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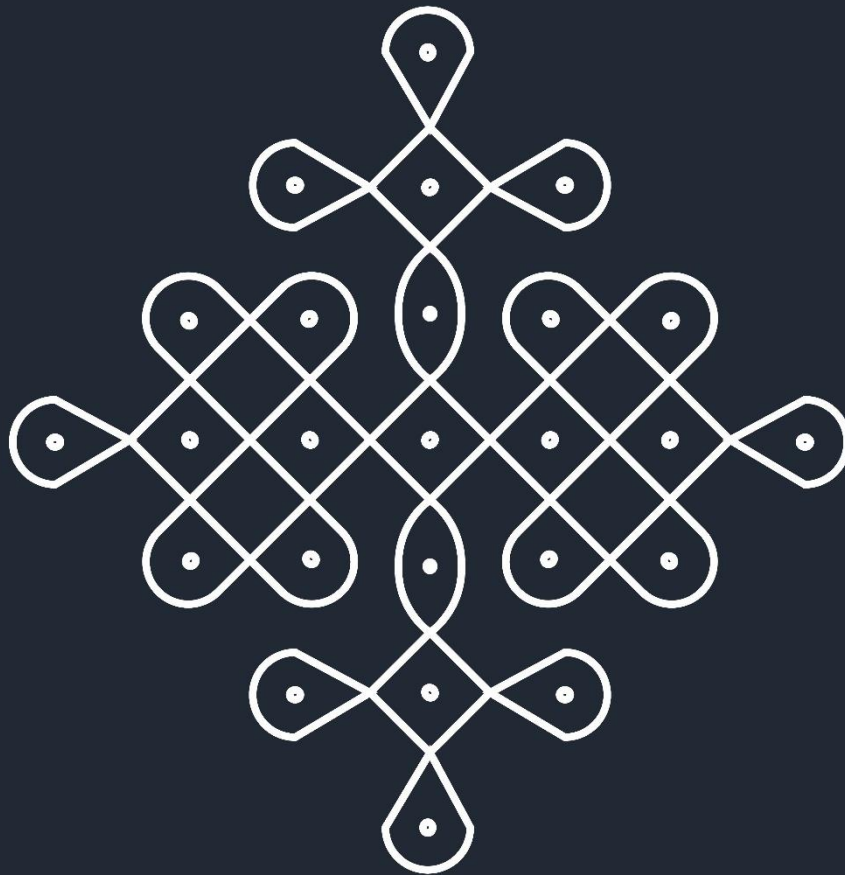
International Journal for Indian Studies

Imagining Urbanity in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

Guest edited by Anne Castaing & Anne Murphy

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Preface

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It gives me great pleasure to announce the July 2025 issue, the volume 10 of *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies*. Titled "Imagining Urbanity in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia," this issue is the first part of a two-volume focus on urbanity and its literary expression and experience, guest edited and curated by Anne Castaing (CESAH) and Anne Murphy (British Columbia). Discussions around this special issue first emerged in 2023 during conversations surrounding the same theme at the ECSAS (European Conference of South Asian Studies) in Turin. All the articles in this July instalment, as also described by Castaing and Murphy in their introduction, are thus closely and mutually linked, bringing erudite scholarship on South Asian urbanity to the forefront. While Murphy, Geva and Kurowska's articles explore postcolonial and post-Partition north India, Harder's paper on science fiction literature takes an account of many vernaculars from South Asia that voice similar anxieties about a dystopic postcolonial future.

This time's *Nidān*'s July issue has a fifth article. Though not part of the special focus on urbanity, it addresses the agential role of vernacular literature in encompassing historical lacunae within India's revolutionary movements. Discussing emerging loopholes in the politicized rural-urban cadres of the Naxalite movement in Bengal (1965-1975), one of South Asia's largest revolutionary movements known for its violence, Pritha Sarkar and Sayan Chattopadhyay show how these loopholes are discussed and resolved through literature, especially *The Naxalites* written by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas in 1979. The authors show how the novel reveals the inherently hierarchical nature of Naxalite politics, exported from an urban student movement in Calcutta to a rural and embattled landscape of peasant insurgencies, that then serves to stage urban revolutionary politics. This export paradoxically serves as an instrument that the movement's seniors and leaders use to sacrifice junior revolutionaries and eliminate them from the revolutionary cadre. Sarkar and Chattopadhyay, in their analysis of Abbas's novel, demonstrate the vicissitudes of the Naxalite movement and the political interests implicit in its mobilization that provides lip service to the cause peasant enfranchisement. The authors make a Zizekian argument identifying the aporia between subjective and objective violence that for all practical purposes are merged as co-contributing domains of political violence. Thus, in how Sarkar and Chattopadhyay read *The Naxalites*, while revolutionaries embody objective violence, the movement get coopted into the subjective violence of the state that it performs an opposition to.

We have many excellent book reviews in this time's *Nidān* as usual. Ajeet Kumar Pankaj reviews Cháirez-Garza's *Rethinking Untouchability* that provides readers with an overview of Ambedkar's intellectual contributions to reformulating the Untouchability debate that then go on to produce the political domain of the Dalit movement in India, bringing together other intellectual streams of thought. Interestingly, and pertinent to this issue's focus, Pankaj's analysis of Cháirez-Garza's arguments outlines how Ambedkar viewed the urban as a rightful space of Dalit emancipation while locating the village as a site of caste oppression. Jessica Vantine Birkenholz reviews Michael Baltutis's *The Festival of Indra*, another contribution to the studies on the urban that is both textual and anthropological, that takes us through an ethno-historical discussion of the annual festival of the Vedic deity Indra in Kathmandu. Though the festival is one of the most prominent festivals of Nepal, there has been no concerted effort

before Baltutis's monograph, to explore its ramifications in the urbanized space of Kathmandu. Resonating with Birkenholz's review of an annual festival, Dilip Menon's review of Deepa Das Acevedo's *The Battle for Sabarimala* explores the unfolding legal battle surrounding women's entry into the 'bachelor' god Ayyapan's temple in the Kerala High Court in 2018. It is important to note that Acevedo's research is located in growing interest in legal history and anthropology that explores the disputes surrounding religious shrines in modern India. Judhajit Sarkar reviews Mallarika Sinha Roy's monograph on Utpal Dutt (*Utpal Dutt and Political Theatre in Postcolonial India*) that explores an Avant Garde age (1970s and 1980s) of theatrical and political performance that meshed ideology with mass entertainment in Bengal. Among other facets, Sarkar explores Sinha Roy's investigation of thespian Utpal Dutt's location in politics and entertainment, exemplified by his revolutionary playwriting and his engagement with the theatrical genre of *jatra*, a people's theatre that transcended the aesthetics of urban and middle class Calcutta. Though Lucia Ciranni Salazar's review of Dunja Rašić's *Bedeviled* does not delve explicitly into India and South Asia, the review is nevertheless relevant for the history and anthropology of everyday Islam in South Asia. The book explores a theme that is well-known for scholars of *dargah* and Sufi healing for example: the question of the *jinn*, an ambivalent spirit within Muslim culture and society. Discussions about this particular *jinn* under investigation in this book, the *qarīn*, is familiar, for it is a doppelganger that inhabits the blood of humans. Otavio Amaral gives us a detailed review of Ahonaa Roy's *Cosmopolitan Sexuality* that traces the subaltern lives and politics of the transgender *hijra* community in urban Mumbai and Pune, which again brings the issue's focus of urbanity to centre-stage. Amol Saghar's review of Baijayanti Roy's explosive *The Nazi Study of India & Indian Anti-Colonialism* similarly gleams with erudition, as he traces the author's exploration of Indology and its history as a political strategy specifically developed by Nazi Germany. As Saghar confirms, based on Roy's detailed archival research, Indology was a specific and strategic Nazi instrument that under the guise of friendship and solidarity, coined and used the discipline of Indology as an instrument of intelligence gathering. Ashish Kumar's exploration of Oly Roy's *Chastity in Ancient Indian Texts* gives us an insight into texts from a gender perspective that explores pejorative notions about feminine chastity, discursively resulting in the suppression of women. Finally, Britta Ohm's review of Abraham and Barak's *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India* makes an incisive analysis of how caste and discrimination are depicted and reformulated in and by postcolonial Indian Cinema. Being a sizeable *Companion* volume, Ohm takes a meticulous approach to its various sections and chapters through which she provides readers with an overview of the *Companion*'s main arguments.

I hope that this July 2025 issue of *Nidān* will make for informative and fun reading!

Introduction

Imagining Urbanity in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

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The City

South Asia's population is now roughly 35% urban (Key Indicators n.d.). The World Bank has shown that the urban population grew by 130 million between 2001 and 2011; it is expected to grow by more than double that by 2030 (World Bank 2016, Ellis et al. 2016). In this, South Asia is in line with broader trends: one half of the world's population lives in cities today, and this is expected to double by 2050. This will mean that, by 2050, 70% of the human population in the world will be city-based (World Bank n.d.). For comparison: in 1970, when the world's population was approximately 3 billion, approximately 37% of the world's population was urban (World Bank Group et al. 2018) We thus see both a dramatic increase in the sheer number of the urban population, and its size relative to rural populations.

It is thus not surprising that this period of exponential growth in the world's urban population has been accompanied by the substantial growth of Urban Studies as a field in academia, and a broader 'urban turn' in the field of social science and humanities, which has involved geographical, but also anthropological, sociological, economic and environmental engagements with urban life worlds and expressions. Conversely, Rural Studies, which were very popular from the 1960s to the 1990s, have been declining for the last two to three decades. In keeping with such developments, the 'city' as a space, whether real or imagined, has thus become a major subject of South Asian studies in diverse disciplines (see for example: Balakrishnan 2019, Chaudhuri 2022, Chaudhuri 2025, Gertner 2015, Coelho and Sood 2021). This special issue, "Imagining Urbanity in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia"— which is paired with a second forthcoming issue of the journal—wishes to consider the idea and practice of urbanity in South Asia in the colonial and postcolonial periods, to examine how it has been perceived, described, and inhabited, in relation to diverse social and cultural formations. Our focus is primarily literary and historical, to consider how a notion of 'urbanity' is articulated in diverse languages and contexts across the subcontinent, with a focus on its northern domains and Indo-Aryan languages in the colonial and, in this issue, postcolonial periods.

Urbanity

What does it mean to imagine the city?[1] 'Thinking the city' involves considering the multiple factors that make urban space both dynamic and stable at the same time, a space of both

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[1] This essay and these special issues take inspiration from the "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations." Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe project at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Social and Cultural Studies, University of Erfurt (Germany), funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG, German Research Foundation) – FOR 2779. Murphy was a Visiting Fellow with the KFG in 2022.

transformation and the production of tradition. It is a space that is defined by the built landscape, but is also constituted by the social lives enabled by that landscape: practices built around the use of space by and with people, defined by different kinds of socialities and encounters among individuals, communities, and genders. The city is thus also lived, embodied, and inhabited; it can be understood as a 'combination of territories', the bringing together different cultural communities in a common space (Le Gallès 2002). It is also an imagined landscape—thought into being by the minds that inhabit it—and then articulated in images, objects, places, and texts which express our lived experiences in the density of our inhabitation. We tell ourselves stories about these places, and how we live in them, in the past and in the present. This is perhaps why the urban has been a preoccupation of the literary, across languages and genres. In the South Asian context, the city has thus been examined by multiple authors: Intizar Husain on Lahore (*Basti* 1979), Amit Chaudhury on Kolkata (*A Strange and Sublime Address* 1991), Ahmed Ali (*Twilight in Delhi* 1940) and Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day* 1980) on Delhi, Arun Kolatkar (*Kala Ghoda Poems* 2004) and Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance* 1995) on Mumbai, and R.K. Narayan (*Mysore* 1939) on Mysore.

But what of urbanity? Even if the urban can defined by the density of human inhabitation and of the built landscape, the related and yet distinct notion of 'urbanity' is still somewhat more complex: does it signify a material condition of the built landscape, a way of being, or an ethical commitment? Susanne Rau's (2020) recent exploration of "[u]rbanity (urbanitas, Urbanität, urbanité, urbanità, urbanidad…)" has noted that "urbanity" has been understood in dramatically different ways over time, in scholarly as well as more general terms. It can be "an ideal of virtue and a style," for example, or more concretely, it can be an effect and expression of the built environment. Perhaps most usefully, it can "be understood as a form of relation, not as a state or condition" (Ibid.): a set of relations between built landscapes and people, and among the people within them. In this latter sense, in its relational sense, it perhaps most centrally signifies the way the city is lived in ethical terms—how a set of values and ideas is embodied in place and by people, in relation to each other—and the sociality that the urban landscape both allows and is sustained by. Urbanity, then, might be conceived as the imagination of the city's social life, its ethical and social commitments and possibilities.

Embracing such a formulation of urbanity as a set of social and ethical commitments, literary representations of the city have often been marked by idealization, and by celebration of the ethical potentials of the urban form. The romantic construction of the city is visible, for example, in the representations of Calcutta in Begum Rokeya's utopic *Sultana's Dream* (1905; see Hans Harder in this issue). We see similar idealization in the portrayal of the town Malgudi in R. K. Narayan's novels: this latter case shows that it is not only the bustling metropolis that can realize our hopes and dreams and represent our nostalgia within the interactions of the human landscape. Intizar Husain's *Basti* (1972) and Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which both combine an idealized—even nostalgic—portrayal of the city with complex representation of urbanity in the present, similarly evoke a space of accommodation and fertilization, of social awakening and cultural dynamism. This literary practice of urbanity can appear in language itself, in literary references and representations of hybridization, as strikingly shown in Rushdie's hybrid language and writing, as discussed in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). These are the resonances of the vision of *begampūrā,* the city with no sorrow, that Hans Harder opens his essay with in this volume: the city as a place of joy and freedom, beyond discrimination and harm.

But this is only one way of conceptualizing the city. If urbanity is a set of ethical and social commitments—a kind of practiced living together—the betrayals of the city, too, have something to say.

Dystopia

The contradictions of the city—its limits, and failures—define urbanity in its negation, a meaning made apparent in stark contrast. This is the ambivalence of the city: as Rau (2020) has noted, the urban "can be heaven or hell or both at the same time" (see also Rau 2024). This ambiguous perception of the city is evident in many literary works, which, while not explicitly dystopian, offer an exaggerated vision of urban life as sprawling, invasive, and dehumanising. We see this, for instance, in the city of Bombay in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, which contrasts with the poor and yet peaceful villages of Maharashtra, leading the novel's characters into decadence. In *Basti*, Lahore is, in the final pages of the work, an almost apocalyptic space of war and confinement, as manifested by the nearby border, which contrasts with nostalgic representations of a childhood village. Decadence is also evident in Anita Desai's portrayal of Delhi in *Clear Light of Day*, as embodied by disoriented and disillusioned characters. In such representations, the city, as a dynamic space, seems always a "fine balance" between idealization and deception, social accommodation and violence, and vibrancy and decadence.

Anne Murphy's contribution demonstrates how literary texts bear witness to a new kind of cosmopolis—in this instance, the one brought about by the formation of a new Punjabi identity in Delhi after 1947—that echo or continue the urban Punjabi identity of Lahore. Murphy's article demonstrates the persistence of both inclusion and exclusion in the urban context. Her analysis of the work of Punjabi-language writer Ajeet Cour (b. 1934) demonstrates how the city is portrayed, on the one hand, as a place of possibility for women, providing for new kinds of meetings, and new kinds of freedom. But, as Murphy notes, while "[t]he city may offer possibilities for autonomy for women… Cour suggests at the outset that these stories are not simple tales of triumph." The city—Delhi, in this case—can also be a place of exclusion, showing the dystopic features of the city space—a pervasive anti-urbanity, perhaps, that accompanies the sociality and potentiality that constitutes urbanity. In her example, this is made starkly apparent within Cour's portrayal of the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984. These dystopic features of the urban are also echoed in Rotem Geva's contribution, which also addresses post-Partition Delhi through the writing of an author who hailed from west Punjab as well and relocated to Delhi. Geva explores the writings of Fikr Taunsvi (the pen name of Ram Lal Bhatia, 1918-1987) that in their engagement with the portrayal of the everyday reveal a kind of "ambivalence between emancipatory politics and an implicit sense of defeat," the contradictions between the progressive possibilities of the city and "a sense of moral erosion and routinized malfeasance" in its everyday life. Corruption here appears as a symptom—a plague, one might say—of everyday life. Both Murphy's and Geva's essays thus foreground both possibility and its denial in postcolonial Delhi, in the shadow of Partition's violence.

Hans Harder and Justyna Kurowska's essays too dispel any notion of a utopian interpretation of the changes occurring in and through the city. Their articles paint a picture of cities as invasive, dangerous and unhealthy spaces, in a state of decay that in some cases is portrayed as reflecting the widespread degeneration of the world. Decolonization here is fraught with failure and contradiction. Through his exploration of Science Fiction, Harder aptly demonstrates the extent to which change, and transformation are integral to the urban ecosystem and stimulate speculative imaginings. The dystopic turn he examines is "connected with globalizing crisis scenarios." Climate change, a major theme of the 21st century, is particularly relevant here. Harder's exploration of a range of works from the late 20th and early 21st centuries highlights how these works "play randomly through the set of available options—heat, drought, drowning, state control, segregation, etc." in their description of crisis and disaster, focusing on social and political themes that "acquire prominence in sync with global public discourse." In Justyna Kurowska's article, the city is similarly presented as a

harmful, pathogenic space. In it, we see in many ways the disillusionment and disenchantment expressed by Fikr Taunsvi, as examined by Geva, taken forward in time and generalized in place. However, the basis for this perception is drawn from contemporary views of the city as perceived in the 1970s and 2000s. In this period, "[o]nce a symbol of infinite possibilities, the city began to reveal its harsh and cruel realities." Illness is the focus of a range of works that Kurowska examines, where illness acts on both an individual, personal level, and also as an effect of the city itself, becoming a metaphor for the degeneration embodied in modern urban spaces. The city itself appears as a sick body, rotting and contaminated. This is far from the domain of *begampūrā,* indeed.

Closing

The essays in this issue demonstrate the moral saturation of our understanding and experience of the city: urbanity—and its denial, its failure—haunt the essays. With them we move through the challenges and failures of the postcolonial period, decades of both corruption and violence, of environmental degradation and loss. Urban failure in this sense stands in for a larger, social and political failure. This is explored in the wake of Partition and decolonization in Delhi in Geva and Murphy's work, with special attention to gender in the latter's. It is taken to imaginative extremes in the representations examined by Harder and Kurowska. Urbanity, in this sense, can also be defined by its own loss. Still, the articulation of this loss is itself the crafting of its alternative: the promise of a city that survives the violence, and the moments of shared humanity that can rise from within it, as Ajeet Cour's writing shows us. There is an urbanity, too, perhaps, that calls out, even in the despair.

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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, biābān, 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—*kauṛīaṅ kasailīaṅ 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 dushmaṇ 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 phaṛphaṛā 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 rahinde 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, <u>kh</u>ūn dā koī mazahab nahīṅ huṅdā. Zāt-pāt, dharam-mazahab, gorā-kālā, sohaṇā-kojhā, sabh toṅ beniāz e <u>kh</u>ūn 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 <u>kh</u>ushī <u>kh</u>ushī gharoṅ nikaliā sī, dostāṅ nāl gallāṅ karan te kitābāṅ risāle <u>kh</u>arīdaṇ? 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 k̲h̲atam 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 *Navaṁbur 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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Research Article

A City of Corruption: Post-Independence Delhi in Fikr Taunsvi's *Pyaz ke Chhilke*[1]

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This article analyses the portrayal of post-independence Delhi in *Pyaz ke Chhilke* (Onion Peels or Onion Skins)—a popular satirical column published regularly in the Urdu daily *Milap*. The column was written by Fikr Taunsvi (1918–1987), an Urdu writer and Partition refugee who settled in Delhi. Based on an analysis of several hundred previously unstudied columns, the article identifies two crucial features of Taunsvi's depiction of 1950s Delhi: a focus on the everyday and a representation of the city as a space of corruption. Published almost daily, the columns offer a rare, close-range view of urban life, capturing the everyday concerns of the city's poor, lower-middle, and middle classes, and the routines, interactions, and transactions that unfold across urban spaces. Making the ordinary and routine the focus of writing is both an aesthetic and political choice—an exercise that ultimately reveals an ambivalence between emancipatory politics and an implicit sense of defeat. The various instances of political and societal venality, along with repeated attention to chronic inflation, unemployment, poverty, and broken urban infrastructure, point to corruption in its original sense: a departure from what is correct, the adulteration of a pure form. It signals a departure from the promises of the Nehruvian postcolonial state and the growing frustration of the citizenry. The article supports recent arguments that (anti)corruption—now recognised as a dominant force in independent India's political shifts—had already emerged as a major concern in public discourse during decolonisation, shaping the interface between citizens and the state.

corruption, partition, Delhi, Taunsvi, Urdu-press

Introduction

When Mir penned the poem, "Delhi is a city singular in the whole world, I am the dweller of that ruined place," the poor fellow couldn't have foreseen that Delhi would face such a time when the thought of desolation would seem so far-fetched; that Delhi would become so populated that managing it would be a challenge. Sometimes, I wonder how anyone could have thought that this place would be abandoned. In 1947, just when it seemed like it might be deserted, the uprooted refugees descended upon Delhi and took it by the collar, saying, "Now tell us! How could you have thought of desolation? We've arrived, and there's no escaping us now!" So Delhi stood before the uprooted refugees, repenting, the population

surged, and now Delhi is overflowing at every turn. It's like Delhi is everywhere, and so are the refugees.[2]

This epigraph is taken from the satirical column *Pyaz ke chhilke* (Onion Peels or Onion Skins) by Fikr Taunsvi, published regularly in the Urdu daily *Milap*, one of the 'refugee dailies' that relocated from Lahore to Delhi amidst the Partition. Entitled "Delhi, Which Is a City" (*Dilli jo ek shahr hai*), the column from August 21st 1955 alludes to a rich Urdu literary tradition that casts Delhi as a focus of melancholic reflection and thus signals Taunsvi's preoccupation with Delhi as a central object of contemplation (for *shahr-e ashob*, or city of misfortune, see, e.g., Dudeny 2018). This epigraph also signals that while literary representations of Delhi before Taunsvi's time focused on the old city, as in Ahmed Ali's iconic novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), *Pyaz ke chhilke* is situated in, and portrays, a city that is rapidly expanding southward and westward in the wake of independence and Partition. Indeed, the columns represent new geographies, such as the new Partition refugee colonies (as Delhi's neighbourhoods are called), as well as new themes—citizens' aspirations and struggles in the wake of independence. Considering its popularity and the fact that satire relies on common social knowledge to resonate effectively, *Pyaz ke chhilke* reveals a good deal about public sentiment and the common experience of the city. It offers a rare, hitherto unstudied contemporary portrayal of early post-independence Delhi. This representation is at the center of this article.

This article argues that the depiction of 1950s Delhi in the columns of *Pyaz ke chhilke* is defined by two crucial characteristics: a focus on the everyday, and a representation of the city as a space of corruption. The article first analyses the quotidian character of the column, in both form and content. It illuminates the ideological imperatives informing the decision to focus on daily experience as well as its implications. I suggest that Taunsvi's commitment to the everyday—as reflected in the format of an almost-daily column and in its subject matter— reveals an ambivalence between emancipatory politics and an implicit sense of defeat. On the one hand, the focus on mundane hardships, scarcity, and injustices reflects the progressive movement's commitment to literary realism, socialist critique, and emancipatory politics. On the other hand, the routine and ephemeral nature of the column genre gradually produces a sense of moral erosion and routinized malfeasance that implicitly subverts the progressive belief in the capacity for social change.

The article next argues that the urban everyday portrayed in the columns centres on scarcity and endemic corruption, which are intertwined. As Taunsvi fixes his gaze on the lived experience of individuals, he reveals life in 1950s Delhi as shaped by shortages and a struggle for basic material needs—food, clothing, and housing, electricity, water, and transportation. Life is also plagued by chronic unemployment and broken healthcare and education systems. The columns implicitly tie these daily hardships and frustrations to an overarching experience of corruption. My analysis reveals that corruption surfaces, quite strikingly, in almost every column, and it manifests on multiple levels. Most obviously, it appears in the strict sense of political corruption—that is, the misuse of public office and resources for private gain, as seen in cases of bureaucrats and politicians receiving kickbacks from contractors, or traffic police demanding bribes. In this respect, the materials analysed here support the recent argument that (anti)corruption, recognized as a dominant force in independent India's political shifts, notably those surrounding the Emergency of 1975-1977 (Jenkins 2014, Baloch 2021), had already become a major concern in public discourse during the process of decolonisation, shaping the interface between citizens and the state (Gould 2011, Balasubramanian 2024).

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[2] Fikr Taunsvi, *Dilli jo ek shahr hai* (*Milap* 21.08.1955). Translations from the Urdu are mine unless noted otherwise.

A second, less clearly defined sense of corruption encompasses myriad cases of negligence by teachers and doctors and abusive behaviour by policemen and other office holders—instances that could be seen more loosely as breaches of public trust. At a third, more diffuse level, corruption infiltrates social practices, often under the wilfully blind eye of the authorities, as seen in cases of milkmen adulterating milk and *ghee* (clarified butter), traders hoarding wheat and selling it on the black market, landlords exploiting tenants, and wealthy refugees using their connections to secure compensation and job placement ahead of poorer refugees.

These anecdotes of both political and societal venality, along with repeated attention to chronic inflation, acute unemployment, poverty, and broken urban infrastructure, render corruption as a pervasive phenomenon that increasingly defines the Nehruvian state and society. In other words, what emerges is a frustration with the Nehruvian project. In this respect, corruption manifests in its basic, literal definition of "decay, decomposition" or "a departure from the original or from what is pure or correct" (*Merriam-Webster*). The numerous columns depicting hungry children, desperate unemployed graduates, inflation, poor schools, failed infrastructure, cynical politicians, and venal bureaucrats gradually build into, and often explicitly comment on, the corruption of Nehruvian developmentalist ideals. In this way, *Pyaz ke chhilke* offers a poignant, even if humorous, contemporary commentary on what economist Ashoka Mody recently called the post-independence 'betrayal of the Indian people'—the failure to create jobs, deliver quality education and healthcare, and make Indian cities liveable; a failure that is bound up with endemic corruption and lack of accountability (Mody 2023).

This brings us back to the political implications of the focus on the everyday. It is precisely because Taunsvi attends to the daily erosion of Nehruvian ideals, rather than to dramatic or extraordinary events, that his columns so effectively reveal what anthropologist Akhil Gupta terms 'structural violence'—the everyday malign neglect that leads to undernourishment and poverty and undermines the goals of the developmentalist state (Gupta 2012). At the same time, the daily, Sisyphean struggles these columns describe imply entrenched structures and, hence, defeat. This ambivalence, I suggest, marks the early postcolonial period as a moment of both great hopes and disillusionment, as the government faltered in delivering on its promise of equity and modernity.

The first section of the article introduces Taunsvi, *Pyaz ke Chhilke*, and the historical context of 1950s Delhi in which the columns are situated. The subsequent sections will analyse the main characteristics of Delhi's portrayal in the columns—the lens of the everyday and the prominence of scarcity and corruption—drawing on concrete examples from the texts.

Fikr Taunsvi and the Historical Context

Fikr Taunsvi was the pen name of Ram Lal Bhatia (1918-1987), a Hindu Urdu writer who hailed from the town of Taunsa Sharif in Dera Ghazi Khan *tehsil* of western Punjab (for Taunsvi life, see his interview by Muzaffar Hanfi in Hanfi and Taunsvi [1988], Amrohvi [2006: 104-120], Taunsvi and Bilal [2019: 11-30]). As Taunsvi's colleague Mumtaz Mufti reflects, poverty was deeply rooted in the former's psyche, going back to his formative experiences in Taunsa Sharif (quoted in Amrohvi [2006: 117]). The centuries-old exploitation of the Baluch tribals by the *jagirdar* (feudal lords), which Taunsvi witnessed, and in which his own father was complicit, left a great imprint on him. He developed sympathy with the downtrodden, an inclination that deepened in the 1930s, when his father's death forced him to abandon undergraduate studies and wander the cities of Punjab in search of a livelihood, doing odd jobs for meagre pay—copying calligraphy for magazines, colouring and printing textiles, painting and writing on walls, teaching at a primary school, and working as an agent for a fragrant oils company. Taunsvi moved to Lahore, which had a profound impact on his cultural and ideological makeup (Bilal

2019, Amrohvi [2006: 136-137]). His attention to poverty and social inequality further consolidated through his involvement with progressive literary circles. The progressive movement, formally inaugurated with the formation of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in 1936, was then in its heyday (Coppola et al. 1974, Gopal 2005, Ahmed 2009, Jalil 2014). Taunsvi, who was immersed in the city's literary scene, absorbed the progressive commitment to socialism, emancipatory politics, and literary realism. He made his first attempts at poetry, worked for the literary magazine *Adab-e Latif*, and edited the literary magazine *Savera*. In 1947, when Lahore was allocated to Pakistan and engulfed by horrific violence, Taunsvi reluctantly left it for India. He documented the fear and anguish of those days in his poignant journal *Chhata Darya* (The Sixth River), which he finished writing in India in 1948 (for an English translation, see Bilal 2019). He initially settled in Jalandhar (East Punjab), where he joined the Communist Party and wrote a daily column (*Aj ki khabar* or 'Today's News') for the communist organ *Naya Zamana* until it closed, prompting his move to Delhi.

In Delhi, where he lived until his death in 1987, Taunsvi launched the column *Pyaz ke chhilke* in the Urdu daily *Milap*. Having relocated from Lahore to Delhi amidst the partition crisis, *Milap* was considered a 'refugee newspaper', catering to refugees in Delhi and the surrounding areas, who were overwhelmingly Urdu readers. Taunsvi published his column from 1955 to the mid-1980s, almost until his death. Constrained by limited means and struggling financially throughout his life, Taunsvi had to write tirelessly to provide for his family. He perceived himself as a hardworking and disciplined 'labourer of the pen' (*qalam mazdur*), committed to the demanding task of producing a column almost every day of the week (Amrohvi 2006: 119, Hanfi and Taunsvi 1988: 71).

Running five to six days a week, the column chronicled life in post-independence Delhi and India, gaining immense popularity for its witty social and political commentary (Zaidi 1988, Zaidi 1993: 423, Bilal 2019: 15-18). Based on Taunsvi's astonishing productivity and consistency, I estimate that over three decades of publishing, *Pyaz ke chhilke* columns number roughly 5,000. Only several dozen columns were collected in a few edited volumes,[3] and these have served as the basis for Urdu-language secondary literature on Taunsvi's satire (Amrohvi 2006, Farrukh 2015, Ahmad 2021). This article is based on several hundred additional columns from the surviving issues of the newspaper *Milap,* which, to the best of my knowledge, have not yet been studied. They span from June 1955, when the column was inaugurated, to January 1959. Accordingly, this article focuses strictly on the second half of the 1950s.[4]

While Taunsvi's commentary in this period is wide-ranging, covering topics from foreign affairs to national and Punjabi politics to light-hearted jokes, the city of Delhi, where he settled as a Partition refugee and where he spent the rest of his life, serves as a primary frame of reference. What, then, was the immediate context of the column in terms of Delhi's history? When Taunsvi launched *Pyaz ke chhilke* in 1955, Delhi had begun to recover from the initial aftershocks of Partition. Back in 1947, India's capital city, like other cities across north India and Pakistan, became a 'Partition city' overwhelmed with half a million Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Pakistan desperate for food, housing, and employment. Just two weeks after independence, with refugees streaming into the city, major violence targeting Delhi's Muslim population broke out, driving roughly 350,000—more than two-thirds of the Muslim population—out of the city

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[3] Taunsvi's published books are available online on *Rekhta*: https://www.rekhta.org/authors/fikr-taunsvi/ebooks (accessed 27.01.2025).
[4] Copies of *Milap* are located in the newspaper microfilm collection at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. The collection includes 885 columns of *Pyaz ke Chhilke*, spanning June 1955 to January 1959, with 139, 247, 217, 261, and 21 columns from 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, and 1959, respectively. I have not yet located the columns published after January 1959, and it is unclear whether they have been preserved elsewhere.

to Pakistan. Even while many newcomers competed over Muslim 'evacuee property', the government started building housing projects for refugees at the city's outskirts, unleashing dramatic expansion. Thus, Partition brought about significant demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and spatial changes to Delhi (Pandey 2001, Zamindar 2007, Kaur 2007, Parveen 2021, Geva 2022, Chakravarty 2022).

Simultaneously, postcolonial state formation and nation building under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru commenced in earnest, with the granting of universal franchise, the enactment of the constitution, efforts at tackling food scarcity, and the implementation of central economic planning to drive development (for state formation under Nehru, see Roy 2007, Kudaisya 2017, Shani 2018, De 2018, Siegel 2018, Menon 2022, Sherman 2022). Existing scholarship on early postcolonial Delhi has largely focused on the initial crisis of Partition, up to 1955, and has not investigated key questions about the city's history during the Nehruvian years after 1955. How did Partition dislocations and postcolonial state formation affect social relations, political orientations, and people's experience of the state? *Pyaz ke chhilke* allows us to begin addressing these questions. What follows is not a historiographical argument about Nehruvian Delhi or post-independence cities more generally, but more modestly, an analysis of Nehruvian Delhi as portrayed in Taunsvi's sketches. The next section will analyze *Pyaz ke chhilke* as an interrogation of the everyday and examine its political implications—namely, that the focus on the everyday was inspired by Taunsvi's progressive background and socialist perspective, while at the same time reflecting, perhaps inadvertently, some disillusionment with progressive literature's belief in perfectibility.

Peeling Onions: A Spotlight on Everyday Urbanity

Pyaz ke Chhilke is not concerned with the eventful or the dramatic, whether catastrophic or glamorous; but rather, with the quotidian and banal. Published almost daily, the columns provide a rare, close-range view of urban life and the various topics of everyday commentary among the city's poor, lower-middle, and middle classes. They bring to life the daily routines, interactions, and transactions that take place in the working-class home, the refugee colony, the overcrowded bus, the coffee house, the ration shop, the upscale shopping area of Connaught Place, and the government office, to name a few examples. At the same time, *Pyaz ke chhilke* offers more than just granular snapshots of daily life. Making the ordinary and routine the focus of writing is an aesthetic as well as political choice. Taunsvi elevates what is supposedly trivial and banal into an object of reflection and critique, even while treating it as a source of amusement. The everydayness of the columns functions as a lens in several ways. It is precisely the commonplace that best exhibits people's struggles to survive and the state's failure to deliver on its promises—and it is the everyday that gradually builds a sense of unmovable structural violence. Let me elaborate.

Scarcity

In one sense, a focus on the everyday means spotlighting the mundane as reflected in the very choice of title (Onion Peels), which evokes an everyday household staple. Indeed, many columns literally deal with everyday staples: one column after another highlights the struggles of ordinary people—particularly the poor and the lower-middle class—to secure the basic necessities, including food (Taunsvi devotes columns to wheat, lentils, milk, oil, *ghee*, sugar), clothing, employment, and essential infrastructure (electricity, water, transportation, healthcare, and education). For example, in February 1958 Taunsvi introduced a new feature that would open almost every column in the following months—short, punchy, grimly humorous conversations between a husband and wife (a *dharam patni* or virtuous wife), and sometimes between them and other family members and neighbours. In one scene, a beggar

passes by their house and asks the wife for wheat, and she responds by saying: "Babaji, please forgive me! Today is the last day of the month, so we are only eating rice."[5] In another sketch, the wife lovingly tells her husband that she is so attuned to his return from work that she can identify his footsteps on the street, to which he replies: "Yes, but only on the first day of the month."[6] Both scenes comment on the struggle of families to make ends meet toward the end of a monthly pay cycle. In a different scene, the wife brings three mangoes for the children but skimps on herself and her crestfallen husband.[7] Another tells us that the couple combine their children's birthday celebrations to save money. In another, they receive a gift of one pound of almonds from the neighbour but get upset because the gift is worth two rupees and the neighbour owes them three.[8] When the wife goes to the tailor to get a pair of half-pants stitched for her son, she insists on staying to watch the tailor work to ensure he does not steal any leftover fabric from her.[9]

There are dozens of such sketches that render people's trivial concerns and petty calculations worthy subjects of literary attention. The idea that the mundane should be taken seriously is also conveyed through Taunsvi's aesthetic strategy as he blends the concrete practicalities of the everyday with lofty themes and poetic allusions. To take one evocative example, a column entirely devoted to wheat begins with the lines: "Oh grains of wheat, may you always be mine; Oh grains of wheat, may God punish you."[10] Taunsvi presents wheat as the forbidden fruit that led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. "From the moment you came into the world," he writes, "neither you nor we had a moment of peace." The descendants of Adam have all gone mad in the pursuit of wheat. All are actors in its drama—from the sharecropper in the field, to the broker in the market, to the poor watchman who would not have the energy for his night shift without it. Taunsvi employs the elevated vocabulary of the *ghazal* tradition, likening the shortage of wheat to the pain of separation (*firaq*) from, and intense love (*ishq*) for, the beloved. Simultaneously, he operates at a very concrete level, detailing the various dramas scripted by wheat in mid-20th-century India: hoarding; famines (specifically alluding to the Bengal famine of 1943); the 1950s "Grow More Food" and "tree-planting campaigns (see Sherman 2013, Siegel 2018); rationing, accompanied by long queues in front of government depots (see Sriraman 2018); and price control and decontrol. The torment inflicted by wheat—which Taunsvi calls the oppressor (*zalim*), a common term for the beloved in *ghazals*—is concretized with nitty-gritty specifics. Besides injecting a humorous and entertaining touch, this aesthetic strategy parallels the political message of the column, imbuing the seeming trivialities of everyday life with importance. Ultimately, what emerges vividly from the numerous accounts of everyday 'banalities' is scarcity and the struggle for material needs as foundational aspects shaping the urban experience and the mindset of citizens.

The Critical and Progressive Outlook on the Everyday

Significantly, inflation looms large throughout the columns, tying these everyday hardships to state policies and failures.[11] After all, the experience of scarcity in the columns reflects the acute shortages that ensued during the rapidly escalating foreign exchange crisis and inflation

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[5] Taunsvi *Main ne ek khwab dekha* (*Milap* 09.05.1958).

[6] Taunsvi *Itwar ke qahqahe* (*Milap* 20.04.1958).

[7] Taunsvi *Jiyo aur jine do* (*Milap* 18.05.1958).

[8] Taunsvi *Corporation ki ek meeting* (*Milap* 01.05.1958).

[9] Taunsvi Ek chai khana men (*Milap* 05.05.1958).

[10] Ae gandum ke dane! teri sada hi mujhe hun; Ae gandum ke dane! Tujh par khuda ki mar (Taunsvi Ae gandum ke dane (*Milap* 01.04.1956). Also see *Sardiyan phir a gayin* (*Milap* 14.10.1955).

[11] Inflation and the struggle for basic commodities appear in many columns, for example, see Taunsvi *Main sailab se bolta hun* (*Milap* 14.10.1955); *School ki wardi kaise banti hai* (*Milap* 29.12.1955); *Kya ap mahangai se pareshan hain?* (*Milap* 21.08.1958).

during the second half of the 1950s (Kudaisya 2009, Sherman 2013, Siegel 2018). Taunsvi likewise attributes chronic unemployment and broken infrastructure to the state, particularly to corruption (elaborated on in the next section). In other words, the columns do not stop at detailing the daily tribulations of the common people, but also connect them to state policies and larger structures of social hierarchy and power. To return to the column's title, "Peels" points to the act of peeling an onion, that is, to the work of uncovering and analysis that is bitter, bringing tears to the eyes of the person performing it. In his first column, Taunsvi writes that his profession is "to peel off onions and luckily there is no dearth of onions in the world."[12] This critical impulse is imbued, first, with a socialist outlook—an attention to socioeconomic disparities and persistent poverty. Taunsvi's sensibility to these realities bears the imprint of his hardworking and humble life, which made him intimately familiar with the experiences of the working and lower-middle classes, as well as the influence of progressive literary circles. While 'progressive literature' signifies a broad and diverse field, most authors associated with it shared the fundamental conviction that aesthetics and politics were intertwined, spurning 'art for art's sake'. Progressive writers, typically drawn to realism and influenced by Marxism and the Communist Party of India, believed that literature should be mobilized to critique social and political ills for the sake of progress and a more just society. Indeed, in columns where Taunsvi reflects on his own writing, he identifies himself as a satirist (*tanz-nigar*) and as a champion of the ordinary and oppressed with a mission to expose social ills and raise people's awareness.[13] Taunsvi exposes the power hierarchies, injustices, and mores that underlie everyday interactions and difficulties.

One strategy for exposing social relations in their bare form is the use of urban archetypes— quasi-stock figures who are entertaining even while they represent larger social strata. These include those who exploit the system, such as corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, greedy landlords, and black marketeers;[14] the struggling lower-middle classes, including unemployed students, tenants, low-wage clerks, and milkmen who dilute milk with water to pay the commissioner his cut; and the most downtrodden, from street vendors and rickshaw pullers earning a meager income to child beggars. The columns express contempt for the exploiters at the top and sympathy for the toilers at the bottom of the social ladder. An especially touching column, for example, is devoted to a street sweeper in posh Connaught Place who longingly eyes the luxurious life of Delhi's elite, a life he can never have because "he is considered a broom, not a human being"—a tacit comment on caste hierarchy. His longing compels him to steal an expensive sari for his wife, hoping to walk with her through the Connaught Place arcades and emulate the wealthy couples he admires. However, his wife stands out in the crowd, and the stolen sari is quickly recognized, leading to the man's arrest. "The thirst that has reached the well drowned and died there," reflects Taunsvi.[15] Such a column is no less about Delhi's elite than it is about the poor Dalit who sweeps the streets and envies them.

Taunsvi's portrayal of everyday suffering reveals a neglect that amounts to structural violence, which is entrenched and systemic, and which ultimately feels immovable. Thus, while the emphasis on the everyday reflects a socialist concern with disparity, its cyclical and repetitive nature creates a sense of inertia that undermines a socialist faith in change. The Sisyphean message is implicit in the very title of the column. Onion peels may gesture toward onionskin paper—an ephemeral writing medium—and to newspapers and the newspaper column as a textual form that is tied to the everyday—printed and discarded daily, leaving little mark.

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[12] *Ao pyaz ke chhilke utarein* (*Milap* 02.06.1955).

[13] Taunsvi *Andhere se roshni tak* (*Milap* 24.03.1956); *Ah marhum Fikr Taunsvi* (*Milap* 02.04.1956). For a representative column about the poor, see Taunsvi *Ham sab ghaliz hain* (*Milap* 25.10.1958).

[14] Taunsvi *Andhere se roshni tak* (*Milap* 24.03.1956); *Ah marhum Fikr Taunsvi* (*Milap* 02.04.1956); *Hamzad ki shararat abhi jari hai* (*Milap* 07.04.1956).

[15] Taunsvi *Nathe Khakrob ki giraftari* (*Milap* 06.01.1956).

Taunsvi hints at this ephemerality in his own reflections on the title. His epigraph to his edited collection *Pyaz ke chhilke* invokes the emptiness he has found at the heart of the onion, after peeling off all the layers: "*Afsos! us maghaz ke nam jo mujhe pyaz men kabhi nahin mila*" (Alas! That core which I never found in an onion) (Taunsvi 1965). This sense of futility is induced in part by endemic corruption, which is the focus of the next section.

Corruption as a Central Urban Experience

> Delhi's culture [*tahzib*] has been the confluence [*sangam*] of many cultures. One is the culture of black marketers, who do not work but get the money; another is the culture of the bribe takers, also known as the "culture of extra income" [*balai amdani*], of people who, despite being government employees with a salary of 250 rupees, would not step out of a car.[16] Another culture is that of the adulterators [*milawat baz*], commonly known as the "culture of mixing" [*mili juli*], which is on the rise these days in Delhi, for it provides its agents with a good life and respect in society. Hence, every third person in Delhi is either the creator of this culture or its exploiter or its victim. And if this culture continues to progress so speedily, the day is not far when Delhi itself will become adulterated, so you will take a lamp and keep on searching for the true [*asli*] Delhi the same way you search for pure clarified butter and turmeric, but will never find it.[17]

In this quote, Taunsvi ironically plays with the idealized image of India as a confluence of multiple traditions and cultures, listing instead the various cultures of corruption that merge within the city. Playing on the practice of *milawat* (mixing, or adulteration), Taunsvi explicitly claims that it has become so widespread that Delhi itself is becoming adulterated or impure. By centring much of his invective on adulteration, Taunsvi invokes corruption in both its concrete and banal form, as petty fraudulence that structures everyday existence, and in its most literal and broadest sense as "a departure from the original or from what is pure or correct" (*Merriam-Webster*). These two aspects of corruption are intimately connected here, as the vitiation of people's everyday needs erodes moral norms to such an extent that the very identity of the city of Delhi is endangered. Indeed, throughout the columns, the overarching sense of corruption—as a departure from an original state or ideal—arises from the numerous instances of negligence, abuse of power, and habitual fraudulence, which reinforce corruption as deeply engrained and pervasive, contaminating society as a whole.

The issue of corruption has been prominent in independent India's political and media discourses, most conspicuously shaping two key moments of political protest: the Jayaprakash Narayan movement, which led to the imposition of Emergency rule in 1975, and the Anna Hazare movement of 2011, which significantly contributed to the Congress's defeat in the 2014 elections (Jenkins 2014, Baloch 2021). Recent scholarship finds that corruption had already become a central preoccupation during the decolonisation process, tracing it to the expansion of the colonial state during World War II (Gould 2011, Balasubramanian 2024). New departments were set up, including the Department of Food, and the Department of Civil Supplies, which took on new economic functions such as the procurement, rationing, and distribution of food. During the war, the government identified corruption as a major problem arising from its new economic activities and established anti-corruption institutions, laws, and mechanisms. After independence, bureaucratic control over economic life further expanded in the context of the Nehruvian development imperative, and this facilitated a proliferation of corrupt practices. Scholars have also emphasised the intimate link between the growing

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[16] This is a metaphor for people living a luxurious lifestyle far beyond their salary.
[17] *Dilli jo ek shahr hai Part 2* (*Milap* 02.08.1955).

pervasiveness of corruption and the Partition, as the state allocated resources to millions of Partition refugees (Ansari and Gould 2020, Chattha 2012). At the same time, the public increasingly expected state accountability as subjects transitioned into citizens, and a lively anti-corruption public discourse emerged. In response, colonial anti-corruption mechanisms were expanded and repurposed in the 1960s (Gould 2011, Balasubramanian 2024).

Pyaz ke chhilke buttresses this historical argument, demonstrating how extensively corruption permeated public discourse about the state. In these snapshots of daily life, corruption is omnipresent, so much so that it becomes people's central experience of their city. It extends beyond political corruption to encompass all sorts of low-level profiteering that Delhiites encounter in "the very exercise of living" (Gould 2011: 1). Corruption is also people's main direct experience of their state. By articulating this perception, the columns show how central corruption became to citizenship formation in the early postcolonial years.

Crucially, official malfeasance is intimately connected to refugee rehabilitation in the columns, reinforcing the recent observations made by historians (Gould 2011, Ansari and Gould 2020). Taunsvi dedicates abundant space to the poor condition of Delhi's refugee colonies, tying it to neglect and corruption—as when contractors dig trenches too shallow for water pumps, leaving a refugee colony without adequate drinking water;[18] and when refugees can secure housing only by bribing.[19] Rehabilitation was a focal point for both state and citizenship formation—by extending the postcolonial state's welfare distribution functions in unprecedented ways, and by transforming refugees into rights-bearing citizens. As the columns make evident, this process was imbricated with corruption. The following sections will develop these observations through several typical examples.

Red Tape

From 1911 onward, when Delhi replaced Calcutta as India's capital city, it developed as a political and bureaucratic centre; in the words of famous Delhiite author Khushwant Singh, it became "a city of babus and politicians" (Singh 2001: xv). During World War II, the government bureaucracy dramatically expanded, and it retained its wartime dimensions in the newly independent state. (Kamtekar 1988, 2016; Balasubramanian 2024.) Thus, it comes as no surprise that bureaucrats and clerks appear frequently in Taunsvi's columns. In one interesting example, Taunsvi delves into the culture of the government office. Titled "The Sun of the Red Tape" (*Lal Fite Ka Suraj*), this column provides readers with a systematic explanation of the mechanisms of red tape.[20] The term, Taunsvi explains, is derived from the red thread used to bind office files, and it signifies carelessness and neglect (cf. Gupta 2012). To explain to his readers how it works, he imagines, in great detail, a scenario in which a group of friends debates whether the sun rises from the east or west. One of the friends submits an application to the Education Department to resolve the matter in the public's interest. The applicant's name, Suraj Prakash (sunlight), exemplifies Taunsvi's recurrent strategy of using symbolic or ironic names in his writing. As soon as the department secretary's eyes alight on the first lines in Urdu, he attaches a slip of paper to the application, declaring himself unable to read it. He forwards it to the translation department and leaves for the club, considering his work for the day complete. There follows an absurdly long and convoluted process as the 'sun application' is shuffled from one desk to another, getting buried under piles of documents on every desk for a week (or more, if there is a holiday), often returning to the same desk multiple times. When it does return, the official has forgotten about it and starts the process afresh. Rather than taking any substantive action, each official attaches a new slip of paper to it, places the

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[18] Taunsvi *Jungle men ek basti* (*Milap* 02.09.1955).

[19] Taunsvi *All India rishwat advisory company* (*Milap* 06.07.1956).

[20] *Lal fite ka suraj* (*Milap* 23.04.1956).

application in a new folder, secures it with red tape, and forwards it to the next person. The affair (*chakr*) of the red tape becomes long and intricate, comments Taunsvi, "like the bowels of Satan."

As Taunsvi describes the different stops in the application's tortuous journey, he exposes the various forms of office corruption and negligence. For example, the application languishes among the head officer's pending files because he is caught up in work for an influential Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) whose election he helped to promote. When we later learn that the MLA has reciprocated by procuring government housing for the same head officer, we get a glimpse into the corrupt liaisons between politicians and bureaucrats. Another example is the chronic time theft that is practiced by the personal assistant of the department's secretary. When the application lands on his desk, he is completely oblivious to it, busy as he is discussing the eyes of film star Nargis with his personal typist. Days go by without any action on his part. One day, his superior reproaches him for not getting the superior's bill for travel expenses reimbursed. It is only this rebuke from his higher-up—and that, too, only to settle a personal reimbursement—that shakes the assistant from his general lethargy, leading to a frantic search for that bill, during which the 'sun application' is accidentally salvaged. When the application finally arrives at the translation department, the staff cannot tackle it because they have just started working on a project that arrived six months ago. They suggest outsourcing the application to a non-governmental company. When the application, along with its seven slips, reaches the clerk in charge of non-governmental work, we learn that he has just embarked on a fifteen-day vacation. Thus, the labyrinthine journey—and the column—reach a dead end.

It is worth emphasizing here that the popularity of *Pyaz ke chhilke* was rooted in Taunsvi's ability to depict everyday life in a way that elicited laughter among readers. To be effective, satire must tap into common social knowledge. We can thus assume that the practices associated with red-tape culture had, by 1955, become a common experience shared by the writer and his community of readers. This suggests that a chasm had already opened between citizens' expectations from the state and their experiences of it. The bitter humour of the column emanates from the rift between the ideal of a public servant and the stark reality of self-serving bureaucrats.

The 'sun application' column typifies two leitmotifs that are fundamental to Taunsvi's portrayal of everyday life in the city as defined by scarcity and corruption. One is the frustrating ordeal. Many columns depict a journey (often the writer's own) around the city or a neighbourhood—or in this case, a single office—as citizens navigate a frustratingly obstructive system to try to meet their basic needs. The frustrating experience, recurring again and again in the columns, is a hallmark of the interface between the citizen and state authorities. The most conspicuous feature of the 'sun application' column is the long and meticulous nature of the account, which demonstrates, through sheer detail, the lengthy and exhausting bureaucratic maze that citizens are forced to endure when approaching government offices. Red tape is revealed to be much more than mere unwieldiness—it is an entire culture of lethargy, negligence, incompetence, and lack of accountability. At its core, it is a culture of corruption, manifested not in direct bribe-taking (which will be addressed in the following examples) but in a systematic breach of trust. This occurs when officials entrusted with the job of meeting public needs and disbursing government funds fail to fulfil their duties honestly and responsibly and, through sheer laziness and dysfunction, betray public trust. A second leitmotif is darkness, which represents the corruption that plagues a labyrinthine system. An application about the sun that gets buried under layers of red tape is a metaphor for the moral stagnation that engulfs government offices. As Taunsvi puts it, "The sun has risen from neither the east nor the west. It remains stuck in a perpetual sunset, and the entire office is enveloped in darkness." Taunsvi

accentuates this point by using three different synonyms for darkness one after the other—*taariki*, *zulmat*, and *andhera*.

Both the ordeal and the darkness/light metaphor recur in multiple columns, conveying an everyday life saturated by corruption and the state's failing its citizens. This is evident, for example, in the above-mentioned column about wheat as a driving force in human history.[21] After reading about a new government program for subsidized wheat, Taunsvi embarks on a long and exhausting search for it in the market, where he endures humiliating encounters with black marketers, only to conclude that the government scheme exists merely on paper and return home empty-handed. Noting that his search for wheat was made futile by a corrupt system on which profiteers thrive, Taunsvi uses darkness as a metaphor for corruption and injustice. He poetically comments that "the beloved" (as Taunsvi calls the wheat) lights the rivals' (*raqib*) lamps with *ghee* (clarified butter) while extinguishing the light in the homes of honest people.

From Darkness to Light

The same motifs are dominant in the following example, entitled "From Darkness to Light" (*Andhere se roshni tak*).[22] This column provides an elaborate account of the tribulations faced by the residents of *ilaqa* Badnasib Pura (Unfortunate Locality) as they endeavour to get their area connected to electricity. This column, too, explores an intricate and convoluted bureaucratic maze tainted with corruption, and it, too, plays with the metaphor of light and darkness. However, as we will soon discuss, electricity also adds another layer of technological, political, and moral associations that are germane to the citizens' experience of the city and the state. In addition, whereas the 'sun application' column revolves around an invented inquiry with purely metaphoric resonance, this column drives home the very real implications of a corrupt, Kafkaesque bureaucracy for Delhi's residents.

Taunsvi informs readers that one day after many months of deliberations, the municipal committee finally decided to connect his neighbourhood, Badnasib Pura, to electricity. That same evening, the municipal commissioner, Shri Mauqa Parshad (Mr. Opportunist), arrived in the neighbourhood and put up posters claiming responsibility for this decision in the face of allegedly strong opposition from within the committee. The naive public came out to congratulate Mauqa Parshad, offered him two *laddus* and promised to vote for him in the next election. Thus, through the figure of Shri Mauqa Parshad, Taunsvi offers his readers a disillusioned sketch of local politicians who make promises in order to gain votes but do not deliver on them. Their lack of accountability disempowers the voters, eroding the democratic system. Ten days later, Taunsvi recounts, he approached Mauqa Parshad and asked him whether the decision to electrify the neighbourhood had genuinely been taken. At this, the municipal commissioner grew angry, retorting that installing electricity does not happen by magic, that a contractor had been awarded the contract, and that he was about to start the job. The moment Taunsvi heard the word 'contractor', he sighed deeply. He explains to the readers that when this species (*jins*) is involved, matters become *ichak dana bichak dana* (one little seed, two little seeds). This is a reference to the title of a hit song from Raj Kapoor's 1955 film *Shri 420*. The movie's title alludes to Section 420 of the Indian Penal Code, which deals with the offence of fraud. Taunsvi thereby cleverly refers to the famous film to invoke fraud and set the stage for what is about to transpire. After the conversation with Mauqa Parshad, Taunsvi waited ten days, but the streets "remained as dark as they were since the beginning of time." A couple of months later, Taunsvi joyfully traced the circular marks the contractor had drawn on the road to indicate where the electric poles would be placed. But time passed,

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[21] Taunsvi *Ae gandum ke dane* (*Milap* 01.04.1956).
[22] Taunsvi *Andhere se roshni tak* (*Milap* 24.03.1956).

and before long, the neighbourhood kids erased the marks during their games. What follows is a typically Taunsvian account of a hopelessly long and ultimately futile affair. Over the following months, with long intervals in between, officials came and went. The contractor returned at some point and drew the marks again; then some other people arrived, examined the marks, jotted something on paper, and left. Taunsvi assumed they were government officials, "because they threatened people all around." By identifying government officials through their aggressive demeanour toward the neighbourhood's residents, Taunsvi highlights the entitlement that marks their dealings with the public that they are supposed to serve, and the alienation this causes among that public. Eventually, a labourer arrived and dug some holes. Taunsvi happily told the man, "Now, electric bulbs will illuminate our area," using the symbolic resonance of light to signal a better society, as he does in many other columns. The labourer must have thought he was crazy, says Taunsvi, "because those who keep yearning for light are, after all, mad." Indeed, the moment of fulfilment never arrived. Half the poles were installed at some point, but the other half of the ditches remained open. "Perhaps the contractor is awaiting the clearance of his next bill, or maybe the government officials' pockets aren't warm enough to pass the bill?" speculates Taunsvi. "This 'pass' and 'fail' business is also a matter of great *ichak dana*," he comments, again evoking the Raj Kapoor film to connote fraudulence. He wonders in desperation: "Where is the contractor? Where is the municipality? Where is the electric company? Until when will darkness engulf the people's desires?"

This column offers a high-resolution account of government corruption as it transpired on the ground. If the previous column sketches the culture of red tape, this one portrays the corrupt culture of government contracts. It demonstrates how corrupt politicians and the contractors who give them kickbacks impede urban development and imperil the city's residents. The ordeal suffered by residents of 'Badnasib Pura', says Taunsvi, is typical in Delhi's colonies.[23] This criticism should be understood in its historical context: the column was published at a time when development was a top priority, a buzzword of Nehru's government (Zachariah 2005, Kudaisya 2009, Menon 2022). The column argues, in effect, that the culture of corruption undermined post-independence India's paramount policy goals.

In this respect, electricity serves as a focal point, linking the failure of development and progress with political corruption and moral stagnation. Electricity connotes not only light and its moral associations, invoked in the previous examples, but also modernity and progress. As political scientist Sunila Kale observes in her study of electrification in rural India, "a belief in the capacity of electricity to not only improve material conditions but also catalyse broader social change… has been a mainstay of the Indian nationalist vision for modern development, and indeed for nationalist modernizers everywhere throughout the twentieth century" (Kale 2014: 2). Nehru, Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar, and many of their contemporaries believed in the power of electricity to usher in India's transformation. They pinned their hopes on electricity to power factories, irrigate farms, illuminate public spaces and private homes, extend the productivity of the Indian worker and student, and help to eradicate poverty. Electricity was also bound up with the image of urban modernity. From the late 19th century, electrification had been part and parcel of the nationalist desire to build a technologically advanced state, with dazzlingly lit modern cities on par with the West (Coleman 2017).

Kale (2014) emphasises that the importance of electricity lies in its role as infrastructure in a dual sense—both physically, as a material system that enables energy distribution and connectivity throughout India, and symbolically, as an extension of the state's power and

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[23] At the conclusion of the column, Taunsvi chats with a friend, who, upon hearing of Taunsvi's ordeal, remarks that this is exactly how things unfold in the South Delhi municipality. After all, "all of Delhi's municipalities are *bhai bhai* (brothers)."

authority, supporting its legitimacy and capacity to govern, and fostering national unity. This dual significance operates in Taunsvi's discussions of electricity in the example above and in many other columns. The failure to provide electricity is fundamentally a failure of the postcolonial state to deliver on its promise of modernity. Thus, in the column, Taunsvi peers at the holes that have been drilled in the road and contemplates, "If it takes another fifteen days [for electric poles to be installed], no worries. Our forefathers used to say that the joy of meeting a beloved after a long wait is unparalleled." He evocatively and poetically turns electricity—a metonym of modernity—into a classical object of painful longing and unfulfilled desire. As Leo Coleman notes in his historical anthropological study of electrification in Delhi, electricity and urban amenities in general have become "a material site for the moralization of politics" (Coleman 2017: 8). Taunsvi's columns bolster this observation, illustrating how the dereliction of Delhi's localities served as a stark embodiment of failed development and became a focus of public discourse on larger moral and political issues. Fundamentally, infrastructure deficiencies point to the failure of a corrupt system to fulfil its obligations to the citizens. Within this broader theme, many columns underscore the unique challenges faced by Delhi as a city of Partition refugees.

Refugee Colonies

With so many refugees thronging Delhi in the years after Partition, and with immense government investment in rehabilitating them, it is natural that many columns refer specifically to the failed infrastructure in the refugee colonies that sprang up at the city's southern and western outskirts. The middle-class, white-collar refugee colonies always lack something, Taunsvi observes in one column—if there is water then there is no electricity, if there is an electric connection then there is no current, if there are houses then there are no *nalas* (sewers), and if there are *nalas* then there is no one to collect the garbage. In the poorer refugee colonies, the situation is even more dire.[24] Take, for example, the column *Awaz de kahan hai* (Call Out, Where Are You?).[25] The column focuses on the refugee colony Ramesh Nagar, telling the readers that it is a 'cheap colony'. (Taunsvi uses the English word 'cheap' and translates it into Hindi/Urdu as *ghatiya*, that is, inferior of poor quality.) Everything in Ramesh Nagar is cheap—the refugees, the water, the air, the alleys and streets, the houses, the refugees' stomachs (that is, their health) and, above all, their fortune or fate (*Nasib*). The column about Ramesh Nagar also attends to the question of electricity, revealing again how central this concern was in 1950s Delhi. Taunsvi employs two strategies we have already encountered: the metaphor of darkness and light, along with other associations attached to electricity, and the long and tormenting ordeal that is taken to absurd comic extremes. The plot revolves around Taunsvi's search for a friend's house in Ramesh Nagar—an impossible task in the complete darkness of a locality that is not connected to the electric grid. The search turns out to be a misfortunate adventure, as Taunsvi crashes into a bicycle, has a fierce fight with a 'dog' that turns out to be just a branch, and is finally forced to run away from residents who think he is a thief. Since Ramesh Nagar is a 'cheap colony', the rehabilitation department expects its residents to use the cheap light of earthen lamps. Taunsvi thus underscores the socio-economic hierarchy that underlies refugee rehabilitation and citizenship in the city.

It is noteworthy that the column's title is derived from the musical hit *Awaz de kahan hai, Duniya meri jawan hai* (Call Out, Where Are You? My World is Young), originally featured in the 1946 film *Anmol Ghadi* and sung by Noor Jehan. The lyrics express the pain of separation from the beloved during the night. As Taunsvi plays with the connotations of darkness and longing, he intertwines, yet again, the prosaic and the poetic by portraying modern electric infrastructure as an object of unrequited desire. He concludes the column by calling on the residents of

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[24] Taunsvi *Dilli jo ek shahr hai Part 2* (*Milap* 22.08.1955).
[25] Taunsvi *Awaz de kahan hai* (*Milap* 03.04.1956).

Ramesh Nagar to raise their voices and bring light to their colony. This ending expresses his progressive belief in the role of literature to highlight social injustice and inspire action. At the same time, as the analysis in this article shows, this conviction is eroded by the cumulative impact of column after column ending in futility.

The Nationalist Thanedar

Many of Taunsvi's columns refer to police corruption, mentioning it casually as a component of everyday existence. Our final example delves more deeply into the subject. It is typically Taunsvian in its ethnographic quality, but darker and more sarcastic in tone than the previous examples, as it explores the coercive power dynamics of Delhi's neighbourhoods. Taunsvi introduces a new term in this discussion—the 'nationalist police sergeant' (*qaumi thanedar*).[26] This unique breed sprang up and flourished in the city after independence, Taunsvi tells his readers, and now he can be spotted in every nook and cranny of Delhi. The birth of the nationalist *thanedar* can be traced to independence, which caught some people off guard, leaving them utterly bewildered and stunned as the English Raj vanished and their collaborationist game came to an abrupt end. Darkness enveloped their world, and out of this despair, the *qaumi thanedar* emerged. Individuals who once served as police informants, professional witnesses, gambling and bootlegging operators, or informal *chaudhry*s (lords) of their neighbourhoods suddenly transformed into shining beacons of virtue. They adapted to the new era and reinvented themselves as patriots (*qaum parast*). Adorning themselves in pristine white homespun attire, they put on an act of artificial humility, folded their hands before everyone, and wept about the nation's suffering. They made grand promises to serve the public and to act as intermediaries between the police and the people. The transition from the nation's enemies to its newfound friends was a matter of changing clothing overnight, says Taunsvi. He wields his exceptional skills of portrayal to convey deeper meanings: "men of towering height like cypress trees, and with mischief lurking in their eyes but cunningly concealed behind the kohl of morality. They have betel leaves tucked in their jaws and *biris* (beedi cigarette) dangling from their lips. They sport a *pajama sadri* (a homespun suit) combo, wear *chappals* (slippers) on their feet, and wield leather whips. A snake's hiss emanates from their noses." To Taunsvi's contemporaries, this would give the men the appearance of neighbourhood loafers and *goondas* (gangsters). However, they also wear national *topi*s (caps) on their heads, and *khadi*, or *khaddar*—the hand-spun and hand-woven coarse cotton that had been central to Gandhi's intermeshing of personal and national self-discipline and rejuvenation. As the 'uniform' of India's politicians, *khaddar* transformed in the postcolonial period from a symbol of moral purity to one of moral decay and corruption (Chakrabarty 2002, Geva 2018). Taunsvi's account shows how early after independence this transformation took place, as exemplified by the *thanedar*'s opportunistic donning of *khadi*.

The *qaumi thanedar* needs to support his wife and children, but he's not engaged in regular employment—no clerical work, teaching, or selling groceries or *paan biri* for him. The societal value of his vocation is certainly questionable, as he does not contribute to economic progress or the five-year plan. To explain the economic rationale of the *qaumi thanedari*, Taunsvi addresses the readers with the following poignant, deeply ethnographic account:[27]

> The day comes that he knocks on your door and says, "Look, Raghbir Das ji! Your
> boy was caught by the police for stealing." You're startled and protest, "But *ji*, my
> boy is honest and would never steal." The *qaumi thanedar* responds, "How can

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[26] Taunsvi *Te lagda thanedar mi mae* (*Milap* 09.03.1956). The column's Punjabi title means "Mom, this [man] looks like a police officer." What follows is my abridged translation, which omits some details for the sake of brevity.

[27] *Milap* (09.03.1956).

you say that, when the police have solid proof that I saw with my own eyes?" So you rush to the police station in a frantic hurry, only to be met with policemen nonchalantly twirling their moustaches, ignoring your presence. Disheartened, you sprint back to the *qaumi thanedar*, desperately pleading for his assistance. But alas! He, too, twirls his moustaches, shrugs his shoulders, and declares, "I can't do anything; I can't tolerate it that our nation's boys would stoop to thievery." You're already on your knees, he is brimming with threats; you now clutch at his feet, and he feigns anger. Yet, as the night wears on, you somehow manage to strike a compromise—10, 20, or 50 rupees, perhaps. The boy's honour is salvaged, your good name in the neighbourhood is preserved, and the *qaumi thanedar*'s goods [protection] are sold. Meanwhile, the bona fide *thanedar* pockets his share of the profit and marches forward, championing law and order in the new nation.

The scene is striking for its on-the-ground perspective and attention to the physical gestures that index the coercive power dynamic. Those who have power twirl their moustaches, frown, and shrug their shoulders, while those who have no power fold their hands, fall on their knees, and clutch at the other person's feet. Analysing a similar scene in his ethnographic fieldwork in a north Indian village in the 1980s, Gupta notes that "however open the process of giving bribes and however public the transaction, there was nevertheless a performative aspect that had to be mastered. … The practice of bribe giving was not… simply an economic transaction but a cultural practice that required a great degree of performative competence" (Gupta 1995: 379-380). Like the rural *patwari* (keeper of land records and tax collector) described by Gupta, the police *thanedar* and self-appointed *qaumi thanedar* in Taunsvi's account skilfully make the poor fellow beg to give them the money that they are extorting from him.

Thus, Taunsvi analyses political power in post-independence India as it operates at the micro-level of Delhi's localities, elucidating the unholy collaboration between the police and the neighbourhood *goonda*s (thugs). Interestingly, he draws a parallel between this arrangement and the layered, oppressive sovereignty that characterized the dawn of British colonialism in late-18th-century Bengal. Pointing out that the regular police *thanedar*s are officially recruited and invested with some authority, Taunsvi wonders where the nationalist *thanedar*s get their authority. A friend explains, "You may have heard tales from the history books—how the British created a dual rule in Bengal, with peasants bending under both the *jagirdar* and the government. Similarly, nowadays, both the bona fide (*asli*) *thanedar* and the *qaumi thanedar* govern the people." This analysis challenges the notion that 1947 brought about a new democratic polity. The *qaumi thanedar*'s portrayed by Taunsvi operate outside the formal structure of the state, blurring the lines between state and society and, along with the bona fide police, wielding power in a personal and discretionary manner (cf. Gupta 1995, Fuller et al. 2001, Hansen et al. 2001, Gould 2011). This reflects a form of authority that is more akin to Weber's model of traditional authority, based on personal loyalties and arbitrary decisions, than to a modern, democratic state, whose power is exercised through a system of rational, impersonal rules and procedures. The allusion to late-18th-century Bengal, considered an especially corrupt, chaotic, and despotic period of British colonialism, adds a particular sting. And thus, Taunsvi sarcastically concludes:[28]

> Behold the *qaumi thanedar*, your saviour for every trouble. He'll help you manoeuvre through black marketing, accepting bribes, dabbling in illegal alcohol, selling prohibited *charas* (cannabis) and opium. He becomes the bridge between you and the police. If you've committed a crime or plan to do so, he's at your service in any situation—whether to forcefully evacuate tenants for higher rents or

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[28] *Milap* (09.03.1956).

intimidate landlords into letting you go rent-free. He offers his services in exchange for your favours. As the old folks say, "Give this hand, and take that hand." Such services come with a price, and the goods are paid in hard cash.

Taunsvi's dark and bitter portrayal of the *qaumi thanedar* captures the informal role of *mohalla* (neighborhood) bosses and strongmen as mediators between urban citizens and state representatives (in this case, the official police). This is a penetrating account of the coercive role taken by local intermediaries, fixers, and power brokers in Indian cities, central to what political scientist Partha Chatterjee calls "political society" (Chatterjee 2004; for the study of brokerage in contemporary India, see Björkman 2021; Piliavsky 2014). The involvement of such strongmen introduces bullying and criminality into the interface between citizens and the state, communicating the corruption of the promises of independence and transition into democracy.

Conclusion

As a popular column focused on everyday life published in a refugee paper in Urdu—which was then the primary literary language of Partition refugees and many other residents—*Pyaz ke chhilke* offers us a rare glimpse into what constituted the main concerns and topics of everyday commentary among Delhi's lower-middle and middle classes. Taunsvi makes the everyday an object of critical scrutiny, excavating the larger sociopolitical structures, power dynamics, and mores that underlie it. What kind of city, then, do the columns conjure up? Succinctly put, postcolonial Delhi emerges as a space of scarcity and corruption, with refugee rehabilitation as the site where these issues most visibly play out. This article fleshed out the quotidian suffering and the governmental and societal corruption that emerge from the columns.

True to his granular approach, Taunsvi hardly ever refers to corruption in general terms. Indeed, he avoids using the Hindi term *bhrashtachar* or the Urdu term *bad'unwani*, and although he does use the English word 'corruption', it appears only rarely.[29] Instead, he usually opts for more specific words that describe a range of concrete situations, such as *rishwat* (bribe), *rishwat khor* (the person who 'eats' a bribe), *mutthi garam karna* (warming of the fist, akin to greasing palms), *jeb garam karna* (warming the pocket), *kala bazar* (black market), *chor bazar* (black market, lit. thieves' market), *milawat* (adulteration), *stock karna* (hoarding), *hera pheri* (shady dealing, lit. exchange), and *lal fita* (red tape). Such terminological choices align with Taunsvi's exposure of the inner workings of corruption in concrete rather than abstract terms. But gradually, the myriad, concrete scenes he narrates almost daily build into a general statement about corruption as an endemic phenomenon that permeates every aspect of people's existence in the city, shaping their daily ordeals and frustrations. It creeps into almost every scene—be it a policeman demanding a bribe from a truck driver for speeding,[30] a government-subsidized shop selling wheat in the black market,[31] a dairy owner adulterating milk to compensate for the commission he is forced to pay an officer,[32] a school principal who is ignorant and careless,[33] doctors who are neglectful and rude to the hospital's impoverished

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[29] Two consecutive columns in which he uses the English words *corrupt*, *corruption*, and *anti-corruption* are *Ham sab corrupt hain* (*Milap* 14.06.1957), and *Ham sab corrupt hain - 2* (*Milap* 15.07.1957).
[30] Taunsvi *Parhta ja, sharamata ja* (*Milap* 11.08.1955). For various urban situations where police demand bribes, see: *1955 chala gaya* (*Milap* 02.01.1956); *Sain baba ki zaban se* (*Milap* 06.03.1956); *Bhole Nath ki jai* (*Milap* 09.06.1957).
[31] Taunsvi *Ek munafakhor ki diary* (*Milap* 17.09.1958).
[32] Taunsvi *Meri dak men* (*Milap* 20.12.1955).
[33] Taunsvi *Headmistress se mulaqat* (*Milap* 18.03.1956).

patients,[34] or individuals securing government employment through connections at the expense of the truly meritorious and hard working.[35] As the columns minutely and consistently detail these specific abuses, the cumulative impression is that corruption is rooted in the very infrastructure of the city, extending beyond the narrowly defined instances of political corruption. Corruption, in Taunsvi's columns, amounts to social fact in the Durkheimian sense—a fundamental aspect of social life, an institution, even a norm that shapes and constrains the individual's life and behaviour (Durkheim 1982 [1895]). Thus, the micrologic nature of the column—its granularity and everydayness—is what facilitates the construction of an implicit macro analysis. The larger pattern that emerges is of corruption as affecting all aspects of public services, from the poor state of the education, healthcare, and transportation systems to irregular water supply and lack of electricity and roads in Delhi's localities to the struggle to find unadulterated milk. Thus, the nitty-gritty examples of corrupt practices point to corruption in its original sense: a departure from what is correct, the adulteration of a pure form. This article suggests that, in essence, it is a departure from the Nehruvian promises and the great hopes that the masses pinned on independence. The columns provide insight into what citizenship in the newly independent nation meant for the working and lower-middle classes of the capital.

Ordinary inhabitants' experiences of citizenship are shaped by their interactions with the various state representatives who populate the columns—self-interested politicians, lethargic and corrupt bureaucrats, venal police officers, and government servants exuding self-importance and using threats when speaking to the public—alongside an array of shady individuals with whom they collude, such as contractors, black marketeers, and neighbourhood toughs. These operators impede citizens' access to the basic rights and public goods and services that comprise the contract between the state and its citizens: employment, equal access to quality education and healthcare, functioning public transportation, a regular supply of water and electricity, and freedom from abusive and discretionary power. In effect, Taunsvi offers us a contemporary account of what Mody recently called the post-independence "betrayal of the Indian people," by which the "continuous erosion of social norms and decay of political accountability" (Mody 2023: xi) contributed to the failure to invest in human capital. In Taunsvi's Delhi, the promise of Nehruvian development indeed remains unfulfilled, epitomized by the lack of electric infrastructure.

This faltering promise is grounded, to some extent, in the challenges posed by Partition. The need to rehabilitate refugees compounded the problems faced by the postcolonial capital and nation and multiplied the corrupt practices that ensued. Taunsvi does not explicitly make this causal connection, but refugees and refugee colonies are so prominent in the columns that 1950s Delhi emerges as a Partition city.

What the columns ultimately capture is the ambivalence of the early postcolonial moment—the coupling of hope and disillusionment. While *Pyaz ke chhilke* is informed by a progressive belief in the potential for reformation, it simultaneously communicates the corrosion of that faith. As analysed above, both the criticism and the resignation are bound up in the focus on the everyday, which entails a cyclical temporality that precludes the linearity of progress. This sense of time as repetitive, devoid of any possibility of change, surfaces again and again. For instance, in a column written at the beginning of 1956, Taunsvi recounts a conversation with a street vendor who remarks that the new year holds little significance for him except for the

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[34] Taunsvi *Nazarin! Na main ishtehari hakim* (*Milap* 26.05.1957).
[35] Taunsvi *Do patan ke bich men* (*Milap* 05.12.1955).

inevitable increase in the bribe he will need to pay to the petrol police.[36] Taunsvi himself ponders,

> Where will the new year take us? Will all the buzz surrounding the Second Five-Year Plan lead to any concrete outcomes? Contractors will probably continue to warm fists to secure construction projects, and the coveted position of a refugee resettlement officer will be awarded, most likely, to a distant relative, perhaps the cousin of the brother of the wife of the son of some influential minister.

The text communicates a sense of inertia, of corruption that has been routinized, leaving no hope for substantial change. Indeed, along with the columns' everyday, cyclical temporality, the atmosphere of pervasive corruption subverts the progressive imperative of the columns. While *Pyaz ke chhilke* is informed by a socialist outlook and is explicitly committed to shedding light on social wrongs in order to rectify them, many episodes conclude with literal darkness. Similarly, the many stories depicting people on tortuous urban treks to accomplish simple tasks impart a Sisyphean outlook, as they invariably end in failure. As Taunsvi reflects in a column that ostensibly announces his own death,

> people have been reading the deceased's texts with great interest, and his ideas had a deep impact on them, but he always complained about the fault of his pen— he has been writing for 15 years, yet not one corrupted person [*rishwat khor*] told him, "*Fikr sahib*! Having read your articles, I have stopped taking bribes." The influence of his writings on the corrupted people[37] was akin to a drop of water on a hot *tawa* [pan]. Despite his efforts, this remained a limitation of his writings that he could not overcome.[38]

Thus, *Pyaz ke chhilke* reflects the charged coexistence of hope and disillusionment that marked the decade after independence.

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[36] Taunsvi *1955 chala gaya* (*Milap* 02.01.1956).

[37] *chor bazaar walon, rishwat khoron, luteron, be'imanon aur khud gharzon…*

[38] Taunsvi *Ah Marhum Fikr Taunsvi* (*Milap* 02.04.1956).

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Research Article

Urban Futures: Representations of South Asian Cities in Recent SF literature[1]

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In the light of accelerated urbanization processes in South Asia since the 19th century, particularly after Independence and into the present, it is hardly surprising that the city is becoming an ever more prominent topos of literary representation. Science Fiction (SF), an area of speculative fiction that has solidly established itself in various literary cultures of the subcontinent, is especially prone to such orientations, and all signs are set for the trend to continue. After some general remarks about the advent and development of South Asian SF and reflections on urbanity in 20th-century writings in the genre, I turn to contemporary SF and portray some examples of 21st century texts and the futures they envisage for a number of South Asian cities: Dhaka, Kolkata, Delhi, Trichy, Chennai and Mumbai. In the conclusion, I argue that two dystopian turns—the first mid-20th century and roughly coinciding with Independence, the second end-20th century and connected with globalizing crisis scