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Keynotes

Cities “visible but unseen”: Notes from some South Asian writings

Stuti Khanna

This paper invokes Salman Rushdie's idea of the “unseen” city to draw out the modes by which a city and its people are systematically inserted into the narrative economy of the visible and the audible. This emerges as an urgent political impulse in writings about cities, one that can be traced back to Charles Dickens and all the way up to our present moment. What animates this impulse, and what are some of the different narrative forms taken by it? How have the textual implications of this act of ‘seeing’ changed over the last two decades? I seek to examine this set of questions with reference to the work of some contemporary South Asian writers in this paper, as a means to think about the urban precariat—the homeless, the migrant, the dispossessed—and the ways in which it shapes both cities and their narratives.

Stuti Khanna teaches Literature in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Delhi, and has a longstanding interest in how cities are configured in writings. She has studied at the Universities of Delhi and Oxford, and has written *The Contemporary Novel and the City: Re-conceiving National and Narrative Form* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), edited *Writing the City: Looking Within, Looking Without* (Orient Blackswan, 2020), and is currently co-writing a book on *South Asian Literature: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Routledge).

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Stranger Than Fiction: The Aesthetics of Infrastructure in Three Indian Cities
Dominic Davies

Increasingly, it is the aesthetics of infrastructure—the way that the urban landscape *looks*—that drives the most dramatic and violent restructuring of the physical environment in India's “global” cities, metering out who has the right to live, work, and *be seen* in urban space. In this talk, I suggest a correspondence between this growing preoccupation with the aesthetics of infrastructure and the 21st-century rise of literary non-fiction in anglophone Indian city-writing. Together, we will consider three examples of non-fiction writing from three different Indian cities, all written by authors recently returned to India from the UK or US: Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found* (2004), Rana Dasgupta's *Capital, The Eruption of Delhi* (2014), and Kushanava Choudhury's *The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta* (2017). As I hope to show, by inverting the optical fiction of the contemporary megaproject through a rejection of its global aesthetics, these non-fiction texts instead excavate informality as the South Asian city's undergirding infrastructure and bring it into view as a powerful urbanising force.

Dominic Davies is a Senior Lecturer in English at City, University of London, where he is also director of the BA English programme. He holds a PhD and British Academy postdoctoral fellowship from the University of Oxford. He is the author of *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature* (2017) and *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (2019), along with several articles in the fields of post/colonial literature, history, and visual culture.

Panel: Mind, Materiality, and the City

City of Ruins: Architectural Encounters

of Nineteenth Century Old Goa in the Travel Accounts of Richard Burton

Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar

Afonso Albuquerque captured Old Goa in 1510, and from being a small city with inland trade it became the thriving capital (1530–1843) of the Portuguese Empire in Asia by the end of the sixteenth century. However, with the arrival of the Dutch and the British from the seventeenth century onwards, the Portuguese Empire underwent a steady downfall, leading towards the decline of Old Goa. The citizens abandoned the capital, not least because of the recurring pestilences in the city but also because of better opportunities arising in other colonial locations, including British ones. In the nineteenth century, Old Goa was largely deserted, barring few churches and convents.

It is this forlorn city that British traveller Richard Burton visited in the mid-nineteenth century. His travelogue, *Goa and the Blue Mountains* (1851), gives a flaneural perspective of Old Goa. While Burton's travel accounts examine him as a translator, explorer, and ethnographer, not much is written about his encounters with the architecture of places he visited. On stepping into the abandoned city of Old Goa, Burton remarks, "Like the modern Romans, they [Portuguese] found it cheaper to carry away cut stones, than to quarry it; but unlike the inhabitants of the Eternal City, they have now no grand object in preserving the ruins" (1851, 68-69). Portugal's lack of resources for Goa meant it was compelled to cull older (ruined) monuments instead of repairing them. Burton sought the ruins of Old Goa as a perfect metaphor for the downfall of the once-mighty Portuguese Empire. Through his travelogue Burton was presenting Portugal as a lesser empire to the European audience. This paper shows how Burton's travelogue portrays that, unlike the British empire in India, the Portuguese could not even sustain and nourish its tiny colonies in Asia. In the contemporary period, a similar saga unfolds, wherein tourists from the rest of India visiting the historical city of Old Goa continue to see it as a mere 'ruin' of Goa's Portuguese past.

