certainly beyond the scope of the standardised Assamese designated as the official language.

Following the State Reorganisation Act of 1971 and the subsequent subdivisions of Goalpara district in 1983 and 1989, the region's political geography contracted further, yet its borderland status endured. Goalpara's history of immigration and its distinctive speech practices continued to mark it as marginal, especially as waves of anti-Bengali and anti-outsider movements swept through Assam, as discussed earlier. Language became central to the post-independence political scene, now intensified by the Assamese public's anxieties over 'illegal' immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh. The acceptance of Assamese as one's language came to be framed by Assamese intellectuals as a key criterion for distinguishing between migrants who could belong and those who could not, with the official language increasingly deployed as an "instrument of exclusiveness" (Misra 1999, p. 1268). At the time of the Assam Movement, Goalpara was a significant site of minority resistance; the All Assam Minority Yuva Parishad (AAMYP) was founded in 1980 in Goalpara by Bengali and Muslim leaders to defend the rights of minority communities (Nath 2020, p. 40). Goalpara thus emerged as a linguistically and culturally distinctive region. It was a borderland in geographic terms and a space where language, migration, and belonging were contested in the face of exclusionary politics.

Keeping these political and historical contexts in mind, the discussion now shifts to the movement of people from Goalpara and its adjoining regions to the central city of Guwahati. The geographic location of Goalpara is characterised by riverine landscapes that are highly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, leading to patterns of intra-state migration. The continuous erosion and disappearance of land due to flooding forces people to relocate to adjoining areas in search of survival. For instance, in 1978, a year before the Assam Movement officially began, the complete

submergence of a river island in the region prompted significant displacement and migration to nearby districts (Manuvie 2018, p. 85). Environment-related factors such as this one affect employment prospects in the region. Goalpara is among the districts with the highest levels of job demand, and this results in sustained migration to Guwahati, which often involves daily movement of workers looking for employment (Manuvie 2023, pp. 59, 45). The reception of migrants in Guwahati and their claims to belonging must be understood within the historical and political contexts outlined above. Their dialects indexed regional origin and class position as well as an implicit affinity with Bengali, and this combination could subject them to linguistic and social scrutiny. Goalparia speech forms were associated with rurality, backwardness, and low-wage, precarious labour, such as rickshaw pulling, thela work, and other informal sectors that sustained the city's economy but remained marginal within its dominant narratives. Even middle-class migrants, like Sheelabhadra himself, bore the marks of outsider status because their linguistic practices did not conform to the dominant norms of urban Assamese speech. Migration from Goalpara to Guwahati thus entailed a physical movement across geography combined with a navigation of entrenched hierarchies of language, class, and cultural legitimacy. It is this layered experience of migration and language politics that informs and shapes the fictional landscapes of Sheelabhadra's urban stories.

### 3.3 Sheelabhadra's Fiction and the Politics of Dialect in the City

Sheelabhadra was born in the town of Gauripur, part of the undivided Goalpara district. He moved through various cities for higher education, including Kolkata (West Bengal), Rangpur (currently in Bangladesh) and Guwahati (Assam). In the 1960s, a decade marked by socio-political developments like the official language movement and the *Bongal Kheda* violence, Sheelabhadra joined the renowned Assam Engineering College in Guwahati as a lecturer of Mathematics. Within Assam, but outside his native Goalpara, Sheelabhadra encountered tensions in claiming an "Assamese" identity, as his speech carried the marks of a dialect that bore Bengali registers. At the age of forty, in 1964, he began a literary career that would produce seven novels and over twenty short story collections. One of the reasons he chose to write in Assamese despite his fluency and formal education in Bengali and English was intimately tied to this complex sense of belonging. Reflecting on this choice in an interview, Sheelabhadra remarked: "Stung by the many ridicules about my Bengali pronunciation,<sup>6</sup> I resolved to prove that I was not apart from what is regarded as 'Assamese'. And how better than by writing in the language?" ("Master Narrator – Personality", 2003).

Although Sheelabhadra wrote in Assamese, he made the strategic decision to embed Goalparia dialect into his fiction to reveal the multilingual fabric of Guwahati. His short stories and novels feature a range of dialect-speaking characters, and often their dialogues appear without translation. This means that Assamese readers of his work, at a time when language was central to socio-political tensions, would directly encounter untranslated Goalparia speech, and in doing so, be introduced to dialects from the margins of the official language. By not providing

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<sup>6</sup> This remark is an indication that in Guwahati, Sheelabhadra's Goalparia speech form was considered 'Bengali.'

translations or explanatory glosses, Sheelabhadra suggested that these encounters between standard language and dialect are non-negotiable. In many ways, the untranslated representation of Goalpara's dialect in his writing constitutes a form of linguistic resistance against the deployment of Assamese as an exclusionary tool.

### 3.3.1 Reading "*Apon Manuh*": Language, Recognition, and Belonging

Linguistic choices for migrants in Guwahati are shaped by the socio-political pressures, which include the state's historical record of political mobilisation against the non-Assamese, which has framed language as a marker of identity. Migrants encounter a linguistic environment dominated by standard Assamese, the language with institutional legitimacy across government, education, and media. Within this context, speaking Assamese and speaking it in an accepted form becomes necessary to live and work in the city. In this way, the city's linguistic landscape demands adaptability. Marginal dialect speakers navigating this space require the ability to shift speech registers. Here, rural/regional speech forms may be used within intimate or familiar contexts, and standard Assamese is reserved for official, transactional, or public interactions. As noted by researchers, the use of urban language involves "applying" language as a commodity to achieve goals, and speakers adjust their language consciously or unconsciously to match different social and communicative settings (Smakman & Heinrich, 2018, p.4).

First-generation and working-class migrants develop a heightened sensitivity to language as a site of social value and identity. Associations with regional or lower-class backgrounds in speech patterns are often met with negative evaluations of status, education, and competence (Edwards 2018, p.22). Judgments like these can shape how speakers present themselves in public. Therefore, dialect becomes a marked feature of identity, and standard language is perceived as a means for acceptance. A form of legitimacy is offered by fluency in standard Assamese. Any trace of dialect can mark one as an outsider, and because of this, speakers shift codes, conceal accents, and recalibrate their speech depending on the situation.

Sheelabhadra sets his story *Apon Manuh* in this context, as it follows two first-generation migrants from Goalpara to Guwahati. One is a rickshaw puller, and the other is the narrator. The latter is a semi-autobiographical figure aligned with Sheelabhadra himself. This is part of a narrative strategy in Sheelabhadra's fiction where he uses personal memory and autobiographical detail channelled through a first-person narrator. This enables him to reflect on contemporary socio-political issues within the structure of fiction. Comparing the settings and characters of his stories with his autobiographical writings reveals the extent to which he drew upon everyday experiences, professional life, and personal history. In *Apon Manuh*, the narrator introduces himself through a reflection on his early life in Gauripur: "I have become a part of Gauripur... One needs to research whether a place shapes a man or whether the people shape the place" (Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 356, translation mine). This moment establishes the narrator's rootedness in Goalpara, which is also a reference to Sheelabhadra's origin in Gauripur, and sets the tone for the central encounter in the story.

The narrator then reflects on the migration to his current city of Guwahati from the Goalpara region, and how he often encounters Goalparia rickshaw pullers who can speak *nibhaj*

(unadulterated) Assamese. In the second half of the story, the narrator is the passenger in a rickshaw where the driver, who initially speaks in standard Assamese, reveals his Goalparia linguistic background through the course of their conversation:

"Where are you from?"

"Noonmati."

"No, I mean where is your real home?"

"Golakganj."

"In Golakganj's town area?"

"No, in Binnasara."

"*Desi mans?*"<sup>7</sup> ("Desi man?")<sup>8</sup>

The driver's eyes lightened up.

"*Tomra?*" ("Where is your home?")

This is it! This is the speciality of spoken language from our region...

Today a boy from Binnasara was driving rickshaw in this metropole! I replied,

"Gauripur! *Janish?*" ("Gauripur! Do you know the place?")

"*Kene Najanim? Saday na Jayay Thakang.*" ("Why won't I know? I visit the place regularly.")

What a delight! I have transformed from a general passenger to a special person! A person close to him. Race, religion or faction does not matter in this case. What matters is that I come from the same region as him and we speak the same dialect.

(Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 356, translation mine)

The rickshaw puller initially answers to the narrator's question ("Where are you from?") with "Noonmati," a suburb of Guwahati. In this case, Noonmati is not a lie. Instead, it is a strategic choice which shows that the rickshaw puller was approaching the narrator's question with caution. The location of Noonmati allows the rickshaw puller to assume a neutral urban identity and align with the expectations of the city's public sphere. In a linguistic landscape dominated by standard Assamese and shaped by a history of movements against non-Assamese migrants, claiming Noonmati as one's place of origin provides safety and avoids exposure to the scrutiny that might follow a dialect-marked answer. The narrator presses further ("No, I mean where is your real home?") to move beyond surface-level belonging and toward deeper regional identification. The rickshaw puller first names Golakganj, a town in the Goalpara district, and finally specifies Binnasara, a village within that district. The narrator asks, "*Desi mans?*." As the Goalparia dialect enters the conversation, the dynamic of the interaction is transformed. Prior to this, it was a transactional interaction between the passenger and the service provider. Dialectical identity moves the conversation towards one grounded in recognition. The question, "Where are you

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<sup>7</sup> This is a transliteration of the Goalparia dialect as it appears in the original Assamese text, where the dialogues are presented without translation. Here, the transliteration is intended to highlight the shift in speech form. For the reader's ease, an English translation of the dialectal dialogue is provided in parentheses.

<sup>8</sup> A *desi mans* or *Desi man* is the speaker of *desi bhasa* which is a colloquial reference to the dialect of western Assam

from?", so often used to scrutinise migrants' belonging and their degree of assimilation (Raj 2003, pp.1-2), becomes the precursor to an unexpected connection in this story.

The narrator and the rickshaw puller begin their interaction in standard Assamese, adhering to the unspoken rules of public language in Guwahati. Interaction in dialect is withheld until recognition is possible. This shift might appear accidental, but it is actually structured by the city's linguistic hierarchies. Dialectal speech can mark a speaker as an outsider, specifically for migrants from Goalpara. This can provoke assumptions of Bengali affiliation or indicate lower social status. The rickshaw puller's initial answer, "Noonmati," is therefore not just a geographic reply but a linguistic strategy. The dialect surfaces only when the narrator signals recognition. The conversation in dialect here produces a momentary absolution from alienation within the city. We witness the latent social ties carried by regional speech forms that are otherwise suppressed in the linguistic economy of the city. In this case, regional dialect produced recognition, community, and affective ties in an otherwise impersonal urban space.

The final part of the story reinforces this affective bond. Upon arriving at the narrator's home, the rickshaw puller refuses payment and says, "No need to pay." The narrator insists: "*Ei kari khaish tui. Bhara nanile keman kare haibe?*" ("You make a living through this. How can you not take your payment?"). The driver relents only slightly: "*Den, tomara jen ischa.*" ("Pay whatever you wish.") (Sheelabhadra 2007, p. 357, translation mine). The transactional framework of their relationship is suspended, redefined by the solidarity produced through a shared dialect. In other works of Sheelabhadra, which include short stories like "*Bir*" (A Hero),<sup>9</sup> language differences and economic dynamics are closely related. These short stories are a commentary on the ties between linguistic encounters and social structures. They reveal the role of language use and practice in shaping everyday interactions in the city and its peripheries. The excerpts discussed above offer a 'fictionalised' representation of Guwahati's linguistic landscape. It could be argued that the events presented are imaginary and bear no resemblance to the present-day realities of migrant language politics. However, Sheelabhadra's strategic use of fiction as a vehicle for commenting on sensitive issues such as language and dialect identity becomes evident through the insertion of factual elements into his stories. This narrative technique is characteristic of many of his first-person fictional works, where fictional events are interwoven with contemporary facts. This blurring of fiction and autobiography allows him to offer political reflections under the cover of storytelling. In *Apon Manuh*, for instance, the narrator follows the encounter with the rickshaw puller by noting that a translator from Goalpara, Jyotirmoy Prodhani, has translated his work into English (Sheelabhadra 2007, p.356).<sup>10</sup> This is a factually correct detail which may appear as a passing remark in the context of the story. Readers familiar with Sheelabhadra's writing will, however, recognise it as a deliberate strategy. He introduced factual references within fictional contexts to ground his narratives in real social conditions and enable commentary that might otherwise receive resistance or censorship.

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<sup>9</sup> First published in the September 1973 issue of the Assamese periodical *Notun Prithivi*. Later published again in 2007 in the short-story collection *Sheelabhadra Galpa Samagra (Vol 1)*.

<sup>10</sup> Jyotirmoy Prodhani is the translator of Sheelabhadra's work *Madhupur Bohudoor and other stories* (2016).

### 3.4 Conclusion: Multilingual Cities in Regional Literature

This chapter has explored how language, migration, and belonging intersect in the literary representation of Guwahati through the fiction of Sheelabhadra. Focusing on *Apon Manuh*, it has traced how dialect functions as a linguistic variation and a socially meaningful and politically charged register. The broader historical and political contexts of non-Assamese migrants in Assam discussed earlier in this chapter clarify the stakes of this moment. Understanding Guwahati as a city shaped by migration as well as a centre of political mobilisation of language-based identity against perceived 'outsiders,' and Goalpara as a district historically marked by linguistic peripheral status, helps to understand why dialect must often be withheld in urban interactions. Sheelabhadra's short story reveals how the politics of speech in Assam are embedded not only in present interactions, but in layered histories of migration, marginalisation, and linguistic categorisation. In this sense, Sheelabhadra creates a space in Assamese literature for the dialect to speak as a mode of urban belonging and not just as a marker of difference. The moment of recognition between the narrator and the rickshaw puller is not simply personal; it is political. It shows how alternative communities are formed, fleetingly, in the shared speech of migrants whose identities are otherwise unacknowledged by dominant narratives. The issues raised by Sheelabhadra's fiction allow us to reflect on larger ideas of how urban spaces are shaped by everyday negotiations across linguistic and cultural differences (Puumala & Maiche 2021, p.809). Across Indian cities, multilingual lives are negotiated through shifts in speech and register, with direct implications for social and economic positioning. In Mumbai, for instance, filmmakers from outside the city began incorporating local registers of Hindi and provincial languages into their work as a response to the dominance of diasporic-oriented Hindi cinema, transforming Mumbai's film industry between the 1990s and 2000s (Ganti 2016, p.127). Like Sheelabhadra's Guwahati, these cities too are built from the speech of those who are often denied narrative centrality. Urban literature that foregrounds dialect makes these lives visible and audible, insisting that the city is not monolingual, but layered, contested, and spoken in many tongues.

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## Chapter 4

# Spatial (Re)orientations and Epic Structures of the Urban in Fareeda Mehta's *Kali Salwaar*

Elroy Pinto  

Independent Filmmaker, researcher and writer

### Abstract

*Kali Salwaar* (2001) is Fareeda Mehta's directorial debut and is based on a short story by revolutionary writer Sadat Hasan Manto. The film follows the life of a couple of migrants from the North, Sultana, a sex worker, and her partner, Khudabaksh, a pimp and dilettante with photography. Sultana navigates the streets of Bombay with the help of several stereotypical characters, including sex workers, *bhai*, grifters, and auto-mechanics. Similarly, their spaces are portrayed as vibrant sites of politics, power, and commerce that operate within working-class localities. In the film, structural elements of cinema- gesture, lensing, sound, music, dialogue, lighting, colour, and movement- form distinct sequences crafted to reveal an 'inner drama' that transcends the narrative. By centring the experiences of the migrant labourer and sex worker, the film's form constructs the spatial relations of the city with its inhabitants into an ever-changing labyrinth. The essay begins by historically locating the role of Muharrum in the life of the working classes of Bombay. Drawing on the work on epic cinema by Alex Koutsouraki, I ask, what does infusing the everyday lives of the working class with modernist epic structures do for our understanding of urban life? Utilising neuroscience studies conducted by Vittorio Gallese & Michelle Guerra on movement in cinema and Bregt Lameris's study on colour, I argue that Mehta tweaks these structural elements of cinema and increases the possibilities of urban spaces. Finally, I analyse the cinematic processes by which Fareeda Mehta transforms the spaces realised in Manto's Bombay stories into the visual language of cinema.

**Keywords:** Epic cinema, Indian cinema, Fareeda Mehta, Sadat Hasan Manto, Kali Salwaar.

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## 4.1 Introduction

Sadat Hasat Manto wrote the short story "Kali Salwaar" in 1941. The film adapts Manto's literary universe and weaves themes and characters common to several stories, such as Mammad Bhai, Sugandhi from "Hatak" and "Babu Gopinath". It situates Manto as a character within the film's landscape. His experiences with Mammad Bhai form a meta-commentary that is sharply critical of the US and filmmaking funded by the mafia. The film is about the use of technology in imaging and sound media. The film provides an ironic depiction of a 'struggling' artist in the city of Mumbai. The film builds and climaxes around the celebrations of Muharram in the city and the desire of Sultana to stitch a '*Kali Salwaar*' for the occasion.

Before writing on the film, the use of the feminist gaze in the film has to be analysed; Kagalwala compliments its ability to "watch Sultana with empathy". The article addresses the role of the labourer in the city and the complexity with which Sultana navigates her relationships with the diverse group of people she encounters in the neighbourhood, or the 'street'. The IAS newsletter presciently looks at the interplay between the Hindu and Muslim components of the film. Highlighting the religious and the spiritual in Sultana's life, the film creates an "abstract odyssey into migration, marginalisation, and displacement". The writing centres on questions of an 'Indian Muslim' identity through its cultural or religious perspective. Neither writing has analysed the role of the systemic nor has it produced any materialist understanding of the film.

The first major task is to briefly sketch a portrait of the city of Bombay, to show that the material relations of the city are deeply intertwined with the spiritual. The film looks at the city as a manifestation of the material relations of labour, and reveals how the mystical evolves from this material history. *Kali Salwaar* places Muharram as a climactic event; the religious festival has deep working-class historical roots in the city of Mumbai. In the film, we see a menagerie of characters, all found on the street or the mohalla, and belonging to the working-class of the city. I wish to make a case for the epic idiom in cinema in this film. The epic idiom is a form that utilises and situates the structural elements of cinema in a historical process. Historically, the epic form arose as a response from artists inspired by the philosophy of dialectical materialism in opposition to the lyrical bourgeois and popular Hollywood forms. The film utilises a dialectic of the spiritual and the material, the mundane and the abstract to connect the city, its workers and life.

*Kali Salwaar* interweaves the complex interactions among the characters while orienting and disorienting the stereotypical imagery of Bombay. As the film oscillates between the sacred and profane, through transgressions designed into the structural elements, it can tell us a story that transforms the surficial "journey of the hero" into a series of interrelated events. This interrelationship is the founding component of what Eisenstein has discussed as the 'weaving of multiplicities' (Khopkar, 1990, p. 23). Simply put, the structural elements of cinema tell us something more than what is told by the plot/story of the film. Some of the broader questions I want to reflect on in the essay are: What does it mean for a film to "take place" somewhere? How does film construct space through explorations of lighting, colour, movement, gesture and subjectivity?

## 4.2 A port city of festivals

Historically, it is around the eighteenth century that the modern city of Bombay came into existence, following the growth of an export trade in raw cotton to China and America. The growth in the opium trade to China provided the larger impetus, along with the further consolidation of the East India Company in the sub-continent. The East India Company provided more incentives for mercantile ventures in the city. Eventually, by the 1850s and 1806s, the first cotton mills started to bloom, turning it into a major capitalist city. While it is not within the ambit of this essay to plot a historical narrative of the city of Bombay, it is certainly possible to dwell briefly on the kind of city that Bombay was to become. To this end, I turn to Sheetal Chhabra, who adds a critical stance to the myth of the creation of Bombay. Countering the view that we should look past views that see Bombay as a 'mosaic' in which 'distinct social worlds live side by side' and instead be able to think of the role of its internal economy, in the pre- and postcolonial eras (CHHABRIA, 2018, p. 1100). Instead, she turns our attention to how "the city emerged from within a regional commercialisation of agriculture" (CHHABRIA, 2018, p.1101) and how the East India Company reorganised the "spatial and temporal dynamic" of the city. Such reorganising began with the reclamation of land from the Arabian Sea, and it took the shape of labour laws, taxation and urban development. The East India Company, along with the local elite, violently reordered the city. Such as the creation of the Bombay City Improvement Trust, which first began with the creation of Princess Street and Mohammad Ali Road.

As Prashant Kidambi details in his book on Bombay that with the state's failure to keep up with developing urban infrastructure, life spilt onto the street. Even as the colonial narrative sought to visualise the city as a place of flows, movements and circulation (Kidambi, 2016, p.71). This was maintained by the East India Company and the emerging bourgeoisie class of locals, as it connected the hinterland by train and the coast by steamships. Capitalism always relies on what Marx calls the 'industrialised reserve army of labour' (DeFazio, 2011, p. 31) of surplus workers on which it can depend to hire when the need arises and fire when the rate of profit drops. This reserve army is the unemployed daily labourers, grifters, sex workers, eunuchs and several other archetypes of the city that are pushed to the margins. The 'street' and the 'moholla' were thus seen as key sites of labour gathering and spaces where by, "the 1890s, around 100,000 labourers usually slept on roads or footpaths.

