

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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