

The City Speaks: Re-presenting Urban Spaces in Indian Literature

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The city has been a zone of contention for a considerable amount of time in literature—a producer of narratives as well as a consumer. These cities have embodied their characters and their narratives in a way that is reflective of the city's topology, genealogy, and living archaeology. Literature, therefore, often serves to excavate the cities through its representations, and is also, in turn, unearthed. Rather than visualising the city as a null-space that exists horizontally to frame the literary work, the cities in literary works across its myriad cultural and national histories have turned more serpentine, more transgressive, and have moved in unpredictable trajectories. These cities can be utopias or dystopias, safe havens or places of terminal oppression, but they are functional mechanisms that are more often than not an intricate aspect of the text/performance itself. Within this extensive histori-'city', the urban space in Indian literature/s has arrived at a crucial point, a point of intervention that requires these adaptations to be evaluated from a subjective perspective, informed with the nuances of critical theorisation, rather than as mere set piece. But not merely in the area/s of literary creation, the burgeoning sphere of media studies surrounding urban spaces/spatialities in India has led to the mushrooming of such developments as the Sarai programme (CSDS and the Raqs Media Collective), and its consequent research output that is accessible through their site, and Vinay Lal's 2-volume *The Oxford Anthology of the Modern Indian City* besides a whole host of other works that discern the Indian city as the host-space, the ground zero for a fomentation of change, a site of evolution and dissemination of radical thought. And this radical thought courses through the literary works that feed on the cities. While such a commentary poses the risk of being elitist and exclusive in nature— by keeping the rural

space outside its deliberation—but, historically, India has a stronger literary tradition of rural spaces than a similar correspondence with urban spaces. The Independence, followed by the Emergency, and thereafter the liberalisation of the economy finally pushed the attention of writers towards the urban centres as more than mere props. Therefore, even if we are to casually remark on the status of Narayan's Malgudi as contentious towards an urban-representative literary state, it is indeed a more deliberate attempt to ingratiate the city within the story until it is no longer so—Narayan fleshes out Malgudi progressively while it corresponds to a native tradition of rural-urban narrative, and acts more in line with a rural-revivalist narrative. But the more recent developments have been more decisive in this regard. An Anita Desai novel that chronicles the city, *In Custody*, for example, cannot be mistaken for anything else. And that is still an older example, which is an evolutionary progression on the semi-/pseudo-rural narrative genetically embedded in the likes of Narayan or Raja Rao.

From a representational aspect, cities act as a space provide shelter, comfort, longing for a home, nostalgia, opportunity, fantasies, myth, fear, crime, alienation, enchantment, disease, corruption, excitement, claustrophobia, disorder and threat to socio-political, religious and economic system. Cities become the universal setting in contemporary Indian literature stretching from the development of the modern urban space in India from the turn of the last century, and poets, dramatists, writers of fiction and non-fiction, graphic novelists, travel writers and other documenters from India began to focus on two different aspects as central to the identification of urban literature where the role and impact of cities had started to being vividly portrayed and projected. However, it should be noted that certain cities in India come to exist also, and largely, due to their religious congregation and, therefore, famous Indian epics like *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* can be seen to feature socio-cultural and religious bases of, sometimes historical, and, mostly, mythologically re-

envisioned, Indian cities like Ayodhya, Varanasi, Hasthinapur, Indraprastha, Kurukshetra, Takshashila, Gokul, Vrindavan, Mathura, Kashi, Magadh, Manipur, Pundru Desh, and Cuttack. The development of a more characteristic narrative concerned with the idea of “Indian literature” culminated in the parallel development of a new canon of writers who, among other things, chose to view the cities of the day and age with a more sceptical perspective, or at least a vision that is propelled with objective inquiry. While poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, A K. Ramanujan, Keki N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Vikram Seth, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Mehrotra, R. Parthasarathy and Bibhu Padhi depict images of filth, squalor, disease, terror, loneliness, landscapes, temples, rituals, pollution, socio-political and religious corruption of Bombay, Cuttack and Delhi, in prose fiction Bombay becomes the narrative setting for Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* and *Love and Longing*, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, *Family Matters* and *Such a Long Journey*, Kiran Nagarkar’s *Ravan and Eddie*, Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, Shashi Tharoor’s *Show Business: A Novel*, Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis*, and Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* to name a few—and all these Delhis and Mumbais/Bombays, Kolkatas/Calcuttas and Madrases/Chennais are as different from each other as is permissible from within a factual framework. They are the author’s/poet’s kin, their imagination, and driven by their idea of a container that works to contain and also to allow the narrative to spill over and possess these cities. Dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Nissim Ezekiel, Manjula Padmanabhan, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Dina Mehta discuss the notion of spatiality and the nature of urban space in their drama and through an appropriation of language, culture, architecture, design, and question the traditional, conventional, the ‘folk’. Similarly, there is an immense spurt in graphic narratives that contain, as their centre, the urban space, the city, and its map acts as the frame on which the artist is able to flesh out her/his characters

and narratives. Graphic novels such as Sourav Mahapatra and Vivek Shinde's *Mumbai Confidential*, a crime noir, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*, which deals with a Emergency era revisioning of Delhi, or Sarnath Bannerjee's graphic novels—*Corridor*, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, *The Harappa Files*, and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*—are works that conform to such a model.

Indian poets, dramatists, short-story writers and novelists not only use cities to showcase the problems posed by cities but also depict how cities give birth to images, experiences and realities of society and these writers show how cities and the characters of their works intermingle to create a larger literary structure of subjectivity. Their works represent the sounds, spaces, and places of cities, and those cities not only reflect human emotions and spirit but also the gradual development of society and its constituents. By adopting and exploring certain theoretical concepts of Western urban thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Georg Simmel, Manuel Castells, Walter Benjamin, Louis Wirth, Edward Soja, Steve Pile, Katia Pizzi, Max Weber, David Harvey, Richard Lehan, David Seed, Michael Jaye, Diane Levy and Ann Watts, and bringing into perspective more of localised thought from thinkers such as Ashis Nandy, Arjun Appadurai, Ravi Sundaram, as well as the impressive output from the Sarai programme, a truly unique and contentious presentation of Indian literature is possible, projected against a seemingly monolithic, and now obtusely homogenous Western qualification of urban literatures, especially if said study can involve a more intense engagement with a wider perspective of Indian sociological and philosophical thought.

The present study proposes to study attempts to examine the diverse aspects of urban sensibility and materiality and socio-political, cultural, moral, ethical, religious and economic changes that are connected with the notion of city

spaces that make an appearance, visibly, in works of Indian literature. Generally, areas of interest include, but are not limited to the following:

1. Gendered Cities
2. The Anthropocene City
3. Mapping/Portraying the City
4. Urban vs. Rural or Urban-and-the-Rural
5. The Urban Industrial Complex in Literature
6. Imaginary Cities/The Fiction of Fictional Cities
7. Colonising/Decolonising Cities
8. The City and Mythology
9. Histori(y)-city(-ies)
10. Travel in and about the City
11. The City and Diaspora
12. Crime and the City
13. Migration and the City
14. Utopian/Dystopian Cities
15. The City and Nature/Seasons in the City
16. City and the Culture of Dissent
17. The City and Memory
18. Gothic Cities/Uncanny Cities/Strange Cities

Contributors may direct their queries and chapter proposals (within 500 words along with their short bio-biblio) to indianurbanities@gmail.com. The last date for the submission of proposals is February 28, 2020. Completed essays (within 6000 words, excluding works cited and notes), written in accordance with MLA style sheet of formatting, are to be submitted within April 30, 2020.

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