Research Article

The Ambivalence of Urbanity: The City as an Open and Closed Space[1]

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This essay thinks through the importance of the urban context for understanding post-Partition Punjabi cultural formations, through the example of the writing of Ajeet Cour (b. 1934). Cour's work engages with the possibilities available—particularly for women—in the urban context, at the same time that it foregrounds the limits and constraints of that context. Analysis centres on two collections of short stories from the early 1990s. One explores the lives of urban women, and the constraints as well as new possibilities they find in the city; the other addresses the violence enacted against the Sikh community in Delhi in 1984, and the ongoing violence in the Indian state of Punjab in the 1980s. Through both of these collections, quite distinctive in their subject matter and focus, Cour exposes the ambivalence of the urban space: it can act as a place for both coexistence and solidarity, and for possible new modes of existence, outside of the constraints of patriarchy and other forms of social hierarchy, and at the same time as a place of violence, brutality, and the re-inscription of hierarchy and difference. Such work allows us to appreciate the need to account for the shape of urbanity—in all its complexity—in Punjabi culture, and to situate Punjabi-language writing in its urban contexts.

Ajeet Cour, Punjabi, Delhi, Lahore, Partition

Introduction

There is a saying one hears on arriving in Lahore, Pakistan: *Jis ne Lahore nahi vekhia, uh jammia nahi* (One hasn't been born, until one has seen Lahore). The sentiment this statement carries—regarding the centrality of the urban centre in Punjab—undergirds this essay, to consider urban imaginaries that are both present and missing in our understanding of the Punjab region as a whole. Now, of course, there are two Punjabs: one in India and one in Pakistan, divided in accordance with colonial census records that divided Muslim-majority districts from those with a non-Muslim majority (Chester 2009; Virdee 2018). There are many dimensions to the traumas of Partition, which impacted not just the Punjab region but also divided the cultural and linguistic region of Bengal, divided between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India. Partition also drew a new border across the continuous cultural regions of what is now Sindh (Pakistan) and in India, Rajasthan and the Rann (desert) of Kachchh (Ansari 2015, Ansari et al. 2014, Chatterji 1994, 2007; Kothari 2007). In Punjab, the drawing of the border led to *en masse* migration and catastrophic violence as members of different religious communities enacted what was usually represented as retaliatory violence upon

members of other communities, a deadly series of successive acts of vengeance (Ahmed 2014; for information on scale, see Agence France-Presse 2017). Women bore the brunt of this retribution, enacted through widespread sexual violence and abduction (Butalia 2000, Menon & Bhasin 1998).

A lesser discussed impact of Partition's violence was its reconfiguration of the urban, the rural, and what comes in between, and the separation of Punjab's great city, Lahore, from the parts of Punjab that lay in India. Lahore, that urban heart of Punjab, was thus rendered completely invisible on the Indian side. On the Pakistani side it was recreated in a sense without the religious and cultural diversity that once characterized it. The secondary urban centres that remained in the Indian Punjab represent another face of urbanity, just as smaller urban centres in Pakistan present their own. Thus, the rural/urban interface bears a complicated form in both the Punjabs (Murphy 2022). But there is still something about Lahore, Punjab's historically largest urban centre. It was a major city with strong links to both the Persianate and the Arabic speaking worlds to the West and to the South, and was the occasional location of the Mughal capital. It was the seat of the independent Punjabi imperial formation under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the first half of the 19th-century. And finally, it was also a major administrative centre under British rule (Murphy 2022). At Partition, Lahore saw the influx of large numbers of refugees, from Punjab and beyond. In India, the federal capital New Delhi beckoned many non-Muslim migrants—mostly Sikhs and Hindus—from the Pakistan side of Punjab at the time of Partition. Delhi, in this sense, in some ways came to stand in for Lahore in the postcolonial Indian state, as a quintessentially urban, Punjabi space, somewhat ironically echoing its earlier administrative inclusion in the province of Punjab under the British until 1911 (Geva 2022: 8).

Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (2000: 191) have argued that historically Delhi "carried the stamp of being an Indo-Islamic city *par excellence*," but it was with the migration of Partition that "Delhi was transformed," as William Dalrymple (1993: 44) put it in his travelogue about the city, *City of Djinns,* "from a small administrative capital of 900,000 people to a Punjabi-speaking metropolis half the size of London." This exceeds general estimates that put the population of Delhi at approximately 1.7 million in 1956 (Geva 2022: 90).[2] Regardless, the city was certainly transformed: Partition brought about the arrival of half a million non-Muslim refugees, mostly Hindu and Sikh, and the out-migration of approximately 350,000 Muslims, roughly 75% of Delhi's Muslim population (Geva 2017: 770, Geva 2022: 90), who went to Pakistan often not intending to leave permanently, as Vazira Zamindar (2020) has shown. Delhi became, in many ways, a Punjabi city—and even today remains so in part, with enclaves like Punjabi Bagh or Punjabi Garden where many migrants from Punjab came to reside. And thus stands the contradiction: Delhi was rendered a culturally-Punjabi urban centre that was outside of Punjab itself and that functioned simultaneously as the federal centre of the Indian state. In this way, it could perhaps never fully capture and express a Punjabi inhabitation. For those from Lahore, however, Delhi offered a city that might somehow compare to the urban centre they had left behind. The newly founded city of Chandigarh came later and has only recently achieved a significantly dense urban character. Indeed, the memory of Lahore has remained vividly alive for many of Delhi's inhabitants. As Deepra Dandekar (2022: 054) has beautifully shown in an account of a visitor from Lahore in Delhi, even second and third generation *Dillīwāla*s or residents of Delhi "embodied the life of another city as if continuing to live in Lahore in absentia… [and] were recreating a timeless Lahore" for this visitor, in their homes.