In her writing on 'The city of the senses', a historical materialist intervention on the subject of urban studies. Kimberely de Fazio, that the city is the fundamental site of the conflict between labour relations and capital class ambitions. Like the major characters in *Kali Salwaar*, a majority of the people living in Bombay travelled from geographical and caste contexts, either coming to the city and becoming a part of the tiny capitalist class or becoming a part of the working class. Even a cursory glance at the muslim communities will show us their diversity along the lines of geographic location, caste and class, rather than a homogenous identity.

From the early nineteenth century till about the early 20th century, it was Muharram that defined the class character of the city. By the late 19th century, "Bombay's Muharram was 'a carnival ... the like of which, for extent and eccentricity, is to be found in few other cities in the world'. According to Niles Green, Muharram was, "far from being a narrowly Shi'ite event, the festive – and often licentious – atmosphere of Muharram attracted celebrants of many religious backgrounds,

particularly young working-class men". Muharram thus belonged to the working classes, and all the people who thronged the street or the bazaar. It was a combined effort by Balgangadhar Tilak, the British and the morality of an ascendant Muslim wealth-owning class that ended the domination of the working-class gathering of Muharram. By presenting a Brahmanised celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi. In the film, ironically, we get a single glimpse of Muharram celebrations in the city. We do not see the film characters participating in the celebrations, but we assume they are part of it. As the sex workers gather in a poignant moment, to relive the echoes of this tradition, a way to think about childhood memories and places they have left far behind. For Anwari, it is about looking like a character from a black and white film; for Sultana, the texture of the flat black shoes is comparable to the softness of *kajal* (kohl).

### 4.3 Situating Kali Shalwar: Modernist epic form and the Brechtian 'Gestural'

In his writing on classifications of the epic form, Alexander Koutsourakis interprets films that utilise the epic style and those that have an epic as their theme. For him, the "modernist epic form" is a film that is 'narrative in scope' but that relies on the presentation of episodic/tableaux sequences that privilege collective dramaturgy, rather than individual characters. In *Kali Shalwar*, there is an emphasis on drawing on the 'epic style' to put it in Koutsourakis' terms but in the manner of a Brechtian/Piscatorian kind, it draws on modernist interpretations of city life, such as how technology intersects with everyday life and situations (Koutsourakis, 2021, p. 32).

In comparison to the dramatic form in popular cinema and the bourgeois 'lyrical' forms in the films that travel to international film festivals, *Kali Shalwar* uses the Epic form (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 17). The epic form removes the cathartic processes from films and aims for generalised representations of sequences that are episodic. This prevents interpretations of 'causes and effects' in a linear format, which is dominant in popular modes of filmmaking and instead makes a case for an interdependent sequence of causation. This causation is close to what Eisenstein described in his words as 'a weaving of basket forms'. The epic form never completely abandoned the 'narrative' that the avant-garde and abstract, and artist cinema do. *Kali Shalwar* reveals the cracks in this structural system that we live in at this time in history, that is, capitalism is the fundamental *relational* term across the planet, and in India, it is intermixed with caste.

In the original text, Manto draws on the ghastly forms created by Sultana's mind of the blue in her veins, merging with the train tracks of the city, which are bringing in thousands of migrants to the city of Bombay. That vision is turned around on its head, right at the start of the film, when Mukhtar goes to buy flowers from the local market. In a series of close-ups of hands perusing flowers and money being transacted, this space is filled with stylised lighting and micro gestures of desire expressed in the hands of the shopkeeper towards Mukhtar. The placement of the hands, the lighting, colours of the flowers create a contrasting schema that complements with vast extensions of it on screen. Following this, there is a mid-length shot of the gesture of Mukhtar combined with the pull of her pallu, just as a train passes by, penetrating the back space of her head (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 30). This evokes a grid-like pattern, revealing the most fundamental parameter of a composition in the visual. Immediately, we are pulled away into the audio space, as we hear a rendition of the composition in the early modern form of the *Khayal*. The words of the composition are taken from a ghazal written by Mir Taqi Mir. We are then left to the pan as we follow Mukhtar

walking through a crowd in a deep focus shot, which renders nearly everything in the fore, middle and background with clarity.

Epic cinema is interested in the emotional responses that films elicit in their spectators and viewers. For example, the use of the gestic principle. In the earlier part of the film, we see Anwari introducing the city to Sultana from the rooftops, set in the background with the blueish and greyish hues of Bombay, Anwari's teal blue and baby pink outfit and Sultana's outfit with striking ultramarine blue, canary yellow and vermilion red are carefully framed in a mid-length dolly shot that brings us closer to them. As it does that, Anwari's hands are outstretched, once again giving us a horizontal and vertical line. Only for her to turn her head around to the other direction, performing half a circle with her head. On the audio, we hear a city drawing to a close in the evening as an azaan (call for prayers) sounds out from the mosque nearby. This gesture holds significance because it is a moment of instruction for Sultana, a moment of pleasure for Anwari and a distinct sylisation (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 30). These multi-layered gestures point to the possibility that Anwari has done this several times for newer sex workers to the city, but they also reveal a deeper friendship that is blossoming between the characters.

Brecht outlines other methods, such as a direct address to the camera, non-psychological acting and non-linear chronology in narratives as part of his epic idiom. In epic cinema, these techniques are sequenced in a horizontal rhythmic arrangement of audiovisual images placed one after the other to form meaning that is conscious and unconscious in meaning for the viewer. The structural components combine the characterisation provided by actors and the arrangement of sound, including music, noise, foley, natural sounds, ambient rhythms and at times the recorder itself. Along with changes in lighting, camera movement and other elements, this allows for a film to engage in a 'totality' of filmic relations. One of the important aspects of the art forms of miniature painting and Khayal gayiki is that their structure is built for microtonal beauty. Similarly, the structural elements of cinema can be adjusted even on the microtonal level (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 19). These interventions used by the filmmaker prevent the moment from achieving a natural state; they make us think of other possibilities of meaning.

In the film, the spaces in which the exchange of money takes place are uniquely framed and lit. In Capital, Marx says that commodity exchange in such a mode of production is universalised (Bellofiore, p. 2018). When society is structured upon relations of exchange, Sultana's body turns into a medium that 'replicates exchange operations either through labour but also via the individual's interpersonal interactions' (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 36). So even as Shankar agrees to figure out a way to get her that Kali shalwar, he exchanges commodities between the sex workers he is deceiving delicately. Similarly, all the major transactions taking place between characters are shot within a close-up, and only the hands of the characters are shown. When they are not shot in close-up, the gesture of counting the money becomes the entire focus. The systemic nature of capital not only redraws the physical map of the city of Mumbai, but it also recasts human relationships in favour of exchange that annihilates relationships and causes deep alienation and isolation. In the film, Sultana is unable to successfully attract regular clients, thus rendering her body incapable of meeting her basic needs. Her life spirals further as Khudabaksh, her pimp and partner, becomes increasingly distanced from her. He arrives in the city with Sultana and continues his work as a photographer in the city, but is unable to obtain any form of sustained income. He increasingly becomes disillusioned with his new environment and turns to a fakir at the legendary

shrine of Haji Malang in Kalyan. The roots of his disappointments can be attributed to the alienation felt by minorities within an Indian society, increasingly bent on 'Othering' Muslims. Though we are not privy to this form of direct instruction by the director, we are given hints throughout about the rise of the Far Right candidates even at local body elections, where the barber grooming Mammad Bhai's character suggests that, 'this time the lotus will blossom'.

#### **4.4 Characterisation in *Kali Shalwar***

The popular and avant-garde cinema lacks a general historical understanding of reality, a reality which is constantly transforming according to the laws of dialectics (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 15). Under capitalism, even the historical epic is considered and treated as a 'genre'. In popular, bourgeois lyrical and avant-garde cinema, ahistorical depictions of characters and social conditions are presented. Marx talks about the individual, "not as an independent entity, nor does the individual have 'intrinsic' transhistorical characteristics. Even the Buddha comments that reality emerges through a complicated interplay and weaving of so many dependencies between sentient and non-sentient life.

*Kali salwar* depicts everyday reality in all its contradictions, just as Shankar is shown to be a genius with chess, and as effortlessly as a mechanic, he is a manipulator of the sex workers he deceives. Just as Sultana is ever ready to help everyone around her, providing care, emotional support and financial payments from her savings, almost no one can help her when she needs the only thing she asks for in the entire film. This approach of the contradictory nature of life under capitalism shows us that even what appears as 'natural' is subject to change, precisely because of the specific historical and social conditions in which the film takes place. Sultana's body transforms in various ways while attempting to seduce customers; for example, she draws on several mudras and kathak poses while she stands on her balcony at night, when Shankar sees her from below. Anwari sings a song on the terrace and gracefully dances to "Yeh Hai Bambai Meri Jaan" She mimics a dance sequence from the film *CID* (1956) Khudabaksh can be found hands outstretched, altering his intonation and tries his best to sell and perform the role of the "local photographer", the mint green kurta, mixed with a print jacket in red, stands out in a sea of monochromatic tourists.

#### **4.5 Eisenstein's Leitmotif and Synaesthesia**

Eisenstein saw intonation, mimicry, gesture and movement as successive stages of human expression, each preserving something from the previous one yet also adding something qualitatively different. (*Khopkar, 1993, p. 163*). Robert Robertson tells us of the simple description that Eisenstein offers on Synaesthesia, he says it is, 'the production from one sense-impression of one kind of an associated mental image of a sense-impression of another kind.' (Robertson, 2011, p. 142) As an extension, Eisenstein adds that "the process of association of sense-impressions involves emotion." In this definition, the sense and the sense-impression produced are dialectically linked but are different. Such sense impressions are subjective and involve emotional states. Furthermore, synaesthesia as understood by Eisenstein could be considered as 'the ability to unite in one whole a variety of feelings gathered through different sense organs. If a person hears an objective sound of a peacock crying, but the subjective sense impression may conjure an image

of blue in the mind, furthermore, it may present the colour blue after having experienced an emotion associated with that sound and that colour. In Eisenstein's understanding, filmmakers have infinite possibilities of evoking emotions in audiences.

Another concept that Eisenstein developed further than the original was the leitmotif. He describes it as.

the theme expressed in colour leitmotifs can, through its colour score and with its own means, unfold an inner drama, weaving its own pattern in the contrapuntal whole, crossing and recrossing the course of action, which formerly music alone could do with full completeness by supplementing what could not be expressed by acting or gesture; it was music alone that could sublimate the inner melody of a scene into thrilling audiovisual atmosphere of a finished audiovisual episode. (Robertson, 2011, p. 166)

Filmmaker and theorist, Arun Khopkar, elaborates on the use of leitmotif, wherein a leitmotif can establish links between characters, work with creating a mood or a theme but that which gives unity' (Khopkar, 1991, p. 106). Eisenstein states that the act of creation allows us to think of the play of complementary colours, much like the flow of the creative energies of the masculine and feminine (Khopkar, 1991, p. 103). It means that no colour is seen in isolation, even red is only thought of in the absence of blue (Khopkar, 1991, p. 105). In the same essay, Khopkar states that Eisenstein takes up three or four chroma that are combined with the achroma of white, grey and black. Eisenstein assigns each chroma a single thematic function, such as red with revenge, gold with debauchery and black with death. In *Kali Salwaar*, the secondary characters are all undergoing their forms of journeys in colour and textile. For example, Mukthar is identified with the colour blue, but is seen drying clothes of different colours one evening. Anvari is paired with achroma colours, but from time to time acquires a green or a purple hue. With textiles, there is the texture of the surfaces that are constantly in rhythm.

In this way, Eisenstein saw an 'audio-visual polyphony' possible because of the movement of the chromatic objects (animate and inanimate objects) and the criss-crossing of the plot, inviting the spectators to experience a 'synaesthetic experience' (Khopkar, 1991, p. 108). In *Kali Shalwar*, we see no direct correlation arising from the use of colours about a single character; the primary colour palette is expressed in as many shades as possible. We see a broad series of colours being associated with Sultana: Red, Blue, Yellow, Green and Pink, and we see a stunning variety in the variation in costumes. Sultana's interaction with other characters and the presence of colours and movement allow us to feel an enhanced sensation of the narrative that goes beyond the dialogue and plot capacities of Manto's text. Sultana's journey is not directly related to the progression of the characters 'inner journey or a psychological journey, but rather is connected with the actions and events around it (Robertson, 2011, p. 160).

*In Feeling Colour: Chromatic Embodiment In Film Culture, 1950s-1960s*, Bregt Lameris outlines that film is a complex form that includes "the body, its motor potentialities, the senses, emotions, imaginations, and memories" (Lameris, 2025, p. 174). The book provides a general introduction to synaesthesia as a 'cross modal and multisensorial perception'. According to Maurer (Lameris, 2025, p. 174), the first experience of synaesthesia is neonatal. With age, the multisensory neurons require maturation and can only be strengthened through experience (Lameris, 2025, p. 175). Just as Khopkar has highlighted, the presence of contrasts in colour design and art has a centuries-

long connection between why complementary colours catch the eye and how they hold their attention (Lameris, 2025, p. 46). In the film, we see Sultana in neon chanteuse pants, bright pistachio greens, yellows and is seen with high-end shiny textiles, shimmering and sporting gauzy dupattas. Eventually, her transition and increasing alienation move away from the more 'folk' inspired colours and begin to turn towards blue with intermixes. There is a consistent use of primary colour and contrasting colours, and the rich possibilities of a single colour merging with the chromatic tonalities of colour emerge within and outside the narrative spaces. As we experience her journey inwards the text, image and colour all start to move towards the darker end of the spectrum.

Rudolf Arnheim's work on colour theory and harmony says that there are up to seven possibilities of contrast (Lameris, 2025, p. 58). The use of contrasts has a known effect on audiences in their reception; both successive and simultaneous use of contrasting colours allows audiences to retain their attention and provide a stimulating effect (Lameris, 2025, p. 41). Through costumes, we take a journey with Sultana's costumes. They mirror her inner state of mind, and they start to become impersonal as the film begins its journey from colour to black. In Fareeda Mehta's words, "the use of colour came from the penumbra of historical consciousness." By the end of the film, the earthy colours of brown have given way to the ecstasy and mourning of black, and we appear to find the lustre of nothingness spilling onto the screen in one fevered dream of Sultana. As the hands of a tailor using a sewing machine shot in a complete black wall, using his hands to gently and mechanically bring the textile together.

#### **4.6 Movement as a structural response to the city**

*Kali Shalwar* is replete with ornate movements of the camera, within the capabilities of the dolly or the track shot, and the pan and tilt. Often, the camera combines these movements. They signify a remarkably personal rhythm and form in Mehta's cinematic practice, one nurtured over the years in filmmaking. For example, after Khudabaksh has failed to sell anything at the Gateway of India, we are presented with a wide-angle shot. He is confronted by a tourist who responds to Khudabaksh's attempts at communication by mechanically video recording him on his camcorder. As the tourist walks away and Khudabaksh moves to the edge of the promenade, the camera pans left, and as he exits the scene, the camera performs a straight movement towards the sea, holding and waiting (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 92). Both camera movements are performed with subtlety and situate us deep within Khudabaksh's subjectivity, without resorting to drama (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 96). So why does this particular movement matter? This scene adds to our understanding of the alienation created by economic relations. As Khudabaksh must resort to performing and attracting attention to earn his living, he performs the role of a 'working person in the city' and is tired and humiliated as he is subjected to an objectification process.

In *The Empathic Screen*, Vittorio Gallese and Michelle Guerra address cinema and movement through neurosciences. By drawing on the study of mirror neurons, they posit a close relationship between the experience of watching the film in a cinema hall, calling it a "liberated embodied simulation". By bringing together neuroimaging and film viewing, they suggest that it is 'movement which permits articulation of meaning' (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 6). According to them, "Embodied simulation is the foundation of human intersubjectivity in general, and empathy

in particular". Their argument teases the liberatory capabilities of cinema in which mirror neurons can be trained to generate empathy; they can be used to teach ourselves about the reality we live in, through the fictional worlds we conjure up on screen. They study the first impact in the cinema of the train pulling in at the station, which famously sent the audience running in all directions. The movement of the train produced 'visible motor reactions' thus showing how important "movement and its resonances are". Another example cited is of Hitchcock and his use of camera movement, which creates the overpowering sense of tension in his films (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 58).

For Gallese and Guerra, film relies on the 'multimodality of the cinematographic experience'. This movement of the camera takes us deep into the subject's point of view; at the same time, it makes the spectator self-aware (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 76). Furthermore, movement is not the only structural component of cinema that can elicit responses in the spectator, but the average spectator has a higher involvement if the intensity of camera movements is present (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, 91). In an experiment which examined the effects of watching a film taken with a still camera and one with movement, they found that motor activity in mirror neurons in people was at its highest when steadicam or dolly shots were used and was at its lowest when the shot utilised a still camera (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 108).

In *Kali Shalwar*, when we see Anwari and Sultana walking through the old market areas, we follow the ladies on a y-axis, and then they turn a corner to come back again into the y-axis. This allows us spectators access to view a plethora of activities, shops, and craftsmen. It allows us to comprehend space in the city in a very different way from how the characters on screen experience it. In many of Sultana's interactions, we see her traversing through the space of the city as a *flâneuse*, but for us, it helps us see how little thought is given to urban planning in a city like Mumbai. Sultana's jaunts help us understand how a regressive societal structure, coupled with an exploitative economic base, can deny space to its workers. Neurologically speaking, these scenes with their carefully designed movements are able to help us think on a deeper and non-superficial level and they leave a deep impression on our minds.

#### **4.7 Constructing a meticulous approach to sound**

The soundscape in film can be defined as the cumulative amount of everything we hear on the audio. This includes ambient sounds, natural rhythms, musical interventions and noise. Fareeda Mehta's use of sound is an attempt at bringing the whole together on the soundtrack. This is in line with how her ethical stance of working-class life is deeply entwined with the aesthetic project that she pursues. Examples of this can be found everywhere in the film. When Mammad Bhai meets Manto to discuss the development of the script at the local bar, there is an entire conversation on the soundtrack where the woman who owns the bar complains and goads Mammad Bhai into getting rid of a person who has abused her daughter. This conversation spills for a moment onto the main conversation between Manto and him, but it is enough to emphasise that there is a world outside of that conversation.

Similarly, two scenes that explore the radical transformation of place in *Kali Shalwar* are - the scene where Sultana begins flirting with Rajat Kapoor's character. Beginning with an establishing

crane shot, moving to a mid-length, we see Sultana to the left of the screen, stationary in her pistachio green, silky yellow and pink outfit as a monochrome blue shirt-wearing white collared worker walks in a straight line towards her. Immediately, we cut to a close-up tracking shot of Sultana's face as she moves sideways into the Indo-Gothic structure. We are then suddenly pulled into a full-length shot in which our characters are standing in the distance on the left, and Sultana makes her way around each pillar of the structure. As she moves through shafts of light and dark, we see her coquettishly attempting to serenade the hero of the scene, and she moves towards the camera. Next in a mid-length shot of the client as he sees the light glisten in her black hair while Sultana moves away from the camera. Suddenly, as she goes around the corner, the camera begins moving, first, left around the corner and then tracks the client running to catch his bus onto the street on the left. The scene closes with a long shot taken from the bus with Sultana in the distance. In this entire scene, there is a major scale pop that is used, and the song sounds very similar to a 90s popular score. This unusual choice for what could be called an 'art film' is deliberate and, on the surface, is a broader comment on how women are objectified in the popular cinema, but here the scene is imbued with feminine sensuality. The choice prevents a naturalised state of affairs from arising and utilises movement and space to convey so much about this possible encounter, by varying camera distances, utilising a dolly and framing the scene in such a manner that the clash of those colours mixed with the gestural body language of Sultana creates a series of encounters that imbue the scene with layers of meaning.

In a follow-up scene to when Khudabaksh has now become a part of the fakir's group, he is tasked with watching a seed. With no further instruction given from the teacher, he wanders around aimlessly, completely indifferent to the adjoining Malang gad hill fort. The hills look down upon him, a tiny figure dressed in a pale lavender coloured pathani suit. In the next shot, we see him walking past a group of locals playing cards. An afternoon game of chance is being played as he takes up a spot near them, but in solitude. As the electric guitar and a synthesiser playing saxophone play out. The music takes us on a different path. The next shot is a carefully designed three-plane medium-length shot, designed to emphasise the free rhythmic associations of the shot. Khudabaksh is in the foreground on the right, the card players on the left in the middle ground and finally the giant hills of Malang Gad in the centre background. These three are in one shot, encapsulating the entirety of the film. Man turns away from collective persuasions only to stare back at a seed (nature) in his palm. Even as nature continues to 'watch' him from all sides. Khudabaksh's subjectivity does not allow him to consider reaching out to others. On the ambient sound, we can hear a bird chirping, only for Khudabaksh to reveal in his palm the tiniest of seeds he has been asked to look at. We then finally revert to an emotionally painful moment for him as he ponders his life in the same three-plane shot. Eisenstein suggests that there are correspondences of different types between music and scene, in which they can come together. For example, "an object or a landscape which can be matched with a timbre in music" (Robertson, 2011, p. 146). Though not a rule, in his work with the composer, Prokofiev Eisenstein suggests other patterning possibilities. Be that the reason why this particular scene strikes out at us in so many different structural components, or we just see a very universalised figure of a man suffering, the landscape and the distant collection of people suggest a historical consciousness akin to how Oedipus seeks his future from the Oracle of Delphi.