Vishvesh Prabhakar Kandolkar is an Associate Professor of Architecture at Goa College of Architecture (Goa University). His research on Goa's architectural history focuses on early modern church design, as well as the evolution of Indo-Portuguese aesthetics. His writing has appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Journal of Human Values*, *Journal of Hindu Studies*, and *eTropic*. Currently, Kandolkar is the Programme Coordinator of the Masters of Architecture in Urban Design programme at the Goa College of Architecture.

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Lahore in Kim and Kim in Lahore
Shradha Kochhar

The bildungsroman *Kim* (1901) by Rudyard Kipling follows the adventures of its itinerant and eponymous protagonist, the Irish orphan Kimball O'Hara. A hybrid figure, Kim straddles the native socio-geography of India and the Western paradigms of colonial politics. In the novel, the city of Lahore emerges as not only the geographical location of Kim's early years but also a signifier of the skills that he needs to display in his negotiations through different cultural and political milieus. The paper explores Lahore through Kim's physical experience and his memory of the city at different points in the narrative. I examine Kim's role as the

prime purveyor of spatial experience through Michel de Certeau's notion of 'the ordinary practitioners of the city', individuals whose perambulations through the urban space inadvertently rewrite and subvert the totalizing gaze of the dominant power. Kim, however, is acutely aware of the way he is using and even manipulating the tangible and intangible elements of Lahore. It is this awareness that shapes his relationship with the city. In this manner, I shall extend de Certeau's theory and study the interaction between individual agency and the macro gaze of authority in urban spaces. Further, the paper employs Edward Soja's concept of 'Thirdspace' to investigate Kim's hybridity as a force that disrupts the dyad of the material reality of life in Lahore and the colonial interpretation of the city. Ultimately, the paper focuses on aspects of Kim's interaction with Lahore that holds traces of what is unsaid which fuels the protagonist's search for identity and belonging, and impacts the meaning of the city as a malleable medium of his experiences.

Shradha Kochhar is a PhD candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at BITS Pilani KK Birla Goa Campus. Her area of research is the representation of cities in the literature of colonial Punjab.

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Mapping the Changing Landscape of Shillong in Janice Pariat's Boats on Land
Panchali Bhattacharya

Shillong, often referred to as the "Scotland of the East", is the capital of the small hilly state of Meghalaya located in the north-east of India. Conveniently placed between the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, the hill-station is surrounded by subtropical forests where hills, valleys, caves, rivers, and waterfalls are available in abundance. Since the time of the arrival of the British colonial rulers to the pristine natural world of Shillong, a colossal transformation in the overall cultural milieu of the city started taking place. The essence of this transition has been minutely captured in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012) which spans from nineteenth century to the present day and focuses on the constant evolution and alteration of the eco-cultural set-up of the city. With the picturesque Shillong and Sohra as background, Pariat talks about a change from a mystical, vibrant, culturally fertile land to a landscape that is "plagued by a host of modern urban atrocities—giant concrete buildings, multi-storeyed shopping malls, rampant traffic." From the enigmatic charm of the city during the monsoon with clusters of pine trees and waterfalls to the present day Shillong "sprawled in all its unplanned ugliness", Pariat has wistfully mused over the land she grew up in and has also lamented its loss caused by rapid and unimpeded urbanization. Her fictionalised account evokes a strong feeling of *solastalgia*, a yearning for a lost landscape which used to be a place of solace, strength and support to a community. The present study aims to offer a post-pastoral reading of the stories to show how lack of commitment to sustainable and ecological urban development is integrally related to the vulnerability and eventual depletion of the ethno-cultural ethos of a region. The paper also analyses the reasons behind such transition and the possible solutions suggested by Pariat to restore the equilibrium.

Panchali Bhattacharya is an Assistant Professor (English) in the Faculty of Arts, Communication, and Indic Studies at Sri Sri University, Odisha, India. She has submitted her doctoral dissertation on the topic, "Revival of Ecological Legends in North East Indian English Fictions by Indigenous Women Writers" at the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Management, IIT Bhubaneswar, India. Her research interests include Indian English literature, Ecocriticism, Folklore Studies, and Indigenous Literature.