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[2] London at the time had a population of roughly 8 million; Lahore, prior to Partition, had roughly 700,000 residents. For London's population, see https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/population-change-1939-2015 (accessed 14.01.2022). For Lahore's population in 1941, see Krishan (2004: 82). On the population of Delhi in 1941 and 1956, see Geva (2022: 26).

The life of Lahore thus continues, in Delhi, a "timeless… relationship with the past that is lived and celebrated in absentia in the present" (Dandekar 2022: 56).

Is urbanity a useful heuristic for thinking through Punjabi-language writing in the wake of Partition, particularly in India, where the Punjab's urban heart had been lost and replaced by a city with contrasting affinities, and only smaller urban sites in the Punjab itself? If as Susanne Rau (2020) has suggested, we see urbanity defined in relational terms, as a relationship to a city, we can see the enduring presence of the urban in Punjabi cultural forms: a significant amount of Punjabi language writing has been done by authors in and in relation to cities – Patiala, Chandigarh, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and of course, Delhi, now a mega-city (see, for example, the work of Patiala-based Dalip Kaur Tiwana [Murphy 2024] and Delhi-based Kartar Singh Duggal [Murphy 2023]). For many, this will seem counterintuitive: there is a strong association of Punjabi culture with the rural, as Radha Kapuria (2023: 30) has argued, whereby "[t]raditions of urbanity, literacy, learning, and culture in Punjab have generally been inscribed as being extraneous to Punjabiness." This is particularly so in India, where Lahore was made absent, and where Punjabi culture came to be seen as a definitively non-urban phenomenon. As another famous aphorism puts it, "the culture of Punjab is agriculture." However, there is also a deep and abiding urbanity in Punjabi society that such a formulation disregards—as Kapuria's (2023) beautiful work on classical music in 19th-century Punjab has shown—and to which it is time we return.

If as Rau (2020) has argued, "a city consists not only of a collection of built structures but also of its dominant ways of life, as well as of ideas and perceptions," then, Punjabi urbanity is something that needs to be thought through. As Rau outlines, urbanity as a concept has been used to indicate a set of ethical commitments and ways of being that do not simply reflect the built landscape. In some ways this has led to the conceptual fuzziness of the term, and, at times, its lack of analytical utility. Yet, as Jörg Rüpke (2022) has explored in his recent work, this aspirational aspect of urbanity—its embrace of coexistence and shared belonging – demands our attention alongside the more material dimensions of the urban. This essay seeks to stake out the possibilities and impossibilities of a sense of urbanity in this register in the formations of a Punjabi cultural imaginary in post-Partition India. My focus is an author whose work stakes out such an urban vision, grounded within the conditions of its own impossibility. In this, I embrace the "core ambivalence.. underlying urbanity" that Martin Fuchs, Susanne Rao, and Jörg Rüpke (2023: 18) have highlighted, in the sometimes contradictory inhabitations that it can entail. We will see that gender is central to the urban imaginary that is staked out, in this instance. This should not come as a surprise to us: as Kapuria (2023: 195) has noted, "[c]ities… have traditionally offered spaces for autonomous women," both in Punjab as elsewhere in South Asia. The urban allows for such possibilities to unfold—alongside and within constraints that simultaneously limit them.

Ajeet Cour (b. 1934)

Of the many thousands of new Punjabi residents of Delhi who originally hail from Lahore, Ajeet Cour (b. 1934) emerged as a leading voice in India's post-Partition Punjabi intellectual life. Born in Lahore, she moved with her family to India at Partition and settled in Delhi. Cour was a major figure in the building of Punjabi cultural life in Delhi after Partition: she was involved in founding the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature in 1977 in India with her daughter, the renowned visual artist Arpana Cour, and participated in the building of Punjabi-language institutions in the city such as the Punjabi Sahit Sabha, which remains active in the hosting of

events and in supporting writers working in the Punjabi language.[3] These institutions have been an important part of post-Partition Punjabi intellectual presence in Delhi. She is well known for her two autobiographical works *Khānābadosh* (Homeless [1982]) and *Kūṛā Kabāṛā* (Refuse Can [1999]). The first received a prize from the Sahitya Akademi (the premiere national literary body/institution in India), and the latter was first serialized in the literary journal *Arsī* (K.S. Duggal [1997?]). The two have been translated from Punjabi and published in a single English-language edition entitled *Weaving Water* (Ali and Minocha 2018). In these works, Cour describes the trajectory of her life, from Lahore to Delhi, and documents the trials of a woman writer living in a patriarchal order, and the extreme precarity that stepping outside of that order entails. The urban, as we will see, has something to do with the possibility of taking such as step.

Cour's autobiographical work is consistent with the interests that have dominated her fiction: her fictive work is characterized by a powerful commitment to exposing the workings of patriarchy, and articulating a vision of women's agency that rises against it. This commitment is worked through, in particular, in her exploration of urban life, and of her use of Punjabi as a language of literature, which has been worked out in complex ways in both India and Pakistan since Partition (Murphy 2018). She writes in a spare and direct style, distilling her words and her characters alike to their simplest and yet fullest forms. In her work we see different kinds of power differentials that work alongside patriarchy—between rural and urban, between rich and poor, between elite educated and the striving lower and middle classes, and across religious and other forms of social difference. But all of these are deeply imbricated with the workings of patriarchy itself, where women as well as men seek to derive power from the system. Cour portrays urban settings far more than rural, providing readers with a sense of women's options and possibilities, as they seek a chance to live. Her vision is particularly grounded in Delhi, which is the setting for most of her stories—although she does also return to Lahore, the city of her childhood, which in many ways defines every city for her, as we will see below. And so, it is to Delhi that we turn, to consider the urban imaginary Cour stakes out for this place.