In her exploration of the city, Sultana meets a young man who appears to have lost his bearings in conventional reality. Instead, he communicates only in code, action and sound. He comes up to Sultana and asks her to leave on the next train with her. Even as their interaction continues under the shade of some of the oldest trees in the Southern part of Mumbai, we hear a long conversation on the audio between two ladies of the working class who are discussing their lives. Not content to merely use their presence on the 'soundtrack', Fareeda even frames them from a distance that accommodates the primary characters along with the secondary characters.

It is not possible to go into the depths of the musical landscape of the film. The scene in which Mammad Bhai and Manto meet at a local bar benefits from the musical score that is given to his character. A complex blend of sounds, unusual synth textures, distorted electric guitar, slap bass and drum programming that can be described as between techno and punk. And an added layer is the major lighting colour contrasts of Red and Green that are used to demarcate space and create major zones of intersection between the differences and 'danger' present in such spaces in the city.

Similarly, when Sultana is rummaging through her trunk, we hear an accordion that transitions into a synthesiser that first plays Raga Yaman and moves into a combination of new age and smooth jazz, only to then once again move into a melody on the electric bass. Thus, even with music, space is being constructed on the soundscape of the city. For example, the use of Anwari singing "Yeh Hai Bambai Meri Jaan" from CID (1956). Fareeda also uses music as a structural component by which she can imbue a historical consciousness into her characters. The music at several spaces in the film goes against an expressive dramaturgy, raising broader comments about technology and the instruments used to produce that music.

#### **4.8 The dialectics of the spiritual and the material**

Mehta never attempts to veil the fundamental conflict between capital and labour; she does not obscure Sultana's retreat to the private, away from the social. Christopher Caudwell sees the individual retreat as a 'fundamentally social process represented as individual' (DeFazio, 2011, p. 138). When it appears that Mukhtar is better off, we are reminded that she is deceived by Shankar. The market forces affect all the working classes alike. The "commodity relations have coded" this apparent retreat to the personal as private.

The film explores the dialectical relation between the material conditions of the city and urban experience and inquires into the relation between the human senses' cultivated orientation toward individual consumption. This is explored through the relation of imaging technology in the character Khudabaksh to his complete collapse into mysticism when he is unable to find the real reasons for his precarity. The labyrinth created by capitalism in which even the tiniest of spaces can be used as makeshift tables for a game of chess, the urban is a series of both formal and informal spaces, "different localities, mohallas, wadis and gullies, bazaars, factories, mills and other workplaces" (Legg, 2014, p. 74).

Several characters we encounter in the film are located on the street. The eunuch who throws a pink ribbon at the police officer like a bolt of lightning is endearing and poetic, whereas Sugandhi, who is always chastised by one of her clients, is well-dressed and taking care of herself. The lonely

man who sits at a bar and eagerly looks for someone, maybe a wife, a lover, a child, is constantly drinking away. The misery of the working-class life is not associated with a diminished existence; in fact, it is surviving, like many of the people who come here and remain in the fabric of the city, unfettered yet trapped. The *Moholla* is the smallest possible unit of community in many Indian cities. They were not homogeneous units but fairly heterogeneous in their caste and religious compositions (Legg, 2014, p. 82).

In the film, we do not see a certain stereotype of a Muslim; we do not see a particular type of muslim that is singled out for their religious identity. Only when Muharram starts to become a fixation for Sultana do we become aware of such questions of identity. Throughout the film, we see all shades of working-class people; at times, we even see a challenge posed to the orthodox mindset in the film. As detailed earlier, the music of the film draws from specific instances of popular culture while completely rewriting them for us to produce disruptions and interruptions that prevent a perfect representation from arising. As Brecht suggested, such interruptions point to a 'series of contradictions that cannot be verbalised'. Instead, the spectator is left to ponder (Koutsourakis, 2018, p. 29).

In particular, a scene that continues the exploration of the epic form and transforms public space in the city. What begins as a conventional love story is transformed in a matter of minutes. The beginning of the scene is focused on the mechanic shop, where Shankar works. In the scene, the anchoring colour is blue, it is the colour of Shankar's shirt, it is the colour of the car bonnet, it is the colour being spray painted in a track shot, it is the colour of the little boys hat and in a powerful three plane framing, we see an emphasis on blue suddenly in the background - Mukhtar's *riyaz*. But we see Shankar and the boy in the foreground, the roofs of the mechanic shop and Mukhtar's gallery, on which she spreads her pallu in yellow, red and the one she has is green. Then, in a shot located between a granary storehouse and other storage spaces and trucks, we see Mukhtar being led by Shankar across a patch of water, even as the cameraman walks behind them. On the audio, a strike of lightning and a peacock's call. The atmosphere is suggestive of Raga Malhar, a pre-monsoon melody and in the miniature painting tradition, the peacock features visually as a bird of sensuality (MET, n.d.). In a matter of minutes, we are lifted away from the mundane, material reality and transported almost magically to another space, through the use of colour, movement and sound. Just as we wait for a further abstraction to take us away from this material reality, Mehta drags us back into the lifting of oversized sacks of grain by workers. As part of the same shot, we see a low-lit godown in which the workers continue their work, even as magical love happens around them.

The song sequence in which we hear the Qawwali, "*Naina Moray*". We are introduced to this scene first through a mid-length shot, which becomes a full-length shot as Sultana dresses up and gets ready to dye her clothes. She dresses in green and blue and wraps up her white clothes, which will go on to become the Kali Shalwar of the story. But she traverses that space in a medium-length shot in which we track her movements diagonally, as she is in profile and so at an angle, we see what is in her background as she walks. As spectators, we are subject to a very intense form of music that details the departure of a beloved. But we see several rooms in which people are engaged in labour-intensive work of dyeing. Eventually, she hands her garment over, and in an extreme close-up of her eyes, we see her closing them inward. As a form of 'acceptance'. Finally, we see the source of the music, as we are taken on another diagonal at a dargah where the Qawalli

singers are singing and women of the working class are feverishly praying for their deepest needs. The scene ends with a shot of a bulbous blue tiled dome framed in half, as an eagle flies by. Like most Sufi texts, the lyrics of the Qawwali detail a lover separated and in intense desire to reunite with the divine or the lover. Such works are common, and Sufis were known to have merged the material realities of labour into a merging with the spiritual or the divine, particularly with the skilled trades through song. This material union is never emphasised, particularly by scholars who see such songs as either metaphors for the beloved or the divine.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

In Marx's analysis of the working day, he relies on the abstraction of the structures of capitalism, rather than the perception (direct experience). One reason for this was that Marx found the structures of capitalism to veil these forms of exploitation and to make wage labour appear as 'fair' (DeFazio, 2011, p. 105). Similarly, Sultana's journey appears abstract but she is reunited with her beloved in the material form of the Kali Shalwar. By focusing on the abstract structures of the city, Fareeda follows the line of filmmakers who are deeply engaged with the epic and the dialectical materialist form. She realises the work of Manto in a radically different manner than the way Manto had envisioned the city. Manto's characters had to deal with the anxiety of a new nation ravaged by the partition of India.. Mehta's characters have to deal with the anxiety of a neoliberal capitalist project and growing communal politics of urban spaces in India. So how does Mehta interrogate the spaces created by Manto further? By bringing in the author in the film, she can bring out the irony, pathos and the comedic, without ever losing sight of the crushing day-to-day life that these characters experience.

In the essay, I have demonstrated how the structural components of film can fundamentally transform a literary piece by reordering and reorienting space. Even as it dips into 'magical' moments experienced by the working class and the marginalised within that class, it can show us that the material relations of society deeply influence the decisions taken by so many characters in the film. The film brings disparate sequences together by rearranging the city into an endless labyrinth through the use of colour, movement, music, sound, gesture, and textile.

The structural, particularly through cutting-edge scientific studies on movement and colour in film, shows us that these have far greater impact on our nervous systems than previously thought. The epic form and its structural uses provide us with a deeper understanding of the relationship between the universalised object on screen and our own subjective experiences. The structure can be thought of as layers in the film, and by imbuing each layer with historical meaning, it points to the possibilities of meaning that extend beyond the cumulative sum of its parts.

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## Chapter 5

# Between Tramline and Traffic Jam: Mapping Indian City through Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* and Anurag Basu's *Life in a...Metro*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to navigate the representation of the city in the process of urbanisation and its impact on human relationships in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) and Anurag Basu's *Life in a...Metro* (2007). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad and Doreen Massey's relational understanding of space, the paper investigates how the city operates not merely as a backdrop but as an active character shaping identity, agency, and emotions. Ray's *Mahanagar* is set in post-independence Calcutta, where the city is portrayed as a place in transition, torn between tradition and modernity. Ray's nuanced portrayal critiques urban alienation while highlighting resilience. The film also presents the city as both a liberating and an isolating space, mirroring the tension of a newly independent India negotiating gender roles and economic change. In contrast, *Life in a...Metro* reflects post-liberalisation, globalised Mumbai, characterised by fragmentation, hyper-connectivity, and emotional dislocation. The contemporary Mumbai in the film captures the frenetic pace, emotional isolation, and aspirational conflicts of metropolitan life through interconnected narratives. The film situates the city as a mosaic of lives entangled in ambition, love, and loneliness, revealing the psychic costs of urban anonymity. While Ray captures the tension of a newly urbanising India, Basu's work mirrors the complexities of globalisation and fractured relationships in a neoliberal city. This paper employs a comparative lens to explore how evolving cinematic urbanisms in Indian films reflect changing social values, economic realities, gendered dynamics of life, and the city as a space of negotiation across decades.

**Keywords:** Cinema, City, Representation, Urbanisation, Gender, Space

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## 5.1 Introduction

“They walk...they are walkers. whose bodies follows the thick and thins  
Of an urban text they write without being able to read it”.

These are the famous lines by Charles Dickens, a renowned nineteenth-century novelist who vividly captured the essence of urban life in his novels. The lines portray density and confusion, the impenetrable complexity of the city, in tales that frequently centre on moral confusion. The city and cinema have a fascinating association, making it complex to examine them from different intellectual vantage points. American sociologist Robert E. Park has rightly opined that the city is a state of mind. The city and its cinematic portrayal have become central to discussions of space in contemporary social theory and other interlocking discursive domains, as they relate to what Adorno called ‘culturescape’. The evolution of the city can be identified in three phases: commercial cities, industrial cities, and post-industrial cities. The third phase, however, has often been termed corporate or world cities (Bell, 1973). The artistic portrayal of post-industrial cities in literature or cinema has challenged a different set of rhetorical strategies and styles of disposition. ‘City’ as a generic term denotes an interesting set of meanings. Robert E. Park comments on the set of meanings which a city connotes by stating:

The city is something more than a congeries of individual men and social conveniences—streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc., and administrative devices—courts, hospitals, schools, police, and evil functionaries of various sorts. The city is rather a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organised attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. (Park, 1915, pp 557-612)

This commentary shows how the representation of cities in films effectively captures urban experience. Lewis Mumford (1938) makes a similar point, stating, “Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind”. If the city is a state of mind, and this state finds expression in cinema, the culture of both city and cinema becomes integral and assumes a very important role. The association between city, cinema, and culture is as complex as it is interesting. The city is not only a creation of culture but also a producer of culture. As producers of social modernisation, cities influence and shape the evolving patterns of culture even as they reflect certain essential currents of those cultures. Although the words ‘city’ and ‘culture’ have Latin roots, in many Asian languages, the word ‘city’ carries the meaning of cultural refinement and elegance. To read a city, in terms of its cultural inheritance, is to gain vital access to the deeper layers of the culture that these cities produce. Roland Barthes states that “everything as writing and in a literary text, the city becomes a galaxy of signifiers” (Barthes, 1982, pp.30). Films, like cities, are both products and producers of culture. If we look closely at the patterns that these signs produce and decode the meaning produced by the film, we will be able to enter the inner sanctums of the culture produced through those films.

## 5.2 Portrayal of the City through Films

Films have become one of the most important forms of cultural studies. The cityscape and the screening have long been interconnected. Films have become an archive in which changes in landscapes can be traced. The metamorphosis of cities can be identified throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by evaluating the tropes and narrative conventions that shape films about urban settings. Cities are complex spaces that are constantly changing and synthesising, adding dynamism. Cities can broadly be divided into two categories. On the one hand, a city serves as a background, and on the other, it acts like an actor, generating the excitement and frenzy that characterise the film. The impact that films have on structuring the city has led to the formation of Cinematic Urbanism, which presents the urban history of modernity and post-modernity through the optical lens of cinema, juxtaposing filmmaking and urban mapping. There is a symbiotic relationship between cinema and the cityscape, in which the city is constructed like the cinematic form and vice versa, as cinema also owes much of its characterisation to the historical growth of the urban space. The urban city has also occupied an ambivalent position in the Indian nationalist imaginary throughout the process of nation-building, often as a confrontational as well as contemplative space that signifies 'modernity'.

As the world of cinema evolved, so did the spatial imagination of the city. With the rise of globalisation and rapid urbanisation in the 20th and 21st centuries, films began to portray a more nuanced understanding of space. The urban landscape became a mirror of societal complexities, and films began to circulate around issues of class, gender, race, and migration. According to Benjamin, "the city is undeniably shaped by the cinematic form and the cinematic city corresponds to profound changes in the perceptible apparatus - changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the streets in a big city and traffic" (Benjamin, 1936, p. 250). In the words of Hansen, "the cinema as a technique registered a shift in the field of human perception. One that worked to sensitise people to aspects of the world that were previously unnoticed: that were not previously recognized or even recognisable as reality" (Hansen, 1999, p. 59). In the Indian context, the city is often portrayed as a heterotopic space, where the real and the imagined take place simultaneously, yet, though grounded in geography, they transcend into the symbolic realm. Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) offers a subtle yet powerful depiction of Calcutta as both a physical city and a psychological space. Here, the city is not merely a backdrop but a catalyst that shapes the protagonist Aarti's experiences and identity. Aarti's mobility within the city is emblematic of a city in transition. Similarly, in Anurag Basu's *Life in a...Metro* (2007), Mumbai is framed from a kaleidoscopic view, through a milieu of intersecting narratives. Anurag Basu's characters are very different from Satyajit Ray's protagonist in *Mahanagar*. Basu's characters are constantly in a state of motion, for physical, emotional, or professional needs. But they rarely connect. This urban mobility becomes frenetic and ultimately causes an effect of alienation. This is what Marc Auge calls "non-places", spaces of transience and anonymity.

Both films offer distinct thematic representations of urban space in Indian cinema. On the one hand, Ray explores the gender politics of the urban space as it transforms into a modern space against a post-colonial backdrop. Basu's film, on the other hand, captures the affective fragmentation and existential uncertainties of a neoliberal society. Together, they map the trajectory of how Indian cinema is presented and negotiated, not as a passive receiver but as a

complex, dynamic 'character' shaping identities, relationships, and social realities. It is through the fluidity of images in cinema that cities are not merely lived in but become part of us, often constructed and contested, and in turn become enduring symbols of both the promises and paradoxes of modern urban life.

### 5.3 The City as Lived Space in *Mahanagar*

Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) explores post-independence Calcutta. In the film, however, Calcutta is consistently depicted as a rapidly transforming space of controversy and struggle. Calcutta appears as a frame of reference that shifts from the periphery to the centre. Set against the backdrop of the Bengal Renaissance, a period marked by intellectual and socio-cultural development and innovation, the city in Ray's film is a place of numerous possibilities, translated and transformed across different socio-cultural milieux. The city is framed as living and emotionally charged, intertwined with questions of gender, mobility, and middle-class identity. The city becomes much more than a living space, influencing the characters' decisions, choices, and journeys, which in turn become the spirit of the city. As the famous lyricist Amitabha Bhattacharya reminds us, "...And to Satyajit Ray, Calcutta is much more than a living presence. It is in his bloodstream." The city becomes a space where human bodies and memories intersect, raising pertinent questions about how it becomes a melting pot of dreams, where hope and aspirations are on one hand and, on the other, their shattering. In *Mahanagar*, Aarti, a middle-class housewife who steps into the outer world to support her family through a crisis, becomes a key figure through which the film articulates how urban space is experienced, negotiated, and resisted. Henry Lefebvre, in his seminal work *The Production of Space*, states that space is not a neutral container but a socially produced and ideologically charged construct. His triad model divides space into three interrelated dimensions: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space). Lived space refers to a space experienced through everyday life, emotions, and symbolic associations. It is a space occupied by inhabitants and users; these spaces are often filled with images, memories, and personal meaning, rather than abstract plans or physical layouts (Lefebvre, 1991). Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of space, we can infer that the city in *Mahanagar* not only acts as an external agent but is also an important terrain that shapes Aarti's personal journey. Calcutta becomes a space of the protagonist's agency and freedom. Trams, office buildings, congested streets, and marketplaces in Calcutta do not merely exist passively but reflect Aarti's evolving identity. For Aarti, Calcutta becomes a space of aspiration, hope, and dreams; while for her father-in-law, an old idealist teacher, it becomes a transforming city, symbolically representing the degeneration of his values and ideologies. Through these contradictory ideologies, opposing identities of the characters are generated against the cityscape. The interaction between physical spaces, such as streets, offices, and homes, helps shape the characters' ideologies and emotions. Thus, in the city space, dominant ideologies are shattered, making way for new debates and visibilities. In the film, the transformation of domestic and public spaces against the backdrop of the post-independence scenario helps transform Aarti, especially from her confined domestic life to the bustling workplace in Calcutta.

Doreen Massey offers a complementary yet distinctive view in her work *Space, Place and Gender*. She presents an understanding of space that should not be viewed as fixed or inert, but as relational, dynamic, and plural (Massey, 1994). She emphasises the development of space through constant interactions and the redefinition of social and political relations, particularly gender. The geographical model treats space as passive, but Massey perceives it as a “simultaneity of stories so-far”, which becomes a process rather than a product. In *Mahanagar*, Aarti’s mobility is intertwined with her evolving gender norms and class expectations. In the post-partition world of *Mahanagar*, Aarti tries to gain a job to support her family, despite the restrictions she faces from her husband and father-in-law. The city here negotiates the personal and the political, the home and the world. For Aarti, Calcutta becomes a space that opens up new avenues of opportunity and is liberating. Spaces are often contested and conflicted, where the old and new fight for their existence. Spaces are written to create new meanings and ways of life and do not necessarily intend to erase the older space completely. Ray’s film has a recurrent motif of older and newer spaces battling together for their co-existence.

In *Mahanagar*, Aarti’s father-in-law laments the degeneration of Calcutta, the city he can no longer recognise, as traditional morals are being shattered and new ones are emerging. There is a tone of condemnation as he thinks the new morals make her daughter-in-law take up a job outside the domestic periphery and the woman of the house meets the household’s economic needs. *Mahanagar* has an interesting episode in which, after returning from her office, a space symbolising her newfound freedom and agency, Aarti narrates excitedly to her husband about her boss and how he has appreciated her promptness and efficiency. To this enthusiastic banter, her husband sarcastically questions whether he would recognise her in the same way even at home. He justifies his comment by stating that Aarti seems changed and unrecognisable after finding her freedom and agency in the contested space of Calcutta. At this, Aarti, bringing her face close to her husband’s, says she is the same, “the wife of the house!” This becomes a moment of reiteration of her identity, where she validates the old and the conventional at the same moment when she has just started to experience the space that the new, big city has opened for her. This becomes the ‘translated’ nature of the city space. Amitabha Bhattacharya observes that Calcutta often appears as a frame of reference, sometimes as an adversary, often in the background, and sometimes as dominant in Ray’s films. Individual beings live and survive, sometimes innocently and sometimes acquiescing, in a society that is fast changing (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 301). This reveals how space becomes a central force in shaping identity, agency, and the reception of the film.

