

Chapter 2

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

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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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