The Ambivalence of the City

We take as exemplary a collection of short stories published in 1994: *Āpṇā Āpṇā Jaṅgal* (My Personal Jungle). This is quintessentially a collection of the city: it offers readers stories that are set in or connected to a working women's hostel in Delhi. In the volume, Cour brings together a diverse group of women from different backgrounds with diverse stories, who are facing a range of challenges. All of them express something of the special circumstances, opportunities and tensions of the city. In her preface to the collection, Cour notes that she had been wanting, for the 25 years before the compilation was published, to write about the *ujāṛ, bīābān, badhavās, te baukhalāī hoī ikall nāl bharī registānī dunīā* (the desolate, deserted, confused, and desert-like world filled with mind-numbing loneliness) of the working women's hostel (Cour 1994: unnumbered). Indeed, she also includes one story, not from the hostel, but about a trip she takes with her family—this is the story that gives the collection its name, which she calls a novelette. She includes this story, she tells us, because she felt that if she had only written about the working women's hostel, this would induce despair (*vīrānī*) in her readers

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(ibid.). The city may offer possibilities for autonomy for women, but Cour suggests at the outset that these stories are not simple tales of triumph.

We begin with the first story of the collection, entitled "*Akk de Phull*" (The Flowers of the *Akk* Plant*)* (Cour 1994: 9-45). The story tells of a young woman living in the working women's hostel, that is actually called *Kamm karan vālīāṅ kuṛīāṅ dā hosṭal* (Cour 1994: 10): the term used is "girls," not "women." There is really only one character staying at the hostel who could be called a girl—and her name is Rāj. The story opens by portraying the fury of Mansukhānī, one of the residents of the hostel, who has gone to complain about Rāj to the hostel warden. Mansukhānī is haunted by a kiss she had bestowed on Rāj. This brings the story back in time, to tell the story of Rāj and Mansukhānī's relationship. Rāj is from a poor family, and her father abandoned her and her mother. Because of this, she feels that everyone around her treated her like *kūṛā* or garbage, because she and her mother had been rejected (ibid.: 13). Rāj wants to escape the village, does well in school, and she tells her grandfather—who has been looking after her—that she must move to Chandigarh, and stay there in the hostel. It is in a hostel, in Delhi, that she meets Mansukhānī. Rāj is impressed by Mansukhānī's apparent wealth—her niece is an actress, and she has nice saris and money that she shares. Mansukhānī says she wants her freedom, and that being near one's family is pointless (ibid.: 17). Rāj pursues her interest in dance rather than going to school and eventually tells her grandfather that she is working for a ballet, which is her true calling. Worried about his granddaughter, her grandfather comes to Delhi to see her, but he is not allowed to see Rāj except during visiting hours. He decides that not only is the *chaukidār* (doorman) heartless, but *sāre shahirīāṅ bāre, khās karke dillī shahir vic rahiṇ vālī sārī khalkat bare faislā kar dittā* (decides this about all city-dwellers, particularly all the people living in the city of Delhi) (ibid.: 19). With this, in the first pages of the story, we get a sense of both the possibilities and limitations enabled by the city. In the end, Mansukhānī helps to facilitate a resolution between Rāj and her grandfather, and he leaves. Rāj is thrilled that he accepts her life choices (ibid.: 22-25).

This begins the complication of Rāj and Mansukhānī's relationship. They hug: it is a long hug, which strikes Rāj as strange (ibid.: 25). Later Mansukhānī gives Rāj beautiful saris, like nothing she has had before. When Mansukhānī massages her neck at night, Rāj is uncomfortable. After one of Rāj's performances, in which she wears one of Mansukhānī's saris, Mansukhānī undresses her when they come home. Rāj cries, and Mansukhānī begs for her forgiveness, giving her more gifts. This pattern continues, but is further complicated by Rāj meeting another character, Kailāsh through the ballet (ibid.: 27). They become romantically involved. Mansukhānī is upset, and one night Rāj wakes up to realize that Mansukhānī is crying. Rāj is angry that Mansukhānī does not seem to realize that she is too old—over 50 years old, something we learn at the opening of the story—to offer anything to Rāj. They come to some kind of understanding, with Kailāsh sometimes taking them both out. But Mansukhānī remains distant. Eventually, Rāj stops taking Mansukhānī along with her when she goes out with Kailāsh and starts staying out late with him. This results in Mansukhānī's complaint to the warden about Rāj, with which the story opens (ibid.: 31). The warden, Mrs. Malhotra is not that sympathetic however, saying: *mainūṅ patā e kāhde vāste tere ḍhiḍḍ vic pīṛ ho rahī hai* (I know why you have such a pain in your stomach) (ibid.: 32).

The story then enters into a general description of this place, the hostel for women, as a place of *badhavāsī* or delirium. In every block, women live alone (ibid.: 34):

> *Ās pās de balākāṅ de har kamre vic ikallīāṅ auratāṅ rahindīāṅ san. Polṭrī fārm vic murgīāṅ de ḍarbiāṅ vāṅgūṅ āpṇe āpṇe kamre vic baṅd uh āpṇī sunsān zindagī te us zindagī dīāṅ tamām kauṛīāṅ kasailīāṅ ghaṭnāvāṅ nūṅ sameṭ ke rahi rahīāṅ san.*

> And in the nearby blocks, women lived alone in every room. Like chickens in their

coops on a poultry farm, they were locked into their own rooms, to live their barren lives together with all the bitter and harsh events of their lives.