#### **5.4 Gender and Urban Mobility in *Mahanagar* and *Life in a...Metro***

Contemporary Indian cinema offers a topography of postmodern culture and society, with the potential for transition in the nature and appearance of people who live in larger cities. In terms of urban mobility, men and women experience and move around the city in markedly different ways. There is a fundamental difference in the movements performed by men and women, attributable to the environment, accessibility, and the sense of security in public space. This is well rooted in the concept of gender roles in successive societies, in relation to societal and cultural history. Gender relations have an impact on the urbanisation process, affecting migration

decisions, housing structures based on family roles, and community organisations. City planning can help reorganise these relationships. Therefore, a look oriented to the specificities of each gender is so important for urban planning and studies on mobility in the city (Lemon et al., 2017). Often men find it easier to navigate the urban space because of their gendered authority, whereas women find it difficult to mobilise within it, often constrained by cultural expectations, family structures, and surveillance. In *Mahanagar*, Aarti's decision to join the workforce and traverse Calcutta on her own marks a significant transgression of gender norms in post-independence India. It reflects Aarti's journey from *antarmahal* to the *bahirmahal*, where the city is identified as the external space or the *bahirmahal*, which is largely dominated by men. The *antarmahal*, on the other hand, is a space designed for women to live and look after. Aarti's presence in public spaces such as public transport, the office, and the marketplace challenges the assumption that women are only meant to be confined within the domestic sphere. Aarti doesn't merely roam about the streets of Calcutta, but she inhabits it. She leaves an imprint of her emotions upon it and gradually tries to make meaning out of it. These spaces, which she navigates, are unfamiliar and intimidating to her, but her experiences make these spaces a site of self-realisation. Aarti's spatial agency emerges through negotiation and quiet resistance rather than open defiance, making her act of mobility through the city a political act outside the confines of gendered norms. Women's access to space has been historically contingent and often requires legitimisation through different acquired roles in employment, family duties, or respectability. In Aarti's case, her mobility is legitimised by her financial agency, leading to her personal and moral euphoria. This also unsettles the rigid binaries of public/male and private/female. Thus, the film critiques the gender implications while depicting them through urban mobility.

In *Life in a...Metro*, the experience of urban mobility becomes a challenge to engage with the emotional consequences of hyper-mobility in the city. The female characters in the film, such as Sikha (Shilpa Shetty), Shurti (Kangana Ranaut), and Neha (Konkana Sen Sharma), are employed and spatially independent, or have a history of employment, as in Sikha's case. However, their mobility is haunted by emotional fragmentation, isolation, and moral ambiguity. Unlike Aarti, these women inhabit the neoliberal city, where freedom doesn't necessarily translate into empowerment. The city of Mumbai is constantly in motion, be it trains, cars, elevators, or footbridges. But for women, this movement doesn't mean agency or authority; instead, it leads to exhaustion, relational instability, and internal dilemmas. Women are caught in the web of marriage, deception, and the desire to be loved. Love is measured against the diffused connotations of sexuality in urban space, seeking legitimacy in the man-woman relationship, as well as forming social engagement and a self-conscious penchant for identity. The characters' mobility is not for survival or economic stability, but it imbues a sense of alienation, pointing to the limitations of urban freedom in a post-liberal society. While *Mahanagar* ends with an optimistic image of Aarti having her foot intact in the public sphere, *Life in a...Metro* leaves its women caught in the vicious circle of disconnection and unresolved desire. Therefore, both films represent how gender navigates spatial experiences. If *Mahanagar* depicts the threshold moment when women began to work in the public sphere, challenging gendered roles and the confinement of domesticity, *Life in a...Metro* reflects the complex aftermath of that mobility, particularly depicting commercialisation, emotional alienation, and ambivalence. Together, these

two films map the trajectory of how Indian cinema responds to the evolving gendered nature of spatial mobility, revealing the intersections of gender, city, and cinematic narration.

### **5.5 Emotional Cartography in *Life in a...Metro***

It is often observed that in narratives, spaces have their own power to be known and critiqued. With regard to Gotham, Reckner has observed that "Gotham serves as a touchstone for contemplating the emergence of a distinctly urban, bourgeois rhetoric of the relationship between poverty, race, and criminality in the nineteenth century" (Reckner, 2001). There are very perceptible examples not only in narratives but also in the reality controlled by spatial development. This power, which the space or the background holds, is not unidimensional, but rather multidimensional and also has a multi-discursive identity. Panayiotou has noted that "space is not gender neutral; on the contrary, it can be said that all spaces are gendered spaces" (Panayiotou, 2015). When examined through the perspective of a cinematic lens, the transparency of the background is decreased and it becomes opaque and thus exercises more power. Talking in terms of gender, the relationship is two-sided. Space dictates the performance of the individual within it, making the identity within a space a performative identity. It is often observed that gender is significantly challenged and distorted by different spaces which impose a certain performance on a person. This is what is regarded as 'spacing of gender'.

*Life in a...Metro* (2007) offers a realistic cinematic portrait of contemporary Mumbai in 2007. It not only presents the city of dreams that Mumbai is to the audience but also depicts Mumbai as a cartographer of emotions, fragile relationships and quiet despair. Before delving into the analysis of the cinematic representation and urban mapping, it is important to consider Indian cinema's turning point in the 1990s, with the advent of globalization and the wake of neo-liberalization. Ranjani Mazumdar observes the shift of focus to metropolitan cities in her work *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*. She states, "the new landscapes of urban spaces resulting from the expansion of industrial capitalism not only shaped the transition to a modern way of being in the world but were also impacted by the culture of modern" (Mazumdar, 2007, p.19). This modern cultural turn primarily signified the classes that were employed and the middle class and their dependents. In the film, it can be observed that both the male and female characters are influenced by external forces of consumerist, capitalist, secularist behaviour, and their identities are subjected to moral flux, guilt, liaisons and emotional dependency. Each narrative in the film is tied to the thread of emotional estrangement, whether it may be Shikha, the vulnerable Monty, or the conflicted Neha.

In the film, Mumbai becomes a space traversed by feelings as much as by vehicles, a city where psychological landscapes are juxtaposed with urban geographies. The significant spaces in the film are the old-age home, Rahul's flat, the call centre, Monty's office, Ranjit's house, and the railway station, all of which become part of the characters' inhibited emotions. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of lived spaces, we can see that the film is filled with affective resonance. The local train where Shikha meets her new friend in the city, the office where Neha navigates an illicit relationship with her married boss, and the hospital room where emotional truths unravel are not merely backdrops but signified spaces that encode and decode personal histories and the

characters' emotional states. Mumbai, here, is not only a city but many coexisting cities with urban imaginaries.

While analyzing spaces as centres of personal history, *Life in a...Metro* has not only examined the gendered politics of space in the experiences of heterosexual relationships but also drawn a nuanced portrayal of a homosexual relationship. Shruti's character, performed by Konkona Sen Sharma, navigates the pressures of urban city life and her desire for love. As an unmarried woman, she constantly feels the pressure to marry, and in a state of insecurity and longing for love, she enters a romantic relationship marked by deception and superficiality. When Shruti confronts the truth about her partner's homosexuality, as an audience, we not only respond to Shruti's trauma and pain but also recognize the identity-blindness that people of alternate sexuality are situated within. On the one hand, the city is identified as a symbol of freedom and liberation, and on the other, the gendered marginalization of people of alternative sexuality situates them in a closet within that very city. After Shruti's confrontation with her partner's sexuality, in a moment of frenzy, she accuses him in a public/office space. Through her character, Basu portrays the reality of women as well as men of alternate sexuality, trapped in dominant heterosexual marriages to survive in society. The film uses this subplot to critique societal prejudices and the taboo surrounding queer relationships in urban India.

While Monty, the solitary radio producer, interacts with the city as a listener, Shikha, on the other hand, navigates a trapped marriage, embodying the city's ambivalent promise of escape and entanglement. Shikha's identity is suppressed by her marital duties. She endures constant emotional neglect from her husband, and his infidelity leaves her lonely. She gave up her career because of her incessant need to fulfil the trichotomous woman-wife-mother role. In the isolation of the chaotic city of Mumbai, Shikha transgresses the image of the ideal woman for a brief period when she meets Akash. Symbolically, the overcrowded roads and trains in the bustling city of Mumbai emerge as liberating and spacious for Shikha, in contrast to the domestic space in her house. She finds her individuality in her encounters with Akash, who reminds her of her lost aspirations and a sense of self. Each of the characters undergoes a unique experience, yet their paths intersect at various points. Every character's life not only crosses others' tangentially, but they also share a collective emotional connection marked by isolation amidst the crowd. The film has a non-linear narrative and coalesces into a single spatial and emotional perspective. Every character has a different perspective on the city of Mumbai, distinct from the others, layered by individual experience, longings and dilemmas. These fragmented depictions echo the postmodern condition of urban living: emotional disconnection in a hyper-connected world.

Therefore, through overlapping narratives, the symbolic use of space, and affective aesthetic choices, *Life in a...Metro* offers a complex portrait of Mumbai's emotional turmoil, one that resists singular meaning and instead embraces multiplicity. There is an interplay of space and gender that seems to be shaped by the urban setting of the metropolis. It further reveals how space is lived, contested, and emotionally constrained by urban subjects negotiating identity, connections, and survival. The film exemplifies how Indian cinema has shifted from portraying the city merely as a stage for social mobility to portraying it as a deep emotional labyrinth, shaped not only by its infrastructure and policy but also by memories, experiences, longing, and unresolved desire. In this emotional roller coaster of the city, every lift becomes a confessional booth, every metro ride

is a moment of reckoning, and every rooftop holds a fragile hope for intimacy amidst the city's noise.

## 5.6 Contrasting Temporalities: Post- Independence vs Post-liberalization City

*Mahanagar* and *Life in a...Metro* have created two distinct temporal contexts for the city. *Mahanagar* belongs to the early era of Independence, a period marked by a shift from Nehruvian socialism to a nationalist progression emphasizing self-reliance and industrialization. In this context, the city is a nascent zone that shatters old traditions and builds fragile modern ideals. In contrast, *Life in a...Metro* is set in the post-1991 era, when India was embracing neo-liberal policies, global capitalism, rapid privatisation, and technological advancement. These two temporalities, one in the post-independence period and the other in the post-liberalization era, not only shape the cinematic endeavour but also exert a significant influence on subjectivity, social relations, and emotional economies.

In *Mahanagar*, Calcutta is depicted as a city of transition. It bears the historical footprints of its colonial past while slowly absorbing the pulse of modern employment and public mobility. There is an estrangement and a sense of isolation, characteristic of most modern cities. Ray's camera flows through the entanglement between humans and the city. The moments of negotiation and metamorphosis often leave the audience baffled by how the city influences human lives. The characters in the film cannot be imagined without the cities - Calcutta and Mumbai - that flow and feed into their identities, 'making new' the old and transforming lives to fit into the city. In contrast, *Life in a...Metro* presents Mumbai as a city perpetually in flux, where time is compressed and emotions are transient. The changing role of technology also offers a very different and fresh perspective in both films. In *Mahanagar*, technology such as a typewriter, a fan, and a tram sets the pace of life, allowing the characters to dwell on their emotions and decisions. In *Life in a...Metro*, technology is omnipresent in the form of mobile phones, laptops, elevators, and radio broadcasts. These objects mark an accelerated life that mediates and distorts life and relationships. Therefore, the city's technological advancement and infrastructure reflect and reproduce its temporal anxiety, where constant connectivity often leads to emotional alienation.

Finally, both films critique society. Ray critiques rigid traditions and moral adaptation in a changing society. Basu, however, critiques the illusion of progress and emotional fulfilment under the mask of a neoliberal society, exposing the real face of consumerist modernity. While at the end, *Mahanagar* locates hope in personal agency and evolving relationships, *Life in a...Metro* offers a more ambivalent narrative of urban life, where agency exists but it undermines structural precarity and emotional fatigue. Thus, the temporal contrast in both films showcases how Indian cities have been imagined differently in cinema across two eras. Ray's post-independence Calcutta is a space of tension due to rapid growth and transformation. Basu's post-liberalization Mumbai is a city in emotional dissolution - a space of motion without progress, connection without commitment. Therefore, the two films offer a spatial understanding of an evolving chronotype that captures the dreams, disillusionment and affective intensities of their time.

## 5.7 Conclusion

While tracing the history of urban spaces and their imaginative impact, Sherry Simon reminds us of the many connections that have been made between urban space and its power over the imagination in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Simon, 2011). Here, the city is intimate and oppressive, yet emancipatory, a lived space that resembles the spatial triad of Henry Lefebvre, in which private and public spaces are entangled. The role the city plays in shaping the human imagination and innovation has greater implications. Critics like Chidananda Dasgupta have complained about his filmmaking, 'the Calcutta of the burning trams, the communal riots, refugees, unemployment, rising prices and food shortages, yet to me, Calcutta seems to be a constant presence in Ray's cinema' (Dasgupta, 1994, p. 108). This estrangement and isolation of characters are at the core of modern cities, just as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock navigates the city through his inner dilemma and isolation. The city has a greater impact on the lives of the subjects who live in it, just as Aarti cannot be imagined without Calcutta, which flows and feeds into her identity, 'making new' the old and translating lives to fit into the city, like puzzles fitting into their boxes, and making spaces for the new ones. Ray's cinematic oeuvre captures the translational fabric of the city. The city enables the translation of prevalent values and creates a contemplative ground for the battle of spaces, real and imagined, and between stasis and development. While Mumbai, in *Life in a...Metro*, presents everything from a post-liberalization point of view, it brings the values of ambition and hyper-mobility that coexist with a deep sense of personal alienation.

Urban spaces in these films are far removed from being passive. They mediate identities, power structures, gender dynamics, and emotional cartographies. *Life in a...Metro* also makes space for compressed time and emotional rupture, engulfing the contrasting temporalities, which reflect broader socioeconomic paradigms. Yet, both films are united by a common thread- an attempt to humanize the narrative, bring out the complexities, and in doing so contradict the experience of city life. Thus, inferring from the analysis drawn in this paper, it can be stated that spaces are relational, fluid, and are imbued with power. Both narratives cast a light on the shifting meanings of mobility, intimacy, and agency within the modern Indian metropolis. Thus, between the tramline of Calcutta and the traffic jams of Mumbai, urban spaces in Indian cinema offer not just a visual record of spatial dynamics but also a critical lens through which the city's socio-cultural and political textures are ceaselessly re-envisioned.

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## Chapter 6

# Reimagining Kolkata: Subaltern Narratives and the Colonial Urban Dystopia in *Kalol* Magazine's Literature

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### Abstract

*Kalol* (1923-1929), a prominent literary magazine of Bengal published under the joint editorship of Dineshranjan Das and Gokulchandra Nag, became a mouthpiece for challenging the dominant Bhadrakolok hegemony in the Bengal Presidency. As the colonial capital and centre of modernisation, Kolkata was both a place of hope and frustration for young migrants arriving from mofussil towns in search of better lives. However, the Bhadrakolok account, disseminated by the city's bourgeoisie, tended to overlook the realities experienced by the underbelly. *Kalol*, as a cultural and literary movement in Bengal, portrayed Kolkata as a city of stark contrasts, defined by fragmented spaces and marginalised lives. Drawing on Lefebvre's conception of space as a political construct and Certeau's framework of tactics versus strategies, this paper analyses how *Kalol*'s stories, poems, and essays expose the city's "third spaces" of resistance, where marginalised clerks, labourers, and migrants navigate oppressive urban hierarchies. By closely reading the texts that appeared in *Kalol*, this article examines how the cityscape of Kolkata becomes a place where illusions of progress are subverted by economic exploitation, poverty, and the erosion of human dignity. These urban spaces in *Kalol* stand not only for physiographic locations but also for psychological topographies that bring to the fore the desperation of clerks confined to demeaning jobs, labourers exploited in industrial areas, and families suffering from squalor and uncertainty. This portrayal underpins the attempt to constitute Kolkata as a fractured entity, where the relentless pace of modernisation left its residents in disconnection, disillusionment, and confinement within its dystopian boundaries. This paper will trace the contours of an uncompromised critique of *Kalol* in reimagining Kolkata as a dystopian space that reveals the human cost of colonial modernity and rapid urbanisation.

**Keywords:** Urban Dystopia, Elite Hegemony, Spatial Politics, Colonial Urbanism, Resistance, Subaltern Agency, Fragmented Cityscapes.

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## 6.1 Introduction

Kolkata, the city of joy, once served as the political capital of Colonial India. During colonial times, it catered to the largest population of educated novice Bengali middle-class. Bengal was the region where the wealth of the Presidency was most concentrated. The British presence had left the deepest impact here, reshaping land tenures, revolutionising education, and establishing the largest city in Asia. As Das (1990) observes, "When the Raj sought to impart Western education, Calcutta was the experimental site" (p. 15; see also pp. 15–26). The *Bhadralok* class, as defined by J.H. Broomfield (1968) was not just a socioeconomic division; rather, it was deeply embedded in Bengal's cultural dynamics. Education emerged as a defining characteristic of *Bhadralok* status, particularly education conducted in the English language, which facilitated access to university colleges in Kolkata and subsequent white-collar employment. As noted in a 1928 report by the Bengal Government, "The school is the one gate to the society of the *Bhadralok*" (Broomfield, 1968, p.8). The early 20th century's expansion of education, evidenced by the proliferation of schools, colleges, and universities, resulted in an excess of degree-holders confronted with diminishing employment opportunities. Advocacy, once a bastion of *Bhadralok* self-reliance, became unaffordable due to overcrowding, and teaching offered poverty rather than prestige. Provincial reorganisation and anti-terrorist policies deliberately severed Eastern Bengal's youth from agrarian or artisanal support, while state surveillance suppressed dissent. The result was a burgeoning proletariat of educated unemployed, concentrated in Kolkata - the unchallenged epicentre of Bengali political, economic, and cultural life - as well as secondary towns like Dhaka.

Meanwhile, national consciousness had spread significantly across all parts of India. However, the burgeoning sense of nationalism coincided with the simultaneous emergence of regional identities. It came to fruition not only in Bengal but also among politically aware people in many other parts of India. Therefore, there existed a distinct, if not necessarily intrinsically contradictory, nationalist and regional split. Political consciousness in Bengal up to the 1910s was imbued with an intense consciousness of superiority, and Bengalis tended to look down upon themselves as politically more advanced than those in the rest of India. Bengal was the keeper of Indian nationalism, taking the lead in political discussion and activity in the area. But this superior Bengali perspective fell in the 1920s (Broomfield, 1968; Aloysius, 2020).

The consequences of India's Non-Cooperation Movement (1921) were a wide gulf of despair: political aspirations were shattered by a sudden disconnection, while economic uncertainty deepened, culminating in a crisis of the system. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das's founding of the Swarajya Party in 1923 had initially created hope through legislative action and election enthusiasm; however, Das's untimely death in 1925 deflated this enthusiasm, leaving Bengal in despair. The despair went beyond the political realm and was in fact an economic collapse. The transfer of the imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911, together with the economic pressures generated by Britain's wartime demands, contributed to a growing sense of political and economic marginalisation in Bengal (Chakraborty, 1990; Chatterjee, 1997). War industries' interference, excessive taxation, and static entrepreneurial activity led to the economic anarchy that contemporary eyewitnesses testified to. The breakdown of the boycott-based economy of Non-Cooperation further ensnared financial uncertainty, leaving Bengal's youth

stranded in a world of broken dreams. Meanwhile, a demographic crisis was in the process of unfolding.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were the most transformative years for Kolkata. By the end of the 1920s, the intelligentsia of the city had ballooned to include the first generation of migrants from rural districts. Newcomers to Kolkata, most of whom came from East Bengal, were always much more integrated into village life than established citizens. They brought rural-urban dialogue to the creative works produced in the city, reminding one of the countryside and embracing ambivalence. The influx of these rural migrants had remade the cultural map of the city. The experiences and perceptions of these migrants brought a new zeal to the cultural fabric of Kolkata, which is otherwise dominated by intellectuals and upper-class elites. Rural distress added to this urban influx: malaria epidemics, agrarian decline, and cultural desolation of village existence clashed with the magnetism of Kolkata's modernity. The surrounding cities with factories promised survival, but yielded crowded bustees (informal, densely populated urban settlements or slums) and exploitative work. Although unquestioned after World War I (1914-1918), Kolkata's supremacy was contradictory; it represented a national revival but embodied the pathologies of the era: unemployment, inflation, and religious confusion.

About the same time, as the industrial revolution increased production efficiency, urban areas received the influx of a large percentage of agricultural labor, creating a pool of surplus population. These potentially rebellious unemployed and displaced workers needed to be depressurized... bourgeois leaders had to conceal their class interests, which sharply conflicted with the interest of the populace at large. (Miyoshi, 1993, p.731)

By the 1920s, the concept of Bengal had undergone a radical change from its earlier understanding. The entire scenario changed dramatically since the Swadeshi movement, which emerged as a response to the partition of Bengal in 1905. This socioeconomic fissure was bound to recast the gender relations. Postponed marriage for the educated elite made education for women obligatory (*strisikkha*, a form of female education aimed at producing morally refined and domestically skilled wives), rearranging the *andarmahal* (women's quarters within the household) as arenas for incremental emancipation. However, for women who came into the city as students, employees, or immigrants from rural destitution, urban opportunities usually meant confinement within new hierarchies of danger and exploitation.