Panel: Space, Place, and the Postcolonial City

*Postcolonial Spatial Construction:
Reading Sarnath Banerjee's The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*
Ritam Sarkar and Somdatta Bhattacharya

The trajectory of comics in South Asia as a visual-verbal medium has been significantly different both from their European and American counterparts. The visual, as Emma Varughese has pointed out, has always been considered to be sacred and auspicious in the subcontinent till the intervention of postcolonial studies, which suggested how the visual register, along with the textual, is fraught and has multiple dimensions. This paper will begin with this premise of what (urban) comic in the postcolonial sense means and how postcolonial studies affect the field of South Asian comics. The paper will hence focus on one of the prominent aspects of South Asian comics, the nature of urbanity, through a study of Sarnath Banerjee's *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007), a narrative primarily set in Calcutta. A city like Calcutta is a "social product", made out of the culture and cultural practices inherent into the everyday lives of its inhabitants. Following Henri Lefebvre, this paper will examine how, in Banerjee, the tapestries of the local culture are woven into the visual-verbal interplay that contributes to the process of city-making. The cultural turn of geography has led to a concern with how popular culture—ideas, perspectives, and attitudes towards comics, television, print media, etc.—enables and disables identifications of one's own position within society in relation to other individuals, groups of people, and places. The present paper will attempt to address issues of postcolonial spatial construction and stratification, and their destabilizing effect on individuals, to argue that the nature of urbanity and spatial interrelations in the text are governed both by the semiotics of comics studies and politics of city narratives.

Ritam Sarkar has an MA in English Literature from The University of Burdwan, West Bengal. He is currently pursuing his PhD in English Studies at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kharagpur. His research interests are rooted in areas of comics studies, visual narratives, urban cultures, social theories of space and spatiality, and city in literature.

Somdatta Bhattacharya has a PhD in English Studies from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kharagpur. Her research interests are rooted in areas of urban cultures, social theories of space and spatiality, crime fiction, city in literature, Indian writing in English, gender and South Asian popular culture.



City, Challenges and Children in The Riddle of the Seventh Stone
Diti Vyas

This paper deconstructs how a fantasy tale for children can both realistically mirror and aspirationally set out to mitigate the challenges of cities within developing nations. Set in old Bengaluru city, Monideepa Sahu's *The Riddle of the Seventh Stone* (2010) revolves around how the siblings Deepak and Leela team up with Rishabh the rat and Shashee the spider to save their home/s from the evil property dealer Shark. Even before the reports proclaimed Bengaluru to be an unliveable, dead city, this narrative makes the threat of

ruthless property grabbing builders and land mafia, depleting green cover, and urban sprawl imminent. It is not only grandfather Thatha and grandmother Aiji's ancestral home which needs to be preserved but also the rich historical and cultural fabric it stands for. This home and its residents as well as the city have had assimilative and accommodating qualities. Once in their human forms, both Shashee and Rishabh are embraced in the household as family just as Bengaluru city assimilated immigrants after partition. True to the spirit of children's narratives, while the adults feel helpless, children emerge as harbingers of hope and agents of change. Rishabh the rat cracks the riddle of the seventh stone and reclaims a crowded space in the old city by discovering chieftain Kempegowda's 'treasure'. This signifies the need to conserve the past and to derive nourishment from it. Again, rodents destroying the Shark's den and his diabolic plan of usurping home, hints at the need for a holistic waste management plan to stop the garden city turning into a garbage city.

Diti Vyas is an Associate Professor in the Communications and Writing Area at Anant National University, Ahmedabad. She is a PhD from Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar and has received accolades for her research by organizations such as International Society for Research in Children's Literature (IRSCL). She has published in journals of repute such as *International Research in Children's Literature* (IRCL).