In this harsh and desolate environment, women speak ill of any other woman with male visitors—*kauṛīāṅ kasailīāṅ gallāṅ, hamad te kīne nāl bharīāṅ gallāṅ* (harsh, bitter words, words filled with rancour and jealousy) (ibid.: 34). So, in the end, *uh auratāṅ āpṇīāṅ sāthaṇāṅ dīāṅ sabh toṅ vaḍīāṅ dushman san* (those women were the greatest enemies of their own female companions) (ibid.: 34). We thus see the barrenness of the hostel, the women's lack of solidarity with each other, and their deep alienation. We then return to the main story, where Mansukhānī considers her own life history, of how she was raped by her uncle at the age of 12, because of which she began doing poorly at school. Her father put her in a hostel for girls, and she loved it: she was finally free of the fear of her uncle. She stayed there, and then applied for a job as a teacher, and was successful. In this way, her long stay in the hostel began. The story then returns to the present. Mansukhānī decides to wait. She suspects that Kailāsh is not serious about Rāj. So, she behaves in a kind and generous way again and does not seek to change the terms of her friendship with Rāj. This makes Rāj happy. And Mansukhānī seems to be right: it is time for Kailāsh to propose marriage to Rāj, but he is indecisive. He does not act. Then Rāj tells Mansukhānī one day that Kailāsh is insisting she spend the night with him. Mansukhānī is enraged, telling Rāj that he is using her. Rāj insists on staying with him, and when she returns the next day, Mansukhānī throws her out of their shared room. Rāj sits with her head on her trunk, crying, while everyone around watches her. No one helps or comforts her. In the end, the warden tells her to decide, when she is ready, about whether or not she plans to stay on at the hostel. Here women are independent, and yet cruel and unforgiving; there is no respite. The urban landscape both promises possibility and freedom, and cruelly forecloses that possibility, in bitter terms.

The second story in the collection offers similarly ambivalent visions. It tells the story of the same warden introduced in *Akk de Phull,* (The Flowers of the *Akk* Plant)*,* Mrs. Malhotra, whose extra-marital relationship with Lieutenant Governor Mahesh Chandra—described in the story—leads to her being appointed as the warden of the hostel. Mrs. Malhotra's greed and unbridled ambition to be a successful Hindi writer drives the story: she embraces the status she derives from her address at Curzon Road in Delhi, at the hostel, and undertakes a 'public relations' campaign to gain a position in the writers community (Cour 1994: 65). She attends prominent events and functions with all the time she has, in her position as Warden (ibid.: 63). As a part of her campaign, she visits an event with her daughter, where she meets a prominent poet. He takes a sudden interest in her work and visits her at home. Mrs. Malhotra thinks that the poet is in love with her until she sees him outside, meeting with her 19-year-old daughter. In the end, both her daughters leave her—one of them becoming a Naxalite revolutionary, and her younger daughter with the poet who is of Mrs. Malhotra's age and who is still married to his third wife, who will not give him a divorce. In the end, all she has is Mahesh Chandra, who asks her to accompany him to Leh on a vacation (Cour 1994: 78). In this story, the city is a land of raw ambition and greed, where social and familial relationship cannot survive its bleak force. An affair of convenience and self-interest emerges as the only truth.

There are two other stories in the collection that offer less ambivalent visions of what the city offers women. The story *Kaṅnūṅ* (Cour 1994: 79-110), named after the nickname of its main character, portrays the life of a young woman rebelling against her elite family to embrace the love of her nanny, whom she sees as her real mother. Here, the city allows women to thwart conventional power structures, and embrace new socialities and forms of familial bonding across caste and class. In the final story about the hostel, entitled *āwāz, sirf ketalī dī* (Only the Voice of the Kettle) (Cour 1994: 111-127), we read of a woman for whom the hostel offers an escape route from a life of drudgery and violence, and her friendship with a South Indian

lawyer, who also lives at the hostel. They share coffee, and offer each other solidarity, as they seek to create a haven from the violence of patriarchy that surrounds them.

The Violence of the City

Cour offers readers a striking articulation of the contradictions of the urban imaginary in her work that addresses the violence of 1984, when Sikhs were targeted in a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign: a set of stories published in a collection entitled *Navaṁbur Churāsī* (November 1984) (Cour 2005).[4] 1984 was a year of deep trauma for the Sikh community. The years leading up to 1984 were characterized by deadly violence in the Indian Punjab as separatist forces rose to prominence within a broader field of criticism of the federal centre's treatment of Punjab. The context for this was the Emergency of 1975-1977, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's abrogation of democratic processes, civil liberties and protections, and her routing of any person who might represent a form of opposition to her (with many bystanders among them), as she was accused of electoral fraud. Gyan Prakash (2019: 39) argues convincingly for seeing The Emergency as a "turning point in the history of Indian democracy," when the "gap between…the promise of postcolonial freedom and its failed realization" became too great (Prakash 2019: 39, 110–111). The trials of the Indian Punjab and for the Sikh community are grounded in, and extend out of, this period, when the Akali Dal, a prominent political party in Punjab that positioned itself as reflecting *panthic* or Sikh community interests, joined a diverse constellation of other parties and groups from across the country to challenge Indira Gandhi's overextension of power. The search for greater autonomy in the Punjab grew out of Gandhi's fundamental assault on democratic practice. Gandhi's return to power in 1980 and her continuing interference in Punjabi state politics in the years that followed led to what has been called the 'Punjab crisis': calls for greater autonomy and—in some cases—for full independence for Punjab that brought about increasing conflict in the state, and with the federal centre. The scale of the crisis for Sikhs across the political spectrum during this time cannot be overstated. A brutal attack by the Indian army on the Sikh central shrine complex at Amritsar, the Harmandir Sahib/Darbar Sahib/Golden Temple in June 1984 led to the death of thousands of pilgrims who were killed alongside the separatist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and many of his followers and the destruction of the Akal Takhat, the centre of Sikh administration. As a result, Indira Gandhi was killed by two of her bodyguards who were Sikh on October 31st of the same year in 1984. This was followed by an organized anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi in which thousands of Sikhs (largely but not exclusively from less affluent classes and/or less elite castes) were hunted down, raped, killed, and/or maimed, with encouragement and help from officials and state machinery.