The aftermath of the Non-Cooperation Movement generated a climate of political uncertainty and economic strain in Bengal, prompting new ways of perceiving Kolkata's urban environment. Rather than appearing as an unquestioned emblem of colonial progress and modernity, the city increasingly came to be represented as a fragmented and unequal space shaped by social exclusion, bureaucratic control, and the everyday struggles of its inhabitants (Das, 1990; Chattopadhyay, 2005). Henri Lefebvre's injunction that "social space is a social product" (1974/1991) is our point of departure: colonial Kolkata embodied capitalism's contradictions in geographically segregated spaces—*Bhadralok* enclaves and bustee slums, imperial offices and exploitative factories. It was not a tabula rasa, but what Lefebvre called "abstract space": a regime in which power (British colonial and *Bhadralok* elite) strategically mapped territory to maximise control and extraction.

In the background of the then-prevailing circumstances of political disillusionment, economic stagnation, and urban degeneration, *Kalol* magazine (1923–1929) appeared, voicing the language of the disillusioned, the marginalised, and the rebel to map this dystopian spatial order. This study contends that *Kalol's* discourse transcends superficial visual rebellion. The *Kalolians* charted the dystopian landscapes of Kolkata from a subaltern point of view, demonstrating how colonial modernity distorted space, labour, and gender, fragmenting Bengali society. Editors Dineshranjan Das and Gokulchandra Nag utilised literature to reveal how Kolkata's progress depended on the fragmentation of subaltern lives. This paper aligns with Michel de Certeau's dialectic of strategies versus tactics (1984) where *Bhadralok* elites and colonial state-imposed strategies like zoning, surveillance and cultural hegemony. *Kalol* documented subaltern tactics - the everyday acts of survival by clerks, migrants, and widows who "walked the city" to reclaim agency.

The selection of *Kalol* magazine as the main corpus for this study is both strategically imperative as well as historio-graphically justified. Despite other coeval periodicals available for perusal, *Kalol* differentiated itself by virtue of its overt editorial aim in opposing then-existing literary and societal norms. It became the main forum for a later wave of literary aspirants - most of whom were immigrants facing the vicissitudes of urban life. The magazine cultivated a literary landscape that redirected attention from the bourgeois domestic spaces traditionally associated with the *Bhadralok* to more public and marginal locations such as footpaths, mess houses, and bureaucratic institutions. Through this shift in spatial focus, it foregrounded the everyday realities of socially and economically marginalised groups, creating a counter-narrative to dominant elite representations. The selection and arrangement of these texts suggest a conscious engagement with alternative social experiences and perspectives, contributing to a broader challenge to established literary and cultural hierarchies.

As such, its selection is fundamentally intertwined with the magazine's inherent identity; its pages served as a purposeful as well as cohesive discursive "Thirdspace" in which dystopian circumstances of colonial Kolkata were not only alluded to but systematically disclosed and theorised in diverse forms like fiction, poetry, and essays. A study of *Kalol* provides a carefully constructed but real window into the shared consciousness of a disenchanting subaltern urban population at a moment of profound socio-political upheaval. These narratives transformed marginal sites into zones of insurgent knowledge, exposing the "real-and-imagined" (Soja) experience of colonial urbanism. With such a Lefebvre-Certeau Soja model, the article has examined how *Kalol* revealed elite spatial strategies, listed subaltern spatial tactics, and reclaimed the city as a space of radical potential.

## 6.2 The City as Palimpsest

The intentional focus of educational spending on the privileged not only widened the socioeconomic divide but also sustained a cycle of exclusion, perpetuating the poor in a state of deprivation with limited social mobility and political participation. "The *Bhadralok* redefined social power and authority by defying social norms and at the same time clung to the criteria of hierarchical social ranking". (Roychowdhury, 2014, p.6) Thus, the image of the *Bhadralok* at the turn of the society became very clear in Bengal's context –

a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture, and its history. (Broomfield, 1968, p.13)

The power structure that was set up during colonial rule had a big impact on how Indians thought about their country. The idea of a nation-state with clear borders began to take hold as the British strengthened their hold on the subcontinent.

As British legal, administrative, and educational systems were put in place, the people living in the colonies became more and more aware of the idea of a unified nation-state. The borders that separated British India, along with new ways of governing and communicating, helped different groups feel like they were all part of the same thing. While the elites often embraced this new political identity, the concept failed to permeate other sections of society, leading to the failure of a unified national consciousness among the masses. "It is generally recognised that the intelligentsia were central to the rise of nationalism in the colonial territories". (Anderson, 1983, p.116) According to Sekhar Bandopadhyay, as quoted in G. Aloysius (2020), "When the nationalist movement arose" the subaltern section of society "perceived it as a Bhadrakolok affair, antagonistic to their own interests, and stood apart from it" (p. 7).

For the *Bhadralok*, nationalism became a tool to advance their own social and political power, but it remained an exclusive project, detached from the lived experiences of the underprivileged classes, who worked under oppressive conditions for the zamindars and wealthy landlords. These labourers, many of whom belonged to lower castes, were subjected to harsh economic exploitation and social marginalisation. The writers of the *Kalol* magazine thus tried to bridge this disillusionment and despair through their writings; they not only portrayed the forgotten heroes of the nationalistic movements but also highlighted the exploitation of these heroes in the hands of elitist mainstream nationalism in the city capital Kolkata.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a number of important spatial and cultural changes in Kolkata that led to the formation of a significant and identifiable body of Bengali literature, paintings, plays, films, as well as literary and art criticism that dealt with various notions of nationalism and modern Bengali identity and claimed the city as its own. (Chattopadhyay, 2005, p. 5)

The *Kalol* group was a prominent advocate of nationalism, and the narratives and novels produced by its authors frequently encapsulated the implicit conflicts and socio-political transformations instigated by the national movement. Although *Kalol* writers' literature primarily focused on societal issues, personal dilemmas, and the intricacies of urban life, their works inadvertently reflected the zeitgeist of the time, as nationalist fervour was pervasive throughout the country. An illustrative example of this is found in the novel "Michil" by Premendra Mitra.

A village boy, within the small confines of rural life, I dreamt of serving the Nation. Sitting at home, I have spun the charkha, dressed in a single piece of cloth woven by my own hands, I have endured harsh cold winters, thinking that I was practising austerity for the country. I have gone late at night in groups, encouraged by rural organisation efforts, to cut down bamboo groves in others' gardens and pour kerosene into others' ponds, and

it's not as if I was not thrashed and castigated for that.

Then, I came to Kolkata with the intent of going to jail, carried by the zeal of the Non-Cooperation Movement. I met Sachin in jail.

About twenty-five of us slept in a long room (Mitra, 2020, pp. 9–10; all translations from Bengali are the author's unless otherwise stated).

The Bengali *Bhadralok* elite's nationalist project was fundamentally discordant with the material conditions of rural migrants moving to colonial Kolkata. Enthralled by the possibility of belonging to an integrated anti-colonial movement, these young men were instead confronted with what Ranajit Guha (1998) describes as the dualistic colonialism of the bourgeoisie, who "professed and practised democracy at home" but uncompromisingly exercised "autocracy" in India. (p.4) Their path from rural residences to the exploitative periphery of the capital reveals the insincerity of the *Bhadralok's* egalitarian rhetoric. According to Guha, "The destruction of the colonial state was never a part of their project". (p.5) The circumstances of these migrants were then structurally obliterated: not only did they fall outside nationalist historiography, but they were systematically erased from its fundamental account. The *Bhadralok's* self-aggrandising narratives generated through personal memoirs, institutional documents, and reformist writings erased subaltern realities in the interests of elite hegemony. *Kallos's* literary productions reveal this epistemic violence by tracing the barren urban landscape of these migrants. The cityscape reveals a high level of destitution, with crumbling infrastructure and poor roads. The poverty here is visible, meaning that it is not localised in specific places or hidden behind attempts at modernisation.

He has a widowed mother back in the village and a few younger siblings. With great hope, his widowed mother, having deprived herself of all comforts, likely sent him to Kolkata to study. However, the boy never returned home. He does not even send any word as to whether he is still alive..... My mother is starving at home, and here I am serving the nation – quite ironic, is not it? Don't you think so, Ravi da?..... But then, every son of Bengal's mothers has already perished, Ravi da. In comparison, how small is my mother's sorrow? (Mitra, 2020, p.27)

The ubiquity of poverty in Kolkata is such that it pervades every corner of life and, in effect, erases the lines between public and private spaces. This pervasiveness is a characteristic of poverty that shapes the vision and experience of the city for everyone who lives there, making it an inescapable part of everyday life. Kolkata has become synonymous with the promise of "Third World" futures and is a form of unfulfilled modernity. The city's failure to emerge as a classic modern city makes it a paradigm of the failures that some developing cities have undergone or might face. It is a yardstick by which other cities that have succeeded in overcoming such failures are measured.

Such accounts also reveal the sacrifices of people in pursuance of the nationalist cause in the region. People were shown to be donating their properties, savings, and material resources to the fighting funds of the revolution without hesitation, sometimes sacrificing their interests for the benefit of the nation. This portrayal of selflessness and generosity further highlights the fact that the struggle for independence was a universal movement in the sense that it was carried out by people who believed in the righteousness of the cause. In such stories, material riches fade into the background in favour of a greater commitment to freedom from one's own nation's greater

good, which is more than enough to justify many sacrifices that involve relinquishing property for the cause. Under colonial rule, the *Bhadralok* elite's ambitions were inherently shaped by oppression dynamics. Their primary goal was to displace the colonial ruling class, which they viewed as the oppressor of one nation over another. This historical context dictated that their pursuit of power had to be framed in universal terms, and this universal aspiration took the form of nationalism. Initially, the subjugated bourgeoisie expressed their desire for power in the language of the colonisers, making their vision of hegemony inseparable from the nationalist discourse. To advance their position, the bourgeoisie had to present their class interests as representative of the entire nation's well-being. To do so, they portrayed themselves as the unifying force capable of transforming a fragmented society into a cohesive nation. The only way to realise their hegemonic goals was to construct their aspirations as the collective interests of all members of society. Thus, nationalism became the ideal vehicle for framing their ambitions, presenting their desires as aligned with the common good and as the logical, rational path to self-determination and freedom from colonial rule. "However much the Swadeshi *Bhadralok* wanted the movement to take on a popular character, the gulf between the *Bhadralok* leaders and the masses lower down the social scale could not be bridged". (A. Roy, 2020, p.435)

### 6.3 Abstract Spaces, Concrete Sufferings

*Kallos* unemployed writers, socially stigmatised "spoilt boys" and economically bruised by the shortage, translated their corporeal experiences of precarity into literary excavations of colonial Kolkata's abstract space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). While the *Bhadralok* elite narrated the city as a site of nationalist progress, *Kallos* writers mapped its dystopian underbelly: the psychological and material wastelands in which unemployed graduates were victims of capitalism's "strategic" order (Certeau, 1984). Despite their education and potential, they were relegated to survival at the margins, far removed from the influential circles of *Bhadralok* leadership that directed Bengal's political discourse. One of the leading writers associated with *Kallos* – Premendra Mitra, ... once wrote in a letter (originally in Bengali) to Achintyakumar Sengupta (see Sengupta, 1950).

Right now, I cannot manage to gather the fee... Send me ten takas within five days. I know that you will do what you can. I'm relying on you... If I take a complete leave, what will I eat? One thing I know well is that poverty can dry up all forms of idealism. I don't want to become rich at all, but I don't have the strength to struggle with poverty and create literature simultaneously. (1950, pp.239 – 240)

The same tone has reverberated in his Bengali short story "Sankranti." From his own mess-house deprivations, Mitra plots a protagonist's collapse from shame to opium suicide, exposing how unemployment deconstructs identity under colonial modernity. Here, the "third space" of the "desolate house" is an archive of middle-class fracture: a letter from a previous occupant revealing the cyclical violence of poverty.

From beneath the blanket, Akhil could hear everything around him. Downstairs, the maid at the mess had once again started her daily quarrel with the cook. The irritable middle-aged gentleman in the adjacent seat was rattling his phlegm-filled, monotonous cough that made one's ears ring. In between these, came the sounds of a student in the next

room reciting geometry aloud, the cawing uproar of a flock of crows over the ash heap behind the mess, and the metallic wails of pots and pans as the angry maid, venting her fury on the utensils, created a chorus of misery that reached Akhil's ears. (Mitra, 2007, p.312)

Mitra's genius lies in finding a balance between raw realism and imaginative resonance, refusing to aestheticize despair. The issues of Kolkata are not so much because it failed to become modern but because it failed to modernise. Unlike other colonial cities, which benefitted from modernisation, Kolkata failed because it could not deliver the economic and architectural benefits which modernisation had promised. The city has a high incidence of poverty, as evidenced by the deterioration of infrastructure and the deplorable state of the streets. Poverty is tangible, indicating that it is not confined to specific areas or masked by progress in modernisation. This marks a difference from other cities that attempt to present a more modern and sanitised image by confining poverty to specific areas.

"As in any other Indian city, the immigrants found in Calcutta poverty as severe and dehumanizing as in the villages". (Chakraborty, S.C. 1990, p.4) Likewise, Sarojkumar Roychoudhury's Bengali short story "Duniyadari" maps Rangalal's ruin—a B.A. graduate shunning clerk-work but driven to it by necessity.

Uncle said, "Damn jobs, Ranga—you should go into business. One of my brothers-in-law made a fortune selling *haritaki* (myrobalan)—he's a millionaire now, owns four houses on Chowringhee, and has two motorcars at home."

A millionaire! Ranga's eyes widened in astonishment.

This was life! Racing through the streets of Kolkata in a motorcar, a radiant, beautiful wife beside him, her veil slipping off now and then in the breeze, her saree's end fluttering in the wind... (2011, p.60)

Rangalal's dream of starting a successful business venture and crafting a vibrant life in colonial Kolkata is immediately thwarted as soon as he visits the Dick Tomson Company office on Clive Street. The description of the street is a stark, unadorned reflection of the disenchantment that often accompanies the urban migrant's dreams. Rather than symbolising opportunity and progress, Kolkata reveals the harsh material conditions and bureaucratic indifference that define the everyday experiences of those who arrive in the city with hopes of social and economic mobility. "Clive Street. Motors whizzed by with a constant whooshing sound; there was no way to cross the road. On the footpath, everyone hurried busily, with no moment to waste". (Roychowdhury, 2011, p.60)

Rangalal's coercive conversion from a would-be entrepreneur to a badly paid clerk may be understood through the framework of "Thirdspace" (Soja) - lived and struggled space where objective structures and subjective experiences meet. Having dropped his plan to start a business in Kolkata, he agrees to accept a clerical job paying him 40 rupees per month—a salary barely sufficient for his basic needs. When questioned by his sister-in-law about his meals, Rangalal brusquely replies that he survives on water during the evenings and at night. Despite being grossly underpaid and overworked, resignation is not an option because his family is entirely dependent on him. This financial instability is exacerbated by his family's decision to marry him off. Rangalal's

circumstance serves as a reminder of the predicament that many educated individuals in colonial Bengal faced when their qualifications and skills failed to guarantee a dignified life. He follows de Certeau's "tactics of the weak" (1984) by wandering on the street and through ultimate compromise. He is forced to lead a life of unspoken torment as a result of being torn between his family obligations and systemic economic exploitation. This serves as a symbol of widespread disillusionment with the promises of modern education and urban mobility. Unlike Mitra's suicidal hero, Rangalal lives on after sacrificing his principles. Lefebvre's claim that colonial space "reproduces social relations" (1974/1991) as a result of economic necessity is supported by this hollow victory.

Moreover, the spatial violence associated with colonial urbanism, as illustrated in *Kalol*, exhibited profound gendered characteristics. The abstract spatial framework of the city instituted specific hierarchies for women, thereby reconstituting rather than dismantling the patriarchal structures of the *andarmahal* within the emergent urban economy. For the educated *Bhadramahila*, the urban environment provided a limited route to emancipation via *Strisikkha*, yet this often-necessitated adherence to the politics of respectability and new forms of dependency. In contrast, for poorer women who migrated as widows, students, or labourers, the urban landscape represented an arena of increased vulnerability, wherein they maneuvered between the exploitative demands of industrial labour and the oppressive moral scrutiny imposed by both colonial and indigenous elite societies. Their mobility was constrained by survival strategies that were distinctly different from those employed by their male counterparts - managing not only economic deprivation but also the constant threat of sexual exploitation and social ostracism. The narratives of these women, embedded in *Kalol's* expansive narrative universe, enrich the overall understanding of a city that fractured communities along both class and gender dimensions. These stories dispense with redemption and portray unemployment as systemic erasure. Pavement dwellers and job seekers are not marginal but central to *Kalol's* reimagined city: human junkyards where the promise of nationalist uplift turns bitter into expendability.

#### **6.4 Tactics of Survival**

Gandhiji led a nationwide mass movement combined with the Russian social revolution spearheaded by communists, which initiated the spread of communist and socialist ideas in India. Subsequently, the impact of the non-cooperation movement and the Russian Revolution further solidified public awareness. The individualist characteristics of the 19th century gave way to a broader social consciousness among the young intellectuals of this era. Youth became aware of the harsh realities faced by the poor through their own financial hardships. Thus, the scope of narrative literature expanded during the *Kalol* Age. The early literature of this period, marked by mass consciousness and a supposed communist stance, largely reflected a middle-class youth mentality and a form of sentimental philanthropy. Nazrul's 1922 poem "Samyabadi" exemplified this trend: "I sing the song of equality/ Where all barriers and differences have merged into one."

In the Bengali short story "Swami" by Bhabataran Basu, Bikas' progression from Swadeshi idealism to bleak capitulation epitomises the structural betrayal engineered by *the Bhadrak* elite. His comrades' detachment in his "path of self-reliance" culminates in a bitter revelation: how

colonial Bengal permits only one mode of subsistence, servitude. As he retreats to his sickbed, Bikas recognises the *Bhadralok's* Faustian pact with the empire:

Despite knowing the country's condition, every Bengali, without hesitation, invests all they have to educate their descendants in servitude rather than providing them with any skills for self-sustenance. Instead of opposing this dishonourable education imposed on their people, they indirectly endorse it, and the consequences are now apparent in the ongoing plight of the nation. (Basu, 2007, p.39)

Bikas' disappointment exposes the *Bhadralok's* involvement in colonial systems. Their stake in "dishonourable education" (Basu, 2007, p.39) and English-medium education that replicated clerical servitude revealed a Faustian choice on whether to provide subaltern futures as sacrifices to maintain elite privilege. It is not indifference but an active complicity of "strategic oppression" (Certeau), the structural relegation of subalterns to zones of expendability while claiming equality. His father-in-law, a zamindar, also embodies this complicity. He starves his tenants to fund foreign education and performs hollow philanthropy ("donating to the New Zealand Feminine Fund"), weaponising wealth as spectacle ("feasts of peas and beans") (Basu, 2007, p.39). His surrender, "I will have to follow that path" (Basu, 2007, p.40), is not defeat but epistemic rupture. It exposes the violence of "dominance without hegemony" where the elites profess nationalism while reproducing the very structures that enslave their people. (Guha, 1998)

Satinath Bhaduri's Bengali narrative "Jhapot" focuses on an indigent clerk who gets by on a meagre income of 30 takas per month. "They therefore work for low wages, under conditions dangerous to their health, and most often on a part-time, early-morning, or graveyard-shift basis, when offices, hospitals, universities, shopping malls, airports and train stations are empty". (Verges & Bohrer, 2021, p.1) Despite a lifetime of diligent saving and careful spending, his financial reserves were utterly depleted by the overwhelming costs of his family's medical treatments. This narrative reveals his intensifying desperation, aggravated by a system which turns a blind eye to his plight and preys on his vulnerability. A physician who is motivated by financial gain and privileges wealthier patients heartlessly refuses to provide care for the clerk's suffering wife and son without immediate payment. This is not just a personal tragedy but a harsh denunciation of a healthcare system that capitalises on human life.

Before the night ended, he rushed to the doctor's house again. After waiting for a long time, he saw the doctor, but the doctor did not come. The doctor mentioned that unless the remaining visit fees were paid, he would not come to see the patient... Driving his vehicle, he went out to visit a wealthy person's house. (Bhaduri, 2007, p.407)

The pervasiveness of poverty in Kolkata is so thorough that it permeates every moment of life, effectively breaking down the distinctions between public and private spaces. The ubiquity of poverty affects how all inhabitants see and interact with the city, such that it becomes a persistent reality in life.