*Memories of Erstwhile Homes: Recollecting and Narrating
Cities Through Food in Intizar Husain's The Sea Lies Ahead*
Harismita Vaideswaran

In Intizar Husain's *The Sea Lies Ahead*, Majju Bhai memorably exclaims, "[I]and is the most God-awful thing... There are some people who live their entire lives and don't let the thought of land come anywhere near them. But the moment one thinks of it, the thought seizes you" (Husain 144). Narratives of migration to and from India and Pakistan are often imbricated in memories of and attachment to homes left behind across the newly drawn border. Places of belonging are suddenly rendered inaccessible, and attachments and rootedness to erstwhile homes now exist alongside forward-looking imperatives of nation-building on both sides of the border. Drawing from theories of memory and platial attachment articulated by Lawrence Buell and Yi-Fu Tuan, this paper will examine the ways in which spaces of affective attachment—cities, districts, villages—that lie across the newly drawn border are narrated through memory, nostalgia, and longing. Through a close, textual reading of memories of home constructed through food practices and linguistic affinities in Intizar Husain's *The Sea Lies Ahead*, I will argue that the varied ways in which recollections of "lost homes" manifest illustrates a complex network of practices of constructing, remembering, and narrating cities. These experiences of erstwhile homes and their narrations unfold at the level of various local geographies and, in so doing, gesture to tensions between identity at the individual and national levels. Relatedly, I also hope to examine the entanglements of these practices of remembering, and consequently, self-definition, with the muhajirs' diverse ways of mediating their relationships with inhabiting the city of Karachi.

Harismita Vaideswaran is an MPhil research scholar and Junior Research Fellow at the Department of English, Delhi University. Her research interests include processes of recollecting and writing wartime trauma, and personal and political resistance in Nigerian civil war fiction; the city-space and affective attachment to place in the literary imagination; and representations of food in fiction.

Panel: Belonging and Authenticity in the Popular Imagination

Tapping into Desi Chandigarh:

Popular Punjabi Songs as Affective Determinants of Cityspaces

Ishita Sareen

Chandigarh is critically discussed as a Nehruvian, modernist cosmopolis executed by French architect Le Corbusier. Today, it is lived in by insiders-outsiders—settlers from adjoining states—whose search for identity co-exists alongside a similar search by this inorganic city’s ‘natives’. This search is tied to many discursive functions of urbanity, especially popular Punjabi music, which shapes the linguistic, social and cultural cartography of the tri-city.

This paper will primarily analyse how select popular Punjabi songs appropriate Chandigarh as a fundamental organizing unit to mediate an urban style and sensibility for residents while validating their quotidian experiences. These metonymic markers sell the ‘sweet’ and ‘good’ city life to a young demographic, rendering the Chandigarh experience as desirable and enviable and transforming its architectural-cultural cartographies into affective spatial registers. Viewing and consuming these songs from within the heterogenous cosmopolis, the paper will argue that such ‘branding’ reflects a minimization of diverse consumption patterns and a hegemonic dominance of unattainable social aspirations that nevertheless resound with settlers and ‘native’ alike. Informed by Appadurai’s “continuous construction” of “ethnoscapes” around which “local practices and projects are imagined”, the paper will further argue that these songs reformulate identity within a transnational framework in which to be Punjabi is to be global. The global evokes an unpartitioned Punjabi place, generating an ethnospatial and ethnocultural *punjabiyyat* as a collective state of mind and a geographical consciousness. Illuminating the entrenched contribution of popular Punjabi music in socio-cultural urban identity, the paper will centre the city-as-backdrop and enliven Chandigarh’s cultural corpus with a fresh perspective, reminding us that music (like affective urbanities) is variable, not only shaping but also shaped by the city.

Ishita Sareen is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, DAV College, Sector 10, Chandigarh. She is also pursuing her doctoral studies at the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. Her research reads Chandigarh as a modern spatial experiment through its literary perceptions and lived experience. Between 2019–2021, she has presented her research abroad and at home at IACLALS, MELUS-MELOW, SWAPCA (Southwest Popular/American Culture Association) and the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research.