Was this the failure of urbanity? Or, was it a competing form of urbanity, the coming together of a force to destroy that which had been rendered foreign or 'Other' in the midst of the diversity of the urban landscape? Cour's stories that address this violence bring this question to the forefront, rendering it in stark relief. In the story *Navaṁbur Churāsī* (November 1984), in the eponymous collection of stories, Cour describe her own experience of that violence (Cour 2005 [1996]: 16-28). This is vividly clear to the reader, not just because she utilizes the first person—as she does in many of her stories—but because, in this story, she mentions her daughter, Arpana, by name (Cour 2005 [1996]: 17). This too is characteristic of many of her stories, such as the eponymous story from the collection *Apṇā Apṇā Jaṅgal,* which is not about the working women's hostel but about a family trip that Cour took. Such stories are about Cour herself. In this case, the placement of Cour and her family at the centre of the story enables a

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[4] Cour has also written stories that address the violence in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s, such as a story entitled "Dead End" translated by the author herself, (Kali for Women 1990), which describes an encounter between a woman, whose brother may have been killed by separatist forces, and an "extremist" (ibid.: 72).

vivid accounting of the violence of 1984. She describes the scene (Cour 2005 [1996]: 16):

> *lokāṅ nūṅ caurāhiāṅ vich katal kītā jā rihā sī. Dariṅdiāṅ de hajūm netāvāṅ dī rahinumāī vich galīāṅ muhalliāṅ vich haral-haral karde ghumm rahe san. Ghar luṭṭe jā rahe san, sāṛe jā rahe san. Lok halāk kite jā rahe san.*

> People were being murdered in the squares. Crowds of beasts were wandering around, bustling, in the lanes and neighbourhoods, as directed by political leaders. Houses were being looted and were being burned. People were being butchered..

Cour draws a direct analogy between this and the violence of Partition (Cour 2005 [1996]: 16):

> *ese tarhāṅ hoiā sī. Bilkul ese tarhāṅ. Jadoṅ ise malikā de pitā ne mulak nūṅ khuṅḍhe chākū nāl do ṭukaṛiāṅ vich kaṭṭṇā manzūr kar liā sī.*

> It was like this, just like this, when this leader's father accepted the cutting of the country into two parts with a dull knife.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India at the time of the division of Punjab and other parts of British India to form the two postcolonial states of India and Pakistan. The violence of Partition is portrayed here as parallel to the assault on Sikhs in 1984, a sense of repetition that is often invoked with regard to traumatic violence in South Asia (Mahn and Murphy 2018: Introduction). But even in this story of violence and despair, Cour describes how people came together to help each other, to seek out and to give support—evoking, in so doing, a topos that emerges in the various tellings of the Partition, highlighting, as Alok Bhalla (1994: xi) beautifully puts it, "acts of kindness and decency, courage and selflessness—… acts which, being free always from prejudices of race and religion, suggested modes of behaviour which we had failed to transform into qualities of our ordinary culture during the time of the Partition." Cour expresses a similar sentiment when she writes *Manukkh katal ho rahe san, par manukkhtā katal nahīṅ sī hoī* (humans were being murdered, but humanity had not been killed) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 18). Humanity did still exist. This does not mean that things were quickly resolved. The army that was supposed to protect people was nowhere to be found (Cour 2005 [1996]: 18, 20). People were being refused medical attention (Cour 2005 [1996]: 19). The police were themselves dangerous and directly involved in the violence (Cour 2005 [1996]: 22). And those impacted and rendered homeless (fleeing the violence in their neighbourhoods) were unable to contact anyone for help (Cour 2005 [1996]: 20). When help finally arrived in the form of a government officer, he sought to control the people's own relief efforts (Cour 2005 [1996]: 23-25): they had to fight for their informal relief operations to be reopened. Still, she argues, some aspect of humanity or *manukkhtā* somehow persisted.

Cour's story reports the 1984 violence, but it also analyses it, reflecting on what it meant then, and what it continues to mean. Important in this task are the analogies that Cour draws, not just to Partition, but to other acts of great violence. One analogous conflagration is the Holocaust: she describes the new refugee camp that she took shelter in as possibly analogous to the ghettos that Jews were forced into under the Nazis (Cour 2005 [1996]: 19, 22). In that case too, she observes, lists were drawn up of people who were to be targeted with deadly and careful planning—albeit at a far greater scale in the case of the Holocaust, as she also observes. She also looks more broadly for historical connections:

> *Te ajj, jadoṅ maiṅ savā nauṅ sālāṅ magaroṅ navambar de kāle te lahū-bhijje surakh dināṅ dī dāstān likh rahī hāṅ, bosnīā te sārāyīvo te rawāṅḍā vic lakkhāṅ mazlūm katal ho rahe ne. pichle do varhiāṅ toṅ. Te āpṇe hī mulak vich bhivaṅḍī te*

maliānā te bambaī de lahū-bhijje varke mere sāhmṇe pharpharā rahe ne. varke, jinhāṅ toṅ itihās hameshā sharamsār rahegā. Te panjāb te kashmīr te bihār te āsām! Har thāṅ te use tarhāṅ de surakh baddal chhāe hoe ne. te nāgāsākī te hiroshimā ajj vī sāḍīāṅ yādāṅ vic khauf de rauṅgaṭe khaṛe karde rahiṅde ne. (Cour 2005 [1996]: 23)