Thus, Kolkata has come to symbolise the futures of the Third World, a specific form of unfulfilled modernity. The city's failure to achieve a standard modern form renders it a case study of the problems that many developing urban complexes might encounter. It is used as a standard by which other cities that have successfully overcome similar problems can be measured. "In most

of the pertinent urban literature, the categories of black/white, coloniser/colonised remain uncontested". (Chattopadhyay, 2005, p.7)

## 6.5 Conclusion

"She is the 'primate city', the great magnet for survival-seekers from one of the poorest and most populous segments of the subcontinent". (Chaudhuri, 1990, Introduction) Kolkata's problems are not just because it did not become modern, but also because its modernisation attempts failed. Other colonial cities succeeded in modernisation, but Kolkata did not because it could not fulfil the economic and architectural potential that modernisation had to offer. "The earliest views of Kolkata in the early eighteenth century are all depictions of the port and fort of Kolkata, two symbols of emerging British dominance in Bengal". (Chattopadhyay, 2005, p.46) This study argues that the literary work of *Kalol* magazine is a revolutionary reimagination of colonial Kolkata - not as a signifier of nationalist modernity, but as a dystopian urban presence marked by spatial violence, economic disillusionment, and epistemic erasure. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's discursive theory of space as socially constructed, Michel de Certeau's account of everyday resistance, and Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace, this research has shown how *Kalol* was a discursive space in and through which the subaltern lives of the city clerks, workers, widows, migrants could be written outside hegemonic *Bhadralok* or colonial narratives.

Within the context of this scholarship, Kolkata is not only presented as a failed experiment in modernity but also as a fractured topography in which colonial extraction and elite complicity rework social and spatial relations. The built space of the city, its mess houses, walkways, industrial spaces, and administrative routes actively construct the affective and material experience of systemic marginalisation. The tales explored here deconstruct the nationalist myth of mobility by exposing how educated subalterns were co-opted into a system that reproduced servitude under the aegis of civilisational advancement. "Sweltering metropolis of squalor and wretchedness, cauldron of agitation and political violence, Calcutta seems to fit almost anybody's description of the perennially explosive Third World city" (Chatterjee, 1997, p.183). Through the revelations of spatial strategies of survival and the nuances of daily negotiation, *Kalol* makes an important literary and political intervention. The authors recover histories and subjectivities erased by hegemonic historical discourses, thus making a "junkyard episteme"—a counter-archive comprised of memory and resistance, underwritten by the lived experience of the people to whom the promises of colonial modernity were never fulfilled.

In this project, *Kalol* not only documents the lives of marginalised urban existence under colonial pressures but also sets down necessary pathways for theorising postcolonial urbanism through the lens of the disenfranchised. The legacy of these narratives requires a rethinking of how the futures of the city are imagined, remembered, and contested through peripheral narratives and by those historically excluded from the dominant narrative.

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## Chapter 7

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# Walking, Writing and Resisting the City: Spatial Tactics and Postcolonial Reimaginings in Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) as a complex meditation on space, memory, and decolonial resistance. It analyses the novel's nonlinear narrative and its shifting portrayals of urban and natural landscapes and argues that Pariat constructs what Doreen Massey terms a "thrown-togetherness" of place. Her articulation of space is chaotic yet generative, marked by vitality and multiplicity. The study explores how characters inhabit postcolonial terrains through practices such as walking and dwelling at the margins, and how these acts become modes of negotiating identity. It also contends that Pariat's fragmented storytelling mirrors the fractured condition of postcolonial subjectivity. Thus, it also opens pathways to alternative epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Keywords:** postcolonial literature, spatial theory, decolonial ecology, Indigenous epistemology, walking, place-making.

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## 7.1 Introduction: Stories Like Trees

Some stories slowly grow on the readers like trees, branching and meandering. Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) tells one such story. It branches to various time periods and jumps across transcontinents. However, there is an underlying connection between the myriad stories and lives. At a preliminary reading, the novel may seem like a historical puzzle. It is populated by multiple characters scattered across different continents and living across centuries. We meet Shai, a young Khasi woman in Shillong, we meet Carl Linnaeus in Sweden, we also meet Evelyn, who is a budding British biologist in the early 20th century, and we also meet the famous botanist Goethe. But amidst all this cacophony, the characters engage with similar questions of how the space we inhabit defines us. This chapter argues that Pariat's novel provides decolonial spatial poetics. Through walking and ecological relationality, the text challenges and subverts dominant ideas. It puts forth an alternative way of thinking whose foundation is indigenous knowledge. While the fragmented narratives may not be linear, the approach to knowing and being is holistic. Pariat's narrative resists colonial cartographies and capitalist temporalities. Her work reimagines space as relational and unfinished. It is ethically inhabited and not conquered. This chapter analyses how Pariat's characters navigate urban and rural landscapes and reclaim them by improvising tactics and generating subtle forms of resistance. The chapter will engage with these tactics across the postcolonial city of Shillong, the forest as counter-world, and the distant village of Mawmalang.

## 7.2 Spatial Theory and Postcolonial Studies

The relationship between space and power is an important area of study in postcolonial theory. Henri Lefevre's groundbreaking work *The Production of Space* (1991) puts forward that space is not just an empty container but a social product. Space is also reproduced by relations of power. Lefevre's triadic model, consisting of conceived space (representations of space), perceived space (spatial practices), and lived space (spaces of representation), helps one understand how colonial and postcolonial subjects navigate these spaces. Michel de Certeau carried Lefevre's work forward. In his book, *Certeau* (1984) states how common people engage with spatial orders imposed on them. He uses the concepts of 'strategies' used by state institutions and 'tactics' improvised by the common people to resist. Subjects of regimes and colonies have often subverted using tactics. Doreen Massey's *For Space* (2005) challenges a linear understanding of both space and time. She understands space as a sphere of multiplicity. Spaces are not created in a vacuum. They also emerge from the intersection of multiple trajectories. This multiplicity is reflected in Pariat's book. We look at Shillong through a multi-layered lens.

The study of ecology has changed over the past two decades. Newer epistemologies challenge both colonial and capitalist extractionist notions of ecology. Arturo Escobar called it "decolonial ecology" (2018). Decolonial scholars and eco-feminists make a case for focusing on indigenous knowledge systems (Shiva, 1988, 38-57). Eurocentric scientific knowledge has tended to objectify and control nature. Many recent scholars have advanced notions of relationality and reciprocity with nature (Simpson, 2017; Whyte, 2018). They advocate returning to the land and to one's roots for knowledge, and they regard nature as a source of pedagogy. Such perspectives can help us understand how Pariat's novel makes a case for indigenous ways of knowing and

living in the world. Contemporary scholarship on ecology has looked to nature as a teacher (Kimmerer, 2013, 55-60). Nature is not merely to be objectified. Students of nature must cultivate a relationship with it. This resonates with Janice Pariat's critique of Linnaean taxonomy and aligns more with Evelyn's relational approaches to botany.

Urban studies have also emerged as a critical field of enquiry in recent times. How we look at our cities must change with our shifting priorities. Many scholars have critiqued the Eurocentric understanding of cities (Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2006). Abdou Maliq Simone (2004) argued that people are a crucial part of urban infrastructure, improvising new networks to survive in cities. They often bypass bureaucratic structures that overlook the marginalised. These practices infuse cities with new meanings and values.

Shillong in Janice Pariat's book can be situated in these multiple frameworks. Shillong is not just a post-colonial town. But place-making has ensured that Shillong shapes its residents the same way its residents and their changing priorities shape Shillong. The city's contemporary character has been shaped by colonial enterprise. Shillong was the capital of the Chief Commissionership of Assam. This pushed the hilly city to the centre. The spaces in the city became commercial and reshaped by colonial imagination. Slowly, people from neighbouring places started trickling in for jobs. Both geography and demography underwent a transformation. Shillong gradually absorbed neighbouring villages to accommodate its growing population. When Meghalaya became a separate state in 1972, Shillong underwent another wave of transformation. The rights of indigenous groups became a prominent issue. While the state grappled with the entry of people and capital from outside, the indigenous way of life faced multiple challenges. The city and its people found themselves caught in an impossible dilemma – to continue tradition and to partake in modernity.

### **7.3 Methodology: Walking with the Text**

In this section, the novel *Everything the Light Touches* will undergo a spatial reading. The paper will pay close attention to how different spaces, both physical and psychological, are portrayed. As a reader, I will closely 'walk' the text. For Certeau, "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language" (1984, p. 97). In a similar way, this paper will engage with Pariat's narrative. Through the act of walking, the characters reclaim spaces and infuse them with new meaning. Such acts provide windows of tactical resistance to oppressive structures. But it is not only walking that manages this; many other physical acts, such as hugging a tree or staying beneath one, also reflect how spaces are seen in a new light in a fast-growing city. At the same time, these physical acts show how residents resist such reconfigurations that are an onslaught on nature.

The analysis will focus on three spatial dimensions – it will look at the physical space of Shillong, a postcolonial city; it will look at the forest, which has become a site of contestation; and, thirdly, it will look at the village of Mawmalang, which has become a site of resistance. This paper will not try to solve the novel's narrative puzzle. Rather, it will walk alongside Pariat's characters, observing the ways they resist and create new knowledge. Such an approach acknowledges that

postcolonial experience does not fit neatly into categories but at the same time benefits from theoretical attention.

## **7.4 Analysis: Tactical Wanderings Through Space and Time**

### **7.4.1 The Postcolonial City: Shillong as Thirdspace**

Shai's story anchors the novel in the present. She returns home after a busy city life. What begins as a break is prolonged as Shai slowly drifts towards her roots. Her move is marked by ambivalence. When her mother asks why she returned, Shai murmurs, "Sometimes you must make the journey to find out" (Pariat, 2022, p. 11). This foregrounds Shai's ambiguous relationship with Shillong. The Shillong that Shai returns to is like a "third space" to her (Soja, 1996, 56-60). It is neither purely material nor completely imagined. It is a hybrid space where multiple histories co-exist. The city's colonial architecture sits uncomfortably alongside newer constructions. Gated communities, high-rise buildings and shopping complexes mark the arrival of neo-liberal consumerism. These new structures are "stacked awkwardly on older houses" (Pariat, 2022, p. 23). The city is experienced not just as geography but as affective residue. Here, memory, loss and aspiration get sedimented gradually.

Shai takes long walks through the city. Her walks, as opposed to other preferred modes of transport, are again marked by ambiguity. She is neither the curious tourist nor the confident native. Her walks are tentative and exploratory. She reflects on the city's "disjointed rhythms", which is how new developments are imposed on existing social structures. Shai reflects on the violence her city endured. After independence, the people of the hills fought for a separate state. But even while accepting their demands, a Sanskritised name was given to a place where people spoke no Sanskrit (Pariat, 2022, p. 27). This was an effort to nationalise the space in the northeast. This is embedded in the process of postcolonial state formation. Local histories are obfuscated in favour of national logics. The introductory chapters show the reluctance of the elderly people towards the encroachment of development. Shai laments the construction of ugly illegal structures while sidelining a few low-roofed old houses with names like Little Cloud and Hacienda. Shai reflects on the inherent violence of such imposition.

Shai's experience of the changes that Shillong underwent resonates with the development of global cities in the Global South. Urbanisation in post-colonial states tends to prioritise fitting into the global set-up, overlooking local needs. Such urgency creates landscapes that feel alien to the place. The city of Delhi that Shai left is also an example of such urgency. It is an unplanned megacity that boasts of international standards but struggles with clogged drains during the rain. Similarly, Shillong is at the heart of a struggle to modernise and develop, but not at the cost of its indigenous identity. The struggle pulls the city in different directions. Shai has a very interesting and evolving relationship with Shillong. She is not nostalgic for the Shillong of bygone days. She is also not very enthusiastic about the fast-paced developments. Somewhere deep in her heart, she believes that the city does not have to cut itself off from its legacy to modernise. It can carry it along and enter the future. Shai finds the remnants of the city she grew up in small instances. She finds the woman who used to grow flowers, the friend who still plays music, and her father's quaint ways of environmental activism. These small gestures resisting an imposed modernity are

similar to “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985, pp. 28-35). These are everyday practices that are mundane yet subversive in their limited ways.

Janice Pariat, through the book, walks a very narrow line. There is no celebration of the post-colonial city, nor any angst at the loss of an old city due to rapid urbanisation. Instead, Pariat presents the city as a third space – a space ‘both’ as opposed to ‘either/or’. Colonial legacies co-exist with modern assertions. Global pressures meet local resistances, which are not dismissive but want to engage.

#### **7.4.2 Taxonomies and the Violence of Classification**

The scope of the novel is vast and delves deeply into the politics of naming. Janice Pariat engages with Carl Linnaeus and the development of modern botanical taxonomy. Through her subtle critique of Linnaeus, she critiques the eurocentrism within Enlightenment rationalism. Western scientific systems have often been used for colonial domination. This eurocentrism is personified in the work of Carl Linnaeus, whose ambitious project was to categorise the natural world. He sought to systematise the chaos into manageable groups. He declares that classification and naming will be the foundation of western science (Pariat, 2022, p. 78). Pariat critiques this classification on multiple levels. To start with, it problematises the cultural specificity of such universal scientific categories. Linnaeus’s binomial nomenclature embeds western assumptions about nature and hierarchy. The idea that plants and animals require Latin names to become scientifically legitimate reflects the colonial state’s tendency to invalidate indigenous knowledge systems.

On another level, the novel explores how taxonomic thinking shapes perception. When Shai wonders whether the forest doesn’t speak to her because she can’t name what she sees, this discomfort becomes clear. Knowledge is mediated by naming and claiming. The act of classification becomes inseparable from the politics of possession. This act echoes colonial regimes that aimed for mastery through documentation. This leads to alienation from entire systems of the natural world that may not yet have been discovered and classified. It also unnecessarily objectifies the human-nature relationship through a compulsion to understand and classify. Shai’s discomfort can be contrasted with her father’s approach to the environment. He protests against tree-cutting by chaining himself to the pine tree. He does not try to reclaim the ecology by knowing it through scientific classification. His knowledge is relational and embodied. His approach to the environment is the grammar of animacy, a way of understanding nature as subjects rather than objects (Kimmerer, 2013, 58-60). Human beings should treat nature as a teacher rather than as resources to be exploited. The critique of such classification is furthered through the character of Evelyn, the early 20th-century botanist from Edwardian Britain. Evelyn looks for connectivity in nature rather than watertight compartmentalisation. She seeks what the novel describes as “resonance over control, relationship over dominance” (Pariat, 2022, p.89). She records what she observes during her travels in India. But her entries are not merely scientific and botanical; they are also remnants of ecological thinking.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe offers yet another alternative to such reductionist classification. He seeks to understand nature through ‘exact sensorial imagination’, which means careful

observation combined with intuitive insight. This approach treats phenomena as a whole rather than as a collection of parts (Bortoft, 1996), emphasising process and relationship over classification. These alternative ways of seeing and knowing the nature question reductive and extractive scientific knowledge. Pariat's novel does not take an anti-intellectual stand. It also does not indulge in romantic primitivism. Indeed, it suggests that different kinds of knowledge should complement, not contest, each other. The novel also questions the logic of destroying nature to pave the way for development. Trees need to be cut down to make way for new construction. Nature is portrayed as obstructive. Shai's father's protest exemplifies an alternative way of thinking and participating in ecological communities that may include but are not centred on human needs.

### **7.4.3 The Forest as Counter-World**

The forest in *Everything the Light Touches* functions as a "counter world". It is a space that operates according to a logic distinct from that of a city. It also opens up different possibilities of being. Pariat's novel does not treat the forest as exotic, as seen through the eyes of urban dwellers. Rather, the forest is a refuge and a teacher; it provides political space and philosophical intervention. Forests are also carriers of multiple temporalities. When Shai learns that a seed may lie dormant for a thousand years before germinating, this subverts the neoliberal logic of productivity and profit. The forest provides cyclical growth in the form of rotating seasons. Late capitalism emphasises short-term gain from manipulated or biotechnologically engineered agricultural products. The long-term ecological cost is often overlooked (Malm, 2018). The forest does not work in tandem with such short-term goals. The forest's time to recuperate is reflected in traditional agricultural practices like *Jhum* in Meghalaya. Pariat's novel also discusses the interconnectedness amongst trees. She talks of mycorrhizal networks which allow trees to share nutrients as well as communicate (Simard, 2021). Such an understanding aligns with indigenous knowledge of treating forests as entire communities.

Shai's father's protest is an art of noticing (Tsing, 2015). He does not violently confront the forest officials who came to cut down trees. He protests through his presence amongst the trees. Shai's father's activism is a product of the emotional attachment he has to the forest. Shai's own relationship with nature changes when she travels to the distant village of Mawmalang. When she plants seeds in the gardens, waters them, and sees seedlings grow, her initial isolation is replaced by a newfound sense of belonging. Shai's new learning in Mawmalang presents her with a different way of being. While living in close proximity with nature, dilemmas of life present themselves to her. No roads, no connectivity meant no proper treatment for her ailing nanny Oin. But roads came with the additional baggage of mining, which created health hazards. Mining would also mean the destruction of hills and the loss of sacred forests. The forests are also an integral part of the lives of the people of Mawmalang. They have co-existed for ages. The forests are not just present as wilderness. They are carriers of memory and histories. Ancient trees carry ancient knowledge. Forests are not just resources for capitalist acceleration. They can be role models for different ways of being, for sustainability. The forest in the novel is both a literal and figurative space. It provides an alternative relationship between human and nature and also offers sustainable ways of living within damaged landscapes.

#### **7.4.4 Walking as Epistemology: Movement and Meaning-Making**

Shai walks across Shillong, to Mawmalang and the nearby areas of the village. Throughout the novel, walking emerges as both a literal and an epistemological method. Through walking, she knows. This is different from textual, sedentary knowledge. Not just Shai, but all the main characters in the novel are seen walking and wandering around. Walking is primitive; it is also timeless. The different characters in the novel walk in different ways and contexts. Linnaeus walks with the confidence of imperial science. His walk is purposeful and extractive. His walks are aimed at the collection of specimens and classification into predetermined categories. His walk reflects the burden of the white man to bring order to the chaos of nature. On the other hand, Evelyn's walks are more tentative. In a patriarchal set-up, Evelyn struggles to find purpose. Her walks are also more open to new ideas – about nature, about life.

Shai's walks constitute a distinct category. While walking around Shillong, she reminisces. Her walk is investigative, seeking a lost city. Yet she is not sentimental about it. By contrast, when Shai walks in Mawmalang, like Evelyn, her walks are more receptive to new ideas. She witnesses the struggles of lives unknown. Through her travels along dusty village roads to far-flung areas and protest sites, Shai reclaims what is lost through this walk. Colonial spatial ordering often worked to erase indigenous symbols and structures. It worked to impose a "strategic invisibility" on structures and people deemed disposable or unwarranted. Rational modernity, obsessed with order, finds informal networks and indigenous practices chaotic. Alternative forms of social organisation do not fit into their epistemology of space (Duncan & Gregory, 1999). Through such walks, Shai discovers lesser-known aspects of Shillong and the completely obscured story of Mawmalang. While official discourses may have left out what mining did to the people of the village, Shai rediscovers that through her walks. But this was not the first instance of knowing through walking for Shai. As a child, she walked with her father and learned to recognise trees by their bark and leaves. A shift to a metro city caused a break in this pursuit. Back in Shillong, Shai, in a way, takes it up again to continue.

In Mawmalang, Shai witnesses a place struggling to sustain itself, caught at the crossroads of 'development' and conservation. While the tussle between environmentalists, NGOs and the state government may have halted uranium mining, it has also foreclosed the possibility of a road to these sections. The villagers are aware of the hazards of mining and of what it does to the flora and fauna of the place, as well as to the health of the people. Yet political intervention ensures that mining does not stop completely. Here, one may take a moment to remember that this exploitation is not specific to the tiny village; large-scale coal mining has been changing the physical structure of Shillong as well as causing large-scale pollution accompanied by health hazards. It has also jeopardised the local economy by forcing rent-based income, and illegal and dangerous methods like rat-hole mining have caused loss of lives.

#### **7.5 Home, Haunting and the Ethics of Staying**

The question of home and belonging also pulses through the novel. Shai returns home with uncertainty on her mind. She does not know how long she will stay. Even her mother finds it awkward to have her at home. Her homecoming is not triumphant. Rather, it is a complex

negotiation between belonging and alienation. When she decides to visit her ailing nanny, Oin, in a far-flung village, her mother wonders how she will cope. A city girl, Shai may feel out of place. Yet despite being in a completely new place, Shai feels at home. On the other hand, Shai feels 'unhabituated' in her childhood home. Education and work took her to a distant city. Cultural displacement reconfigured her notion of home. (Pariat, 2022, p. 44) Her feelings on her return home are similar to the violence that inhabitants of post-colonial cities face. They are psychologically displaced. The logic of capital is imposed on their homes.

This 'not feeling at home' is not just personal. It also reflects spatial dispossession. Colonial violence operates through direct economic and political exploitation, but it also creates subjects caught in between. These people feel displaced in their own spaces (Bhabha, 1994, 37-39). Shai's feeling of being foreign in her mother's kitchen reflects this alienation. But Shai does not resolve this feeling through departure or nostalgia. Instead, she resolves to stay and work towards 'belonging'. In an era marked by migration and mobility, the commitment to stay is resilience. Shai commits to staying, but this stay is not a mere continuity of what she left behind. This stay intervenes in something new. Caring for her ailing nanny may have been personal, but Shai's concern is not limited to Oin. She develops concern for the people of Mawmalang. Through the protests in Mawmalang against imposed development, Shai questions her own ideas of development.