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*Dilli Hamara-Aapka, Nahin Kisi ke Baap Ka:
Narrating and Belonging to Delhi Digitally*
Meenakshi Nair

South Asian cities such as Delhi are often narrated and produced by mainstream and high culture, in this case by Anglophone and Hindi-Urdu print culture. These narrations are overwhelmingly from privileged social, economic, geographic and linguistic locations. I argue that this is a limited narration of the city in terms of gender, location, language, and class that does not bear adequate witness to labour migration, urban planning and eviction, and access to and sexual violence in urban public spaces. In this paper, I will suggest that

digital texts narrate the city differently from—and destabilise public culture that is dominated by—Anglophone and Hindi-Urdu mainstream and high culture. Digital texts allow for the emergence of a fragile, yet vibrant, alternate public sphere. I argue that digital narratives of the city could function as oppositional and interventionist interpretations of the city(scape) and urban belonging. I will demonstrate this through “Khadar ki Ladkiya” (Girls Of/From Khadar), a spoken word poem and video on YouTube collaboratively created by young women from the peri-urban locality of Madanpur Khadar. This digital text from the geographic and social margins of Delhi narrates gendered and classed experiences of mobility, violence and belonging in the city through everyday Hindi. I will show how the text reveals the city as a lived space, produced by the experiences of and relationships between the people and communities within the city. These experiences are varied, differentiated, and hierarchical. Consequently, those who ‘belong’ to the city, belong to it in different ways and to different degrees.

Meenakshi is a third-generation Malayali from Delhi. After earning her BA in English Literature from the Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, she completed her MA in Comparative Literature from SOAS. She will start her tenure as a PhD student at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in Fall 2021. Her poetry has been published by *nether Quarterly*, *VAYAVYA*, and *Porridge Magazine*.

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*The ‘Authentic’ Indian Experience:
A Study of Select Travel Blogs from Dharavi*
Ishita Sharma and Dyotana Banerjee

Dharavi in Mumbai is one of the largest slums in Asia and has received attention in popular culture through many Hollywood and Bollywood block-busters such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Gully boy* (2019). These representations are somewhat tied to a larger process of slums being portrayed as platforms where individuals’ capabilities, innovation, and enterprising spirits may flourish even amidst tremendous resource scarcity in urban India. Concomitantly, there has been a substantial increase in the number of the slum-tourists visiting the slums to experience the ‘authentic India’ in the last decade, a phenomenon which aestheticizes poverty and marginality. Being driven by self-governing principles and enterprising culture are key characteristics of neoliberal subjectivities (Harvey 2005). Scholars such as Gooptu (2013) and Jefferey (2012) discuss how the celebration of individual ability of managing with limited resources or *jugaad* is normalised in urban India in neoliberal times. Our study aims to understand how the *jugaad* culture is represented in contemporary travel vlogs on Dharavi claiming to show ‘authentic’ India. We ask, how is Dharavi portrayed on the social media platforms such as YouTube vlogs? What are some of the main themes of these popular vlogs and what kinds of urban and political discourses are constituted and shaped through them? We analyse the content of three YouTube videos, namely: ‘We Spent a Day in the Largest Slum in India’ by Asian Boss; ‘24 hours in the Biggest Slum in India’ by Naomi and Mar; and ‘My Daily Life in the Slums of Mumbai (Life Changing 5 Days)’ by Jacob Laukaitis. All three videos were shot with the aim to show and experience ‘authentic’ India. We argue that these travel vlogs are contributing to the representation of slums as depoliticised spaces by packaging and presenting the socio-spatial experiences of living in urban slums as ‘content’ for social media consumption. Everyday experiences of living in Dharavi by the youth are presented as stories of celebration, individualised successes and navigation of structural challenges with a neoliberal culture

of *jugaad*. These processes shift the viewers' attention from a structural critique of the production of marginalised spaces in Mumbai and facilitate a specific kind of depoliticisation.

Ishita Sharma has completed her MA in Society and Culture Studies from the Humanities and Social Sciences department at IIT Gandhinagar. Her research interests include Indian Politics, Women in the Political Sphere; Urban Spaces, and Youth Culture in India. Prior to her MA, she has completed her BA in Social Sciences from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad Campus.

Dyotana Banerjee, Assistant Professor, School For Life, UPES, Dehradun, has a PhD in Politics from IIT Gandhinagar. Her research interests include urban space-making and caste politics, identity politics, public culture and democracy in India. She has published her research in *Contemporary South Asia*, *Critical Asian Studies*, and *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Before her PhD, she completed an MA in Politics and International Relations from Jadavpur University and MSc in International Development from the University of Edinburgh.