And today, when I am writing the story of the black and blood-soaked red days of November, after more than a year, hundreds of thousands of oppressed people are being murdered in Bosnia and Sarajevo and Rwanda. For the last two years. And in my own country, the blood-soaked pages of Bhiwandi [Maharashtra], Maliana [Uttar Pradesh], and Bombay flutter before me. Pages that will always bring shame to history. And Punjab and Kashmir and Bihar and Assam! Red clouds have spread over every place. And even today, the memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still cause the hair to stand on end.

Bhiwandi, Maliana and Bombay were locations of deadly riots in 1984, 1987, and 1992 respectively (as well as 1982). Seeing these incidents of violence as parallel and connected, and asserting the commonality that is born of suffering and conflict, Cour articulates a common humanity in the face of violence. Cour in this way connects the suffering of the Sikhs in Delhi and other urban centres in 1984 to other urban "riots" across the country, highlighting in particular anti-Muslim violence. This brings the Punjab conflict into a broader view, not singularizing it into a unique experience of one community. It is part of a larger problem. It also highlights that while Sikhs were a prominent community in New Delhi, particularly after Partition, they were overall a minoritized community that was vulnerable, like other minorities in other Indian states.

The violence of 1984 is at the centre of the story *Giṭṭe vic pīṛ* (Ankle Pain) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 81-97). This story describes a family that is caught in the violence of the period marked by separatist activity and government repression in Punjab, which began in the early 1980s and intensified after 1984. Extensive human rights violations have been documented from this period, from the decade of the 1980s to the 1990s with repercussions in the next decade.[5] Ajeet Cour describes the time thus: *ih din ī dahishat de san. Dahishat de mausam! Khauf nāl suṅgaṛ suṅgaṛ turdīāṅ havāvāṅ* (these were days of terror. The season of terror. Winds stirring, pressed by fear) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 86). In the story, a young man driving a motorcycle is injured when a bomb goes off. His mother and younger brother are called to the hospital in Kapurthala from their small village consisting of 40-50 houses, located 25-30 miles away from the city. The mother stays with her elder son and sends her younger son home to care for the animals. After returning home, soldiers come to their home and question him about his

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[5] It is well known in the scholarly domain and in human rights circles that the Indian state engaged in repressive and violent police tactics to suppress the movement for an independent Punjab, under the name of Khalistan, which can be translated literally as the 'Land of the Pure', or more specifically, the 'Land of the Khalsa', wherein Khalsa denotes a form of orthopraxic Sikh identity. From 1987 to 1992, during a period of President's Rule, local governance was dismissed, and the federal government controlled the state. In this time, counterinsurgency tactics included extra-judicial killings, fake encounters (staged encounters between people said to be [but not prosecuted with due process as] militants and the police that ended with the death of people said to be militants), abductions, and torture. These repressive tactics continued well into the 2000s. Human-rights advocates were also targeted and killed, as has been detailed in an extensive 2007 Human Rights Watch Report ("Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India," *Human Rights Watch/ Ensaaf*, October 2007 https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/india1007/3.htm (accessed 03.12.2022). see also "Police Torture in Punjab, India: An Extended Survey" by Ami Laws and Vincent Iacopino (2002: 195-210).

brother's activities. He must be guilty of something: why was he there, where the bomb went off? The next day the younger son returns to the city to see his brother and to bring food for his mother. He donates blood at the hospital, which his brother will need for his operation. The narrator of the story notes (Cour 2005 [1996]: 88):

> *ajīb gall e, khūn dā koī mazahab nahīṅ huṅdā. Zāt-pāt, dharam-mazahab, gorā-kālā, sohaṇā-kojhā, sabh toṅ beniāz e khūn dā dharam. Ihdā dharam e siraf jisam vich gardash karnā te ziṅdagī dā tohafā deṇā.*

> It is a strange thing: blood has no religion. Caste distinctions, religion and faith, black and white, beautiful and ugly: the religion of blood is indifferent to all these things. Its religion is only to make the body work and to give the gift of life.

The younger brother is sent home again—he does not want to go—but he does not want to worry his mother by telling her what happened with the soldiers. He asks (Cour 2005 [1996]: 88):

> *ki uhdā kasūr kī e? te kī kasūr uhde vīr dā jihṛā khushī khushī gharoṅ nikaliā sī, dostāṅ nāl gallāṅ karan te kitābāṅ risāle kharīdaṇ? Par ih mausam ajihā sī jis vic suāl siraf ikko ī dhir kar sakdī sī. Uṅj te har zamāne vic suāl karan dā hakk siraf ose ī dhir nūṅ huṅdā e jis kol tākat hove.*

> What was he guilty of? And what was his brother's crime, who left the house so happily to go buy some books and magazines? But the season was such that only one party was able to ask questions. And in that way, always, only the party that is in power has the right to ask questions.