Shai's return is also marked by her engagement with her surroundings in new ways. She indulges in mundane activities such as weeding and baking. In Mawmalang, she gardens and cares for Oin. While such care work may be invisible in dominant political narratives, it sustains the conditions that make other forms of work possible (Tronto, 2013). Shai's decision to stay extends beyond her individual story. When she discovers the story of a mythical white woman who also chose to stay for the sake of knowledge, she is convinced. In societies where choices are framed as between cultural identity and economic modernity, Shai believes in the possibility of a third path. This path embraces without excluding.

Such choices to negotiate with changing spatial structures also reflect a resurgence that does not completely reject modernity. Instead, it finds ways to negotiate and creates "nested sovereignties", meaning navigating post-colonial changes while maintaining indigenous systems (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014). While Shai's story may not explore indigenous knowledge systems directly, she does emphasise exploring alternative ways of being. Her nanny's choice to let go of life also reiterates to Shai that there may be something deeper in the simple things of life. Her uncertain dwelling, first in Shillong and then in Mawmalang, opens up new issues for her.

## **7.6 Fragmentation, Multiplicity and the Art of Not-Knowing**

The narrative in the novel is not linear. It is fragmented in structure. There are multiple timelines, and the story moves across continents. The novel's form enacts spatial thinking (Massey, 2005, 9-15, 118-121), which privileges multiplicity as well as simultaneity. It also favours open-ended storylines over simplistic cause-and-effect closures. The novel's movement between different characters, time periods and geographical locations creates a "spatial narrative". It asks readers to navigate multiple relationships. It does not provide a single plotline and a neat closure. While the

storylines may seem random and situated at very different points in time, there is an underlying connectivity across them. The characters' concerns are shared. Understanding nature as well as responding to the crisis creates a bond between the various characters.

The novel's scope is vast. It encompasses characters across different time periods. Yet a single point of convergence is their shared concern with understanding nature. Indigenous knowledge systems often operate through such convergence. Such systems honour complexity and multiple perspectives, as opposed to meta-narratives. The novel also moves between different time periods, from 18th-century Sweden to colonial India and then to contemporary India. While they may be spread across the timeline, taken together they are myriad points in the process of colonisation. Colonial interventions have also met resistance. They have engineered environmental changes. Linnaeus's taxonomic project, Evelyn's botanical explorations and Shai's contemporary concerns may initially come across as separate stories. But a closer look will lay bare that they are all part of the historical process which shapes the postcolonial experience of today.

Modern India is also home to "colonial continuities". Colonial structures and assumptions persist. The obsession with cities rediscovering themselves as a new version is an example of this continuity. It equates mindless development and urbanisation with modernity and overlooks the extractive nature of such projects. At the same time, the novel's temporal complexity offers windows of possibility. Characters develop alternative relationships and interrupt colonial logics. Whether it is Goethe's eccentricities or Evelyn's difficult choices, the characters redefine a set path at different points in time. The steps taken by these characters have caused ruptures in these colonial continuities.

The novel's constant movement from one plotline to another is a cradle for an epistemology of uncertainty. Pariat's novel is not about coherence in knowledge. Rather, it champions a way of knowing that is open to what is yet unknown. Throughout the novel, characters acknowledge the limits of their knowledge. Evelyn wants to understand the ways of an indigenous tribe that has carved out a separate way of life. At great personal risk, she undertakes the journey only to face a life-changing choice. Yet that very moment of uncertainty gives Evelyn's life purpose and meaning. Shai's journey is also marked by uncertainties. She is not sure why she is back and for how long. After Oin passes away, she is unsure whether to return to Shillong. She is even unsure how her relationship with a former partner will be. But such uncertainty has not unsettled the plot of the novel. Rather, it highlights the complexities of human characters.

The novel also refuses to provide simple closures. Rather, the multiple storylines end with curiosity and ongoing questions. That the author managed this even with a historical character like Goethe is commendable. Evelyn's difficult choice is left inconclusive. Evie travels to other parts of Meghalaya, but even then her reference point with regard to weather and the surroundings is Shillong. When she meets the Nongiad tribes and tries to learn about their whereabouts, she is made aware that, unlike the others, they don't have equal access to all spaces. A nomadic tribe, they are forced to be constantly on the move because of their different ways of living. Shillong, even during the colonial period and especially because of colonial intervention, was made to witness these myriad ways of living. The society underwent stratification, and hierarchies were put in place. These hierarchies also marked the physical spaces of the state – Shillong was earmarked as a place where the colonial administration could flourish. The elements which seemed too unruly

were relegated to a distant space and denied access to these central places. The book ends on a slightly ambiguous note, but one can very well understand that Evie must have accepted the terms of the Nongiad tribes and exchanged her liberty for the sake of knowledge about diengiei, or the tree of life.

Pariat's novel subverts the 'coloniality of time'. It dismantles the imposition of a linear, progressive notion that assumes the future is better than the present (Wynter, 2003). The novel resists this temporal colonisation with "ongoingness". Knowledge gathering is also a process, and it did not end with modernity. Even readers are forced to engage with this multiplicity. Reading a novel of such expanse enables readers to become comfortable with uncertainty and incoherence. Through such a narrative, Pariat creates "World travelling" (Lugones, 2003). It enables readers to move seamlessly between multiple narratives across timelines. Readers connect with characters in different settings. Through them, readers can move between different ways of seeing and being without reducing them to single perspectives. Thinking is decolonised when readers navigate between indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Such novels create grounds for decolonial consciousness. Readers learn to hold complexity without reduction. Rather than answering questions, such works teach living within questions while searching for deeper meaning.

## **7.7 Toward a Postcolonial Ecology of Attention**

Janice Pariat's novel constructs a "post-colonial ecology of attention". In it, the author creates a world where ecological and decolonial insights are integrated into everyday practices. This ecology is reflected in the novel's treatment of space, time and resilience. Characters who approach knowledge relationally develop the most sustainable connections to places. Shai and Evelyn are perfect examples. Even Shai's father, through his simple tactics, does so. Evelyn has no aim of strictly objectifying nature. She is keener to know. Even Shai's realisation about the problems of Mawmalang emerges from her personal connection to Oin. The novel also constantly juxtaposes colonial temporality, inspired by capitalist logic, against slower, ecologically sustainable rhythms. This imposition has political implications, and the effect is profound. Such imposition on the environment often leads to "slow violence" which unfolds over an extended period of time. (Nixon, 2011, 2-2, 19-22)

Apart from time and temporality, the novel also presents the choice of where to stay as an act of resilience. Shai's decision to remain in Shillong and Evelyn's decision to give up the life she knew for the sake of knowledge show how these women resist dominant narratives through simple choices. But merely choosing a place is not enough. It carries the added responsibility of ensuring its flourishing. The novel also differentiates between strategies and tactics. It favours the tactics that the marginalised use against state machinery, which relies on strategies. When policies favour the powerful, the weak are left with fewer weapons. Through art, storytelling, documentation and reporting, Shai and her friends resist the neoliberal narrative of development. Shai's father, sitting under a tree, is part of such tactics. Shai's travel to a distant village and participation in their protests are also tactics. Such tactics foreground the importance of "prefigurative politics". These are forms of resistance whose sole aim is not to capture state power. Rather, they aim to put in place alternative value systems. Such politics bypass the urge to dominate and control. Rather, they open us spaces for decolonial alternatives.

The novel also does not claim to have the final word on anything. It acknowledges that knowledge is always partial, ongoing rather than complete or universal, and context-specific, constantly evolving. This way of knowing, which rejects claims to mastery, is decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999). Such an approach to knowledge is accountable to communities and places rather than claiming universal validity. Postcolonial contexts need such methodologies, which resist Western canonism and Eurocentrism. Objective neutrality is problematised in such methods. Plurality is accepted even in ways of knowing. In postcolonial societies where colonial knowledge systems continue to shape policies, such methods offer alternative modes of thinking and doing.

## 7.8 Conclusion: Living the Questions

Everything the *Light Touches* does not end with simple resolutions. Rather, it leaves the reader with deeper questions and a sense of curiosity. Such expansive novels leave readers dwelling on the uncertainty that marks lives rather than providing false clarity. Pariat's novel makes readers also dwell like her characters. Readers are forced to dwell on questions which continue to be relevant. Today's world is marked by environmental crisis, conflicts and various social upheavals. In such a scenario, readers will find resources in Pariat's book. But at the same time, it will also challenge readers to bypass simple solutions to complex problems. The book ends with another chapter on Shai, in which she further delves into the politics of mining and the way a section of affluent local authorities is in cahoots with the devastating activities of mining corporations. As Shai ruminates on and revisits her own life in Shillong before her move to Delhi, we see that such social hierarchies echo even in modern-day Shillong. For Shai's parents, her development hinged on moving away from the place and people like Dajied. And it was this move that later made Shai envious of the rootedness that Dajied felt towards Shillong, which was somehow absent in her.

The novel consciously avoids colonial certainties and the urgency of capitalist acceleration. Postcolonial societies face the challenge of living sustainably amidst fragile ecologies. The novel does not provide easy answers, but it offers practices and perspectives for such living. Literary works like these demand new ways of thinking and being. The forest continues to grow, sometimes slowly and sometimes in surprising bursts. Like nature's own rhythm, the resilience of ordinary people takes its sweet time. It is not always structured or formal, but it may take varied forms. Pariat's novel offers one of these many forms, in which characters reclaim lost spaces through walking and infusing them with new meaning, in places where struggle is constant.

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## Chapter 8

# Mimesis, Montage and Mapping: A Spatial Analysis of Gangtok's Cityscape in the Select Works of Satyajit Ray and Prajwal Parajuly

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### Abstract

The concept of spatiality in India is continually evolving with transitions in the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres, shaping our perspectives on spatiality. India is now beginning to be recognised not only as a principally rural and agrarian country but is also attracting notice for its urban spaces and urbanity, including its innate intricacies. The Indian scholarship in this direction is proliferating in commendable ways. Apart from the critical enquiries, several writers have produced brilliant literary works about Indian cities, like Khuswant Singh, Amitav Ghosh and Mamang Dai, to name only a few. However, an extensive literature review reveals that a minimal eclectic analysis is seen about the smaller urban places in India, such as Sikkim's capital city, Gangtok. Our study stems from this huge research gap because the process of urbanisation is happening ubiquitously in India, and hence, scholarly probes cannot be limited to the comprehension of the established Indian metropolises alone. Through an interpretive analysis of Satyajit Ray's detective fiction *Trouble in Gangtok* (1971) and the documentary film titled *Sikkim* (1971), and Prajwal Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee* (2014), the present research attempts to understand the urban nuances of Gangtok within the broad framework of spatial studies to highlight the existence of unique Indian urbanity.

**Keywords:** Spatial turn, Urbanity, Gangtok, Satyajit Ray, Prajwal Parajuly

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## 8.1 Introduction

The statement that spatial conglomeration in India has undergone enormous change is irrefutable, as its visible and tangible signs are so prominent and ubiquitous. The recent surge in scholarly discourse on Indian spatiality is highly suggestive of the various ramifications that require probing from multidimensional perspectives. Prominent changes in urban spaces in India have gradually taken hold, giving rise to the development of smart cities, and the categorisation of Indian cities and towns into tiers has become the new norm. With conscious spatial-change programmes being implemented in our country, the features of both urbanisation and urbanity have been undergoing radical transformations. These two terms are often used interchangeably and sometimes indiscriminately, which leads to a vague and complex understanding of the changing spatiality. Therefore, it would be prudent to apprehend the two intersecting terms to understand the nuances of spatial changes, which is the prime focus of this study. While urbanisation represents the process, urbanity configures the historical, political, social and cultural trends which eventually develop within the process. Urbanisation encompasses the physical and material ramifications, growth, advancements, advantages, and achievements. Urbanity, on the other hand, connotes the patterns of human behaviour and their negotiation of the changing and variable spatiality around them, marking a sharp distinction from rural and rurality. Both the process and its impact on human behavioural and emotional patterns in the Indian scenario have attracted scholars from interdisciplinary fields, as well as writers who have placed their plots in India's urban spaces and have also created an immortal imaginary urban space like R. K. Narayan's Malgudi (*Malgudi Days*, 1943). India is now beginning to be recognised not only as a principally rural and agrarian country but also for its urban spaces and urbanity, with its innate intricacies involved in it. Undoubtedly, the Indian metropolises, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Bengaluru, have most often attracted great writers' attention as interesting, intriguing and complex sites, and renowned authors like Khuswant Singh (*Delhi A Novel*, 1990), Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*, 1980), Amitav Ghosh (*Shadow Lines*, 1988), Jeet Thayil (*Narcopolis*, 2012), Arvind Adiga (*The White Tiger*, 2008), Anjum Hassan (*Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, 2009; *History's Angel*, 2023), Mamang Dai (*Stupid Cupid*, 2009), among several other noteworthy writers writing in the English language, have done adequate literary justice in bringing to life the aforementioned cities in their works of fiction. However, it must also be acknowledged that we have a renowned writer like Ruskin Bond who has brought to the limelight the sleepy towns and cities like Mussoorie and Dehradun in his excellent literary works.

If one delves deeply into the study of Indian urban literature, one can discover a treasure trove worthy of interdisciplinary scholarship. The growing number of literary texts centred on urbanism and urbanity has the potential to create a canon within Indian writing in English, to which brilliant writers from Northeast India have added sparkle through their unique representations of urban spaces and urbanity in the Northeast. Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat, Mitra Phukan, Aruni Kashyap, Bijoya Sawian, Ankush Saikia, Jayant Nobis, Nilanjan Choudhury, Dhruva Hazarika, Jahnabi Barua, Siddhartha Deb, Anjum Hasan, and Prajwal Parajuly are among the diverse group of contributors to urban fiction in English from Northeast India. This growing representation illustrates the prolific growth and development of urban spaces in India's Northeast, comprising

eight states. Each of these eight states bears the legacy of a unique historical, social, cultural and political lineage, which is gradually being comprehended and accepted in academic discourses. This is a welcome change in perceptions, which can eventually reduce the misnomer of homogeneity hitherto associated with the eight states. Although in terms of population growth and area, the urban spaces in the Northeast states may not be comparable to those in the larger states of our country, the growth and development that is happening in physical and material terms, weaving its intricate pattern in combination with human emotions and human interventions, is indeed very fascinating. The popular towns and cities of the Northeast region, such as Shillong, Darjeeling, Kohima and Gangtok, have attracted attention since colonial times either as a haven for the administrators of the British Raj or as a stage for resistance and contestation. In the process, these places have acquired multiple nuances and layered manifestations of urbanity unique to themselves. Our research interest in decoding the urbanity of a city led us to the study of two interesting texts and a film; *Sikkim* (1971), *Trouble in Gangtok* (1971) by Satyajit Ray and *Land Where I Flee* (2014) by Prajwal Parajuly, which can be taken as points of reference for forty-three years of the history of urbanism and urbanity in Gangtok, the capital city of Sikkim, which became the twenty-second state of the Indian Republic in 1975.

Our main objective in undertaking this study is to contest the exclusion of the urbanisation process occurring elsewhere, beyond the well-regarded metropolises of India. We aim to reinstate the claim that the growth of non-metropolitan urban spaces, with their appendage of urbanity, is worthy of scholarly inquiry. The methodology is an interpretive, qualitative analysis of the chosen texts, aided by a phenomenological approach within the broad framework of spatial studies.

## 8.2 Review of literature

Undoubtedly, such a study demands an extensive literature survey to identify the research gap and to position our findings through the reading of the chosen primary texts, including the English translation of Satyajit Ray's detective novel *Trouble in Gangtok*, originally written in Bengali in 1970. His documentary film, titled *Sikkim* (1971), was commissioned by the last king of Sikkim, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, and is paired with Prajwal Parajuly's novel, *Land Where I Flee* (2014). Notably, these texts provide a traceable link to Gangtok's urban-scape and urbanity, spanning four decades and three years. Ray's documentary on Sikkim had been banned from public viewing since 1975, the year of Sikkim's merger with India, and the ban was finally lifted in 2010 (*Sikkim* (film), 1971). Satyajit Ray's stature as a filmmaker and writer has earned him acclaim and attracted several critiques of his works. The controversial documentary on Sikkim has not only been reviewed but also critiqued with interest by critics (Suchismita Das 2014; Sujata Dutta Dey & Rajni Singh, 2024). Das traces the hidden political history through the objections posed by the Royals who commissioned the film's making, the ban imposed on it for thirty-nine years, the lost and found reels of the film, its restoration, the lifting of the ban, and its aftermath. Sujata Dutta Dey and Rajni Singh have done a comparative study of the film by bringing in the concepts of Eco-cinema and ethnonationalism. Muzahid Sharif, in his Master's Dissertation (2018), points out Ray's shift from a personality-centric documentary film to a place-centric documentary film in his treatment of *Sikkim* (film) (1971). With reference to our chosen text, *Trouble in Gangtok* (1970/2019), we have found two interesting articles written in recent times; one regarding the

Bengali perceptions of the 'Hippie gaze' by Pratiti Ketoki (2022) and an analysis of Ray's indigenising technique employed in the detective genre by Chandreie Mukherjee (2021). Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee* (2014) is a tantalising postcolonial and postmodern fiction set in Gangtok city, and the novel, for all its characters and postmodern pastiches, has earned notable acclaim among critics (Lahiri 2017, Rai 2018, Pradhan 2022), and several reviews (Narayan 2013; O'Callaghan 2014; Kniggendorf 2017) have also established Parajuly as a notable contemporary writer. These articles and reviews help to illustrate psychological conflict, friction in relationships, diasporic entanglements, and the study of the 'queer' character in the novel.

The city of Gangtok, the focus of this study, has directed us to several important scholarly works that have clarified our understanding of the subject. These works can be categorised into those that address the political history of Sikkim, with a focus on Gangtok, the capital (Sinha 1975; Tran 2012; N.Ram 1974; Rose 1969), and those that focus on geospatial and environmental studies (Tamang, 2016; Karan 1989; Bhasin et al., 1984; Maharana et al., 2000; Sharma & Pandey 2022; Pierse 2017; Paul, 2013; Chandran 2008; Thambidurai P & Ramesh M.V., 2017; Mandal and Saravana D; Banerjee and Maurya, 2020). The location of Sikkim, its land, history, legends, and the unique grandeur of its religio-cultural tradition, overseen by the towering peaks of Mt. Kanchenjunga, continue to provide mesmerising experiences not only for travellers but also to immerse scholars in deep, eclectic engagements. There are several seminal and archival books available on Sikkim (Edgar 1873; White 1908; Risley 1911; Easton 1928; Das 1983; Williamson 1987; Mullard 2019; Kazi 2020; McKay 2021) that illustrate the varied aspects of Sikkim and the Sikkimese entity, such as history, geography, culture, religion, and the growth and development of Sikkimese society. Since the primary aim of our research is to probe the nature of urbanism and urbanity in Gangtok, we have sought to gain a general understanding of urbanisation, urbanism, and urbanity through several journal articles. Some of the scholarly writings can be traced back to antiquity (Clarke 1881; Hyde 1915; Merrium 1940; Beals 1951; Crane 1955; Anderson 1964), but they help to develop a clear idea about the colonial agenda behind the urbanisation process in strategic locations in India and the postcolonial implications that arose out of the process. The following academic discourses on urbanisation (Smethurst 2000; Grant, 2003; Peterson 2003; Lund 2005; Koelb 2009; Devi 2012; Slooter and Diphooorn 2016; Korenjak 2017; Pautungthang 2018; Vidal 2020; Jain 2021; Mandal et al. 2022; Sahoo 2021; Thakur and Diwan 2021; Naeem 2024; Sharma 2024; Majhee 2025) have provided the required data and analysis of the process of urbanisation in general, in the Indian context, and, in some papers, concerning India's Northeast. *The Cambridge Companion to The City in Literature*, edited by Kevin R. McNamara (2014), is undoubtedly a seminal book, with chapters ranging from mythical cities, colonial and postcolonial cities, and dystopic cities, to urban nightscapes and the urban pastoral, which helped us to assess our stance on Gangtok with clarity. The recently published collection of discourses titled *The City Speaks Urban Spaces in Indian Literature*, edited by Subhashish Bhattacharjee and Goutam Karmakar (2024), is very appropriate for gathering varied perspectives on urbanisation and literature in India. Besides these references, our precepts were further refined through our study of Robert T. Tally's book *Spatiality* (2013), which offers a concise and thorough overview of Western literary theories on the spatial turn, and of critical literary enquiry into space and spatiality. The edited book by Johannes Riquet and Elizabeth Kollmann, *Spatial Modernities Geography, Narrative, Imaginaries* (2020), is a comprehensive, contemporary literary criticism on

space and spatiality, given the wide range of analyses of island narratives, the influence of digitisation on literature, "Satellite Vision and Geographical Imagination" (Shim, 2020, p.68), and narratives about experiences on moving trains.

The extensive literature review above has only affirmed the evident research gap, namely the minimal literary criticism of texts representing smaller cities and towns in India, as well as the negligible studies of literary texts or films that have illustrated smaller cities and towns, particularly in the Northeast region. Thus, our contention has been to introduce two literary texts and a documentary film to explore Gangtok's unique urbanism and urbanity, and to establish the immense potential of literary texts and documentary films as authentic sites for unravelling the tales of an urban space.

### 8.3 The Romance of the Hidden Ridges

Gangtok, meaning "the hilltop", is the capital of Sikkim, a small but strategically located state bordering Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. The capital city of Gangtok has developed along ridges, connected by meandering roads ("Gangtok", 2025). Sikkim's principal economic generator is tourism, and the city of Gangtok has emerged as the most attractive tourist hotspot in the Northeast region for both domestic and foreign tourists alike. Today, Gangtok, with its traditional idyllic charm in combination with 'up-to-date' facilities, a vehicle-free market area, shopping malls, the availability of all global consumer brands, posh hotels and the stylish demeanour of the majority of the inhabitants, has kept Gangtok as a top tourist destination, often beating renowned places like Shillong and Darjeeling in the tourism popularity scale. All available references trace Gangtok's origin to a hermitage, which eventually paved the way for the development of Buddhist monasteries, the King's palace grounds, an Imperial residency and a market area. Gangtok's innate role as a seat of governance and urbanism was noted by the imperial traveller John Easton in his book, *An Unfrequented Highway Through Sikkim and Tibet to Chumolaori*, as far back as 1928, in the following words:

Gangtok, at the head of the Rongni valley on the road to Tibet by the Nathu La, is the capital of the State of Sikkim and contains all that makes up a capital: the palace of the Maharajah, a monastery, a hospital and a jail. Far away to the south-west one can just distinguish Darjeeling; to the north-east is the range of hills, some 12,000 feet high,.. To the north-west, her great crest towering above intervening hills, lies Kinchenjunga, white and clear in the brilliant morning sun (p. 15, Reprint 1997).

Easton, the Scottish flagbearer of the British Raj, a traveller moulded by an imperial vision of exploring a strategic location that would advance the expansive design of the British Empire in Tibet, found a welcome repose in Gangtok after the hardship of riding uphill from the foothills of Bengal. His peripatetic observations recorded the existence of a very clean hospital, the carpet factory, and the monastery of "Enche" (Easton 1928, p. 20), as well as "the impressive secretary to the Maharajah who had a very charming manner, and spoke English perfectly..." (Easton 1928, p. 17). The wondrous gaze of this adventurous spirit finds a perfect "urban pastoral" (McNamara and Gray 2014, p. 245), a hidden hearth, as enchanting and comfortable as the descriptions of places and palaces in fairy stories and myths. By the time Easton had reached Gangtok, the Imperial

establishment was already firmly in place, in the form of a residency house for the Political Officer, the agent of the British Government. Easton is all praise for this set-up:

A picturesque place is Gangtok, perched on its hill at the head of the Rongni valley, and the jewel in its crown is the Residency, with its roses, orchids and dovecot: polished oak floors, pictures, books: great fireplaces, an English country house hidden away in the hills of India ( Easton 1928,p.22).

Forty-three years later, in 1971, when Satyajit Ray was commissioned by Chogyal (King) Palden Thondup Namgyal, the consecrated King, the 12th scion of the Namgyal Dynasty, to create a documentary film on his nation-state, Ray was equally impressed by the picturesque setting and the unique urbanism of Gangtok. Although Ray's documentary encompasses all the major sites of the state of Sikkim, Gangtok's vignette stands out prominently because of the grandeur of the royal monastery and the beautiful scenery of the palace grounds. The making of the film coincided with the consecrated twelfth king's efforts to establish Sikkimese identity amid political upheavals surrounding the nation state. Ray was chosen for his finesse and aesthetics, which could convey and illustrate "cultural-political nationalistic effervescence of that period...(Das 2014, p.45). Ray's portrayal of Gangtok evokes an arcadia overlooked by the glistening snowy peaks of Mount Kanchenjunga. The commissioning of the film itself was a departure from being contained in the "urban pastoral", where the significance of a traveller or a tourist's display of perspective holds great interest. The film opens with rituals and ritual dance in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition at the Royal Monastery at Gangtok, asserting the uniqueness of the grand traditions and customs of Sikkim. The Royal regalia in brocades and the dignified, sophisticated demeanour create an everlasting impression on the viewers, who can comprehend the influence of the palace and the traditions and customs associated with it as markers of urbanism and urbanity of those times in Gangtok. Besides the royal palace and the monastery, Ray's montage shot has captured "Gangtok's Lal Bazar", which was already the "crucible of diversity" (Das 2014, p. 45) with Indians from the plains engaged in trade and commerce. Gangtok's emergence as a modern city is projected through "a shot of a parallel ropeway with two carriages advancing towards each other..." (Das 2014, p. 45), and the inclination towards western ways of education and dressing up is illustrated through the projection of an aristocratic school, The Tashi Namgyal Academy, named after the venerated ruler Sir Tashi Namgyal, the eleventh consecrated king (Das 2014, p. 46). Gentrification in the urbane clime of Gangtok was already in existence, and Ray's camera pans over many huddles of gambling men... While the king and queen attend to their royal guests at the buffet, the commoners are shown sitting on the ground... (Das 2014, p. 46). The residency (converted into the Governor's house after Sikkim's merger with India) of the British Political Officer is not shown at all, reflecting the strong message of "ethnonationalism" that the Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal and his American wife sought to propagate, and they had hoped that the commissioned documentary would fulfil their aspirations. According to chronicled history, contact between the British East India Company and Sikkim began during the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-1815, and John Claude White was appointed the first political officer of Sikkim in 1889 (Kazi 2020, xix-xx). The residency, as the permanent power hub of the British Raj on the ridge opposite the palace, was Claude White's initiative and a triumph of the imperialist vision. Despite Ray's apolitical and objective attitude, the residency on the other ridge is not shown in the film. The royalty were displeased to watch "Ray's matter-of-fact depiction of the arrival of the country-

folk to the royal grounds to gamble and eat plain rice and pork while the royalty entertained their aristocratic guests separately..." (Das 2014, p.47), and the film was stashed away from public view for thirty-nine long years until it was restored after a long legal battle in 2010 and released in Gangtok for public viewing on April 6, 2011 (Das 2014, p.50).

Satyajit Ray's brilliance shone not only in his filmmaking but also in his writings. The protagonist of his detective novel is better known by his nickname "Feluda" (Mukherjee, 2021, p. 1). He loves to travel, and his cousin "Topshe" is the narrator through whom readers learn about the adventures, mysteries and places. Ray's avid interest in exploring Sikkim lay not only in creating a documentary film titled *Sikkim* but also in his alliteratively titled Bengali detective novel *Gangtok e Gondogol* (1971), translated as *Trouble in Gangtok* (2019) by Gopa Majumdar. Pratiti Ketoki, in her article titled "Narrating the 'Hippie': Bengali Perceptions of the Trail" (2024), while arguing about the intersectionality of "hippie travel" with "local travel", designating a kind of counterculture movement (Ketoki, 2024), brings in Gangtok's vantage location as a hill station "not very far from Calcutta but is an alternative" to the highly popular Darjeeling hills among the Bengalis. Ray's detective protagonist chooses Gangtok for its Tibetan mystic influence and the Buddhist Mahayana religious tradition, to spend his vacation with his narrator cousin and to avoid the sweltering heat of Calcutta. The opening chapter describes travel by air to the foothills at the Bagdogra airport and travel by jeep upwards to Gangtok, followed by a description of the city with an array of houses with potted plants, a military camp, men and women in colourful clothes, and ethnic diversity comprising people of Nepalese, Bhutia and Tibetan origin (Ray 1971/2019, p. 8). The presence of a military camp in the vicinity described is a subtle reference to the simmering political unrest and dissensions against the Royalty. While Ray's documentary film projects both place and people, his novel documents the place and the ruptures caused to the place by outsiders, such as tourists and tradesmen.

The plot of Ray's novel is set primarily in Gangtok in East Sikkim, although certain episodes take place in and around the famous Pemayangste monastery in West Sikkim. In the novel, the detective protagonist Feluda and his cousin, Topshe, the narrator, illustrate the ambience of Gangtok through their peregrinations. The reference to the hotel "Snow View" and the colonial vestige of the "dak bungalow" (Ray 1971/2019, p. 8) highlights the city's growing tourism interests. It is interesting to note that, in the novel, the characters do not show interest in visiting the palace grounds or the residency on top of the hills, but are happy to saunter around the bazaar area and the Institute of Tibetology. Although Ray's protagonist and his brother are tourists, as a detective and his assistant, they indirectly reflect the local sentiment of commoners who were gradually weaning themselves away from the awed reverence of the royals and the palace activities. Since the 1940s, there had been intermittent dissensions against the King, and Gangtok, being the capital city, now growing at the base of the overlooking ridges, often became the centre stage of the demonstrations (Kazi 2020, xxi). The growing trade and commerce, and a medley of ethnicities merging in the city's urbanism, are markedly pronounced, with the protagonist feeling surprised to find a "paan shop" (Ray 1971/2019, p. 10); the betel leaf is a typical product of humid, tropical and subtropical climates, and its availability in the market area at an altitude of approximately 5,410 feet ("Gangtok", 2025) above sea level shows the cultural exchanges taking place in the urban scape of Gangtok. Kajri Jain, in discussing the ontology of the Indian bazaar, quotes Derrida about the bazaar as "colonial economy's 'constitutive outside'" (Jain 2021, p. 35), which can be

inverted to understand the growing activity at the bazaar, away from the Royal premises, as the centre stage. In Ray's novel, walking is illustrated as the main form of negotiating the urban space, and the presence of rows of vehicles displayed around explains the sprawling limits and postmodern conveniences. As in the film, Ray projects the chief attraction of Mount Kanchenjunga overlooking the cityscape in his novel, too. His character, Topshe, experiences, with his "reflecting eye, the touching eye" (Lund 2005, p. 29), the "proud, majestic and beautiful" (Ray 1971/2012) Mount Kanchenjunga from the window of their hotel room.

#### **8.4 Gangtok: The City which has Grown**

Sometimes, certain coincidences in history may not be chronicled but can be traced through literary texts. It is interesting to note that, just as Satyajit Ray arrived in Sikkim forty-three years after John Easton, the Imperial traveller, the former had captured his impressions of the place and people in his documentary film and his detective novel. Similarly, forty-three years after Ray, Prajwal Parajuly, from Gangtok, wrote his debut novel, *Land Where I Flee* (2014), a post-colonial and post-modern fiction set in Gangtok. Undoubtedly, perceptible differences are evident in the works of the two, divided by time and place, but their works can be decoded to trace the inevitable changes that have occurred in Gangtok's urban space.

Parajuly's Gangtok, a city of ascensions, has moved a long way from the pretty Arcadia it used to be. His novel depicts buildings that are ever on the rise, a disturbing concern that preoccupies the mind of the eighty-four-year-old lady named Chitrlekha, the protagonist in this novel (Parajuly 2014, p.70). Chitrlekha, the virago grandmother in the novel, strikes one as a 'badaud' (a bystander), whose thoughts about the city reveal to the readers the portrait of the city as it has become from what it was not. This is because of the deft writing style of the author, who portrays the aged lady as a "voyeur" in Certeau's terms (Loffler 2017, p.39). However, Chitrlekha's position as a superior matriarch with strong and advantageous social and political connections, combined with her age, does make her static like a "voyeur" who "takes up a detached, uninvolved position, observing the city from a physically elevated position or a distance" (Loffler 2017, p.39). Her mind cannot accept the increasing transfigurations of the Gangtokscape, especially the fact that a Minister of the ruling government begins the construction of a seven-storey building in front of her house, which would eventually block the view from her house of the majestic Mt. Kanchenjunga (Parajuly 2014, p. 66). To add to her chagrin, the minister had plans to convert that structure into a hotel. Gangtok has emerged as an attractive tourist destination, and tourism is the most viable means of generating capital, as implied in this part of the description. Chitrlekha's anxious concerns about urbanisation in this novel reflect the state of spatial expansion happening in Gangtok. The readers are led into the labyrinths of the worried mind of the old lady, who feels highly annoyed and deranged because of a high-rise construction beside her house (Parajuly 2014, p.71).

The urbanisation of Gangtok has become synonymous with the construction of buildings. The population of Gangtok, which was 13,308 in 1971, has risen to 100,286 according to the 2011 Census of India. According to the Census of India, the number of census houses in Gangtok in 1991 was 7682, whereas in 2011 it was 30,328, of which 26641 were modern buildings. Since this novel was published in 2014, the above-mentioned data supports the effort of the writer "who is

best able to capture the relationship between the urban environment and human behaviour" (Coverley p.116). The writer portrays how the spectacle of capitalism has assumed a marked characteristic in both the horizontal and vertical spread of buildings, of varied shapes and heights, that have filled up the ridges and the spur that make up the city (Parajuly 2014, p.66). Pine trees and cherry trees have receded from the bases to the top of the ridges (Ashok Kumar Sharma, 2010), and when viewed from the opposite hill, Gangtok appears as a mountain of thick layers of rising structures (Parajuly 2014, p.70). With buildings aiming at vertical rise, back-hill cutting of the spurs (A.R. Vijaya Narayana et al., 2012) is a regular phenomenon. The indentation of the land has led to the creation of numerous staircases, which dot the cityscape. Parajuly describes the phenomenon of the stairways as replete with meanings, as Calvino's descriptions of the city of stairs laden with dreams in his famous book *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 37). Calvino's perception of the city of stairs is embedded with both "desires" and "fears" (Calvino 38). The readers can detect a similar combination of emotion in Chitrlekha's mind, whereby her memory of the open space and the easily accessible view of Mount Kanchenjunga gets unfortunately obstructed by the rapid construction spree, which she fears would soon go out of her control despite her financial status and favourable political affiliations (Parajuly, 2014, p. 69).

Parajuly has made a brilliant assessment of the manoeuvrings within the city's space, leading to multiple segmentations of the land that affect the minds of those who inhabit the place. Solnit discusses in her book *Wanderlust* how changed "public spaces" and new architecture create crisis and fear in the minds and induce extreme resistance (Solnit, 2002, p.11). In contrast to the general acceptance of the inevitable transfiguration of the cityscape, Chitrlekha, the protagonist, opposes it. Her psyche resists the expansion of the staircases in the city (p. 69).

As a city "is regarded both as a physical and metaphysical space, an artistic and a socio-political site" (Beville 2013, p. 603), Gangtok has been growing as India's prime tourist destination, with "a regular growth in the number of tourists visiting the state, which increased to 41,000 in 1985 and gradually culminated in 25,500 in the year 2005" (C. Latu and M. Bulai, 2011). Gangtok's economy thrives on tourism, and in the novel we find frequent reference to this aspect. Gangtok's pride is Mount Kanchenjunga, the third-highest peak in the world, a magnificent gift of Nature to the cityscape, which makes Gangtok's populace happy. The scenic view of the mountain range is the major attraction for tourists to Gangtok. It is interesting to note that the tourists' awed appreciation differs markedly from the intimate feelings of the city's inhabitants. Parajuly's old protagonist displays an emotional bond with her surroundings that no outsider can feel (p.71).

The building construction and structures have inverse financial and class connotations, whereby the old social structures have been transformed, and relationships have been affected. In the novel, Chitrlekha's cottage becomes a symbol of power, a testament to assertion and frequent participation in bureaucratic machinations (p. 69). With the proliferation and ramification of government machinery in the capital, vehicular movements have increased, as vehicle ownership testifies to the maintenance of status and positions (Parajuly 2014, p. 69). The protagonist, Chitrlekha, "born during the First World War" (p. 95), is a witness to the transformation of the cityscape. The writer uses the metaphor of the mushroom to explain the widening breadth of the constructed structure on a narrow foundation (p. 70).

The present condition of Gangtok echoes what Debord explained about the new architecture that seems within the reach of the masses but, in fact, leads to subtle transformations in the conditions of living (Debord 1955, p. 173). At the back of people's minds, the water scarcity in the adjacent Darjeeling district serves as a continual reminder of an impending disaster that may strike the city very badly in future. Apart from that, the Darjeeling district, which has long been trying to carve out its statehood in the form of Gorkhaland (p. 11) and secession from the state of West Bengal, finds sympathisers in the people, and at times the streets of Gangtok resound with demands for it (*India Today*, Datta, 2017). In the novel, besides the eighty-four-year-old protagonist, other characters also feel the striking transformation of the cityscape. The reckless growth of urban space and the rapid rise in economic activity in Gangtok are noticed by Chitrlekha's granddaughter Bhagwati, who returns to Gangtok after nine long years. She gauges the transformation, and the unplanned expansion of construction sites bewilders her (Parajuly 2014, p. 66). Her amazement at witnessing the changes corroborates Debord's statement that "Urbanism is the modern fulfilment of the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power" (Debord 1967, p. 172). Bhagwati recalls the days when she had taken her would-be husband on a tour of the important landmarks at Gangtok (p. 81), and the noticeable vehicular movements strike her as markedly different from those of her previous spatial remembrance of Gangtok. *In Land Where I Flee*, through several episodes, it is implied that walking, as a natural means of navigating the cityscape, has given way to the domination of the automobile. This change corroborates Debord's observation that the "dictatorship of the automobile, pilot-product of the first phase of commodity abundance, has been stamped into the environment with the domination of the freeway, which dislocates old urban centres and requires an ever-larger dispersion" (Debord 1967, p. 174). The transfigurations and the dispersion of space affect the characters whose memories of the place do not match the present. The driveway to Chitrlekha's cottage, in place of stairs, is an affirmation of the significance of automobiles as a benchmark of social stature and prestige (Parajuly 2014, p. 74). The novel ends symbolically with the description of Mount Kanchenjunga being partially visible to Chitrlekha's eyes through the clouds, implying that, as the construction work in front of her house continues, it would eventually block her view of the peaks altogether. It becomes a veritable case of psychogeographical pathos as the protagonist comes back home from the hospital only to encounter her helplessness to curtail the construction activity. The author ends the novel with the juxtaposition of discord and desire for economic fecundity. Chitrlekha tries to drown her mental pain by puffing on a forbidden beedi and watches helplessly at the workers, "laying the foundations for the seventh floor of the new hotel" that would bring in the uncouth class of tourists from the neighbouring state of West Bengal (Parajuly 265). Chitrlekha's mental state vis-à-vis her location can be taken as a representation of the populace and their interaction with the speeding spatial transfigurations.

## 8.5 Conclusion

Through this study, we have attempted to trace a long period of urbanism and urbanity in Gangtok by scrutinising select texts that chart the gradual transformation of the Himalayan city over the years. The select texts present Gangtok as a city known for its gorgeous natural grandeur, overshadowed by the striking exquisiteness of the Himalayan range of Mount Kanchenjunga, which retains social and cultural significance as sacrosanct and is considered the guardian deity

of Sikkim (Parajuly 2014, p. 70). The legacy of the royal family is embedded in the city's cultural fabric; for example, the aristocratic school named after the 11th king, Tashi Namgyal Academy (Das 2014, p. 46), where a character in Parajuly's novel is a student (Parajuly 2014, p. 83). However, from Ray's portrayal to Parajuly's writing, one can discern a considerable change in the power structure and hierarchy, as well as the fluidity of demography, such as the notable increase of the Nepali diasporic community. Memories, desires, and expectations of one's city are overhauled by new developments that occur with the passing of time. This especially strikes the people who are aged and who live to witness the transformations. Parajuly's Chitrlekha is an example of this category of people, and as Calvino writes, for the old people, desires for a particular spatial configuration of a city regress as memories (Calvino 1997, p. 7). Although the transfigurations affect the characters in the novel, there is also an embedded premonition that the cityscape is gradually losing its uniqueness and becoming immersed in the spectacle of growing urbanisation, affecting the populace both psychologically and physically. While Ray's works have immortalised the city's Arcadian impression, Parajuly's novel leaves the readers with questions about the city, which has grown.

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*Urban Imaginaries and Indian Cities in Literature* explores the multifaceted ways in which Indian cities are represented, contested, and reimagined in literary and cultural texts. Moving beyond conventional understandings of the city as a mere backdrop, this volume examines urban spaces as active presences that impact identities, social relations, memories, and everyday experiences. Drawing on contemporary spatial theories and interdisciplinary perspectives, the essays in this collection investigate the complex intersections of literature, cinema, language, culture, and urban life. The volume engages with diverse themes, including sensory experiences, migration, belonging, subaltern narratives, spatial politics, environmental concerns, gendered experiences, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Through studies of cities such as Kolkata, Guwahati, Mumbai, Shillong, and Gangtok, the contributors illuminate the multiple ways in which urban spaces are imagined, negotiated, and transformed across different historical and cultural contexts. This collection engages with both metropolitan and relatively underexplored urban locations and expands the scope of urban literary studies in India, and contributes to ongoing conversations in literary geography, cultural studies, and urban theory.



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