The younger son worries that he is being followed, but manages to get home. After he falls asleep, he is visited again by soldiers. Accusations follow, and then a brutal beating. He still does not want to tell his mother about this, as she is already overcome with worry for her elder son. So, he hides his situation and goes to sleep at a Gurdwara (Sikh congregational site) to avoid going home. On the fourth day after the accident, his brother wakes up and complains of a pain in his ankle, and begs for medicine. The older brother's leg is gone, and he suffers from the pain where it should have been; at the same time, the younger brother carries his own injuries but can tell no one about what has happened to him. We see a similar reference to the unspeakability of fear in the story *Billīāṅ vālī koṭhaṛī* (The Room of Cats) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 53-57). A room of cats was a threat that the protagonist's mother and grandmother used: if he did not behave himself, he would be put into a room full of cats. Those cats for him, represented fear. But now, as the character tells us, the whole world had become a room of cats. And he had been shut inside it, without doing anything wrong (Cour 2005 [1996]: 54). He goes out to the fields and feels at peace, when he hears the sound of footsteps. He is terrified. When he meets the person following him—who is also avoiding him—he meets another boy who is as frightened of him as he is of the boy. They laugh at their own fears. This time, they are safe.

Cour was known for her capacious vision, and her foregrounding of women's experiences. She was active in Delhi, and played a central role in the development of Delhi as a place for Punjabi literature—in this so-Punjabi-city, not in the Punjab. Cour, who earlier had strong ties to Indira Gandhi in her building of art institutions in Delhi, was also a vocal critique of the Indian state and its role in the violence against the Sikh community in 1984—as we see from her stories analysed in this article. She highlights what she calls humanity or *manukkhtā*, that which exceeded in the violence of the 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs. But on the other hand, the

urban space is also a space of persecution and conflict—just as the girls' hostel is a place of both possibility and liberation, and of petty, unrelenting constraint alongside possible freedom.

Can we be sure that the violence Cour describes is not itself an aspect of urbanity, where the idea of 'belonging' has been weaponized to exclude, just as it includes? If this is so, a concept of plural urbanities has the potential of describing social bodies in different ways, placing them on a continuum from the inclusionary to the exclusionary. There may be moments of inclusion and of exclusion in any given urban context: for example, caste-based differences may persist in places where religious plurality is maintained. Gender differentiation and exclusion, for another example, often accompany urbanities of all different kinds, even those we valorise today as cosmopolitan, even as we recognize that what marks the cosmopolitan may not be fully definable (Pollock et al. 2000: 577). Indeed, to include 'some' is always to also exclude 'others'. Cour herself describes such competing urbanities. On the one hand, she portrays the violence of the urban in the story 'November 1984' and, on the other, she describes how people came together in that time to create an urbanity that served people and protected them, even as neighbour attacked neighbour with state support, uprooting the shared urban landscape. Cour clearly sees the urban as providing new possibilities for women's agency, such as in *Ik Sī Kamalā Mahirā* (There was One Kamala Mahira) in *Navaṁbur Churāsī,* where the protagonist is able to gain economic independence. When she realizes she is being used by her brother and sister-in-law, she strikes out on her own in the city, mobilizing her financial independence (Cour 2005 [1996]: 130-140). However, in *Dād Deṇ Vāle* or (Giver of Praise) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 98-121) in the same collection, Cour provides us with a mocking account of urban life characterized by decadence and superficiality. This resonates with some of the ambivalent portrayals of independence for women depicted in *Āpṇā Āpṇā Jaṅgal* (1994). Cour does not allow us to revel in urbanity as a kind of solution, or as a simple ideal.

Urbanity and what it offers are therefore ethically complex, and just as the urban environment creates circumstances for new possibilities for women, so too it creates new kinds of limitations. In the first story in Cour's collection, 'November 1984' entitled *Chhuṭṭī* (Holiday), Cour portrays a mysterious old man who visits a farmer in a village (2005 [1996]: 9-15). The farmer's son has been killed, and no one knows why: some say it was the police, and others say it was *ātaṅkvādīāṅ* (terrorists). Still others say it was because of an old family feud or because the farmer's son got into a fight (Cour 2005 [1996]: 9). When the old man visits the farmer, the latter is afraid—because in those dangerous days, everyone was afraid of guests— but eventually he offers the man water. The farmer worries about a bundle the old man is carrying: could it be weapons? Gun powder? (Cour 2005 [1996]: 11). Eventually he allows the old man to spend the night in his house. As they get ready to retire, the farmer asks the old man his name: he is told that the man's name is *rabb* or God. The farmer is shocked and asks what he is doing there. God, it seems, has taken a vacation. When asked why, the old man says: *Maiṅ thakk giā. Merā ī nāṅ lai lai ke lokīṅ ik dūje nūṅ vaḍḍhī ṭukkī jāṅde ne. Maiṅ sochiā, je main ī chhuṭṭī kar lavāṅ tāṅ shāid ih vaḍḍh ṭukk khatam ho jāve* (I am tired. Taking my name, people are chopping each other to bits. I thought, maybe if I take a vacation, maybe this destruction will end) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 14). When asked what he is carrying with him, he answers that he is carrying a handful of stars, some pieces of cloud, the chirping of the birds at dawn, newly sprouted shoots, the roots of grass, a few drops of dew, a mouthful or two of river water, and the first joyful shriek of a child laid in a cradle (Cour 2005 [1996]: 15). He ends with: *Maiṅ sochiā, ih tāṅ bacha lavāṅ* (I thought, these things I should save) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 15). Here, *rabb* appears to despair of what is done in his name. Perhaps, this kind of meditation can only take place in a rural environment?

Conclusion: The Promise and Impossibility of Urbanity

We return again to the question that we opened with: is urbanity a useful heuristic for understanding Cour's work? The foregrounding of the rural in our understanding of Punjabi history and cultural production has occluded our understanding of the many urban locations of their articulation, and the central role that urbanity may have taken in the lived experience of a religiously and culturally plural Punjabi world. The city may not always be the 'subject' of Cour's work, but it is central to the stories, personalities, and tensions that are at the centre of her work. The city as a subject is thus only one way to consider "literary urbanity" (Harder 2016). I would argue that even the portrayals of 'rural' life by authors like her and others can be seen as an aspect of their 'urban' situatedness, and a search for an ethos that allows for a shared religious and cultural space, amidst diversity.[6] There is something about the urban centre that this author's work speaks to.

We finally return to Cour's Lahore in the collection *Navambur Churāsī* (November 1984) (2005) in another autobiographical story entitled *Shahir nahīṅ, Ghogā* (Not a City, an Oyster) (Cour 2005 [1996]: 29-52).[7] The story describes the author's return to Lahore for a conference, many years after she left it during the drawing of Partition's line—here Cour clearly articulates that link between Lahore and Delhi discussed earlier, expressed through the people who left each of these cities. She also provides readers with another way of thinking through the nature of Partition's exclusionary violence, through the inclusion of the story in a collection on 1984. For Cour, Lahore is every city, and every city reminds the author of Lahore (Cour 2005 [1996]: 31):

> *Dilli hī kiuṅ, dunīāṅ de jis kise shahir vich maiṅ gaī sāṅ, ose lāhaur vale ghar nūṅ āpṇe kaleje vich chukkī phirī sāṅ. Lāhaur vālā ghar, lāhaur dīāṅ saṛakāṅ, lāhaur dā āsmān.*

> It is not only Delhi, but every city that I go to, that the Lahore house comes to my heart. The Lahore house, Lahore's streets, Lahore's sky.

She describes how the city seems unknown and unknowable to her upon her return as she faces a past of violence that is inscribed in the unrecognizability of the city (Cour 2005 [1996]: 35, 37, 41). At the same time, she asks, who can say whether or not the restlessness and hunger, and the dreams, joys and pains of these people now divided are not the same (Cour 2005 [1996]: 49)? Cour's quest for humanity in the inhumanity of the anti-Sikh violence of Delhi and her nostalgia for a Lahore to which she once belonged, speaks to the aspirational dimensions of urbanity—and the enduring spectre of Lahore in defining a Punjabi urbanity. Yet, there is also something quintessentially urban about the violence itself, both that centred on the Sikhs in Delhi and the violence among communities at the time of Partition. What do we do with such 'competing urbanities' then: the contrast between Cour's quest for belonging and humanity, and the violence of those who sought to erase Sikhs from and within the urban fabric of Delhi and other urban centres of north India in 1984 (and the years that followed)? This question of the constitution of urbanity persists: such violence continues until today, most commonly perpetuated against Muslims—as Cour herself highlights. If we want to hear more about the urban imaginary that is at work in this logic of violence, we need only to listen to the voices calling out for ethnic cleansing today. Right wing forces have learned from earlier engagements with 'urban transformation' especially after the Muzaffarnagar riots/pogrom of 2013—which many believe helped propel the BJP to a position of control at the federal centre

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[6] We can see this, for example, in the novel *Gaurī* (Cour 1991), discussed in Murphy (Forthcoming).

[7] This story was included in a recent collection of Partition-related stories published in the Shahmukhi or Urdu script in Lahore, Pakistan. Cf. Ilyas Ghumman (2022: 56-88).

in 2014. State forces forcibly demolished urban refugee camps that had housed Muslims who had been attacked and had been forced out of their homes during and after the riots. No durable physical reminder was allowed to survive. A lesson seems to have been learned after the 1984 violence against the Sikhs in Delhi. The widows of Sikh men killed in the anti-Sikh attacks were allotted housing, which created 'widow colonies' that became a potent symbol of the 1984 violence, and that have been politicized by various forces, as Kamal Arora (2017) shows. Nakul Sawhney's chilling 2015 film *Muzaffarnagar Bāqī hai* (Muzaffarnagar Remains) documents the erasure of the human cost of the violence of the city in 2013 and 2014. This erasure too, is an aspect of urbanity, is it not? One which seeks to overwhelm and erase some aspects of the urban landscape, and the inclusive and diverse forms of urbanity along with them?

While openness and diversity seem to characterize urbanity, it is also about belonging. That belonging can also be exclusionary. This is not simply the 'cosmopolitan' that Pollock and others suggested 25 years ago embraced "infinite ways of being" that "we already are and have always been" (2000: 588). Belonging can have both positive and negative dimensions as we see in the violence of 1984, and the diverse forms of violence that persist in the right-wing urbanities of today, around the world. It does well for us to remember this now, at the beginning of 2025, when such discourses and their enforcement are ever-advancing in the world and assuming a frenetic pace. As Craig Calhoun (2008) rightly argues, the 'cosmopolitan' and the 'national' (or 'ethnic' or 'particular') need not be held in opposition. Indeed, as he argues, "cosmopolitanism is not free-floating, not equally available to everyone, not equally empowering for everyone" (Calhoun 2008: 434). It too is particular about belonging—to certain elite groups with the means to embrace others and travel—just as belonging is particular to *some* in the city, to those who are allowed to comprise the landscape of its urbanity. At the same time, this is certainly not always the case, since as Pollock and his co-authors (2000: 582) assert, "cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility," and it is the migrants, refugees, and exiles of the world that truly exemplify "the spirit of the cosmopolitical community." Cour articulates urban aspirations for the marginalized—for women, for the persecuted, and for the minoritized, but these are among the other urbanities that claim the same terrain. As Cour shows, there are complex dimensions to 'urbanity' that are morally and ethically ambiguous, and which—as the violence in Delhi in 1984, and recently in 2019-2020, has demonstrated—can be murderous in intent. But it is perhaps the petty bitterness of the betrayal of urbanity that we need to fear, just as much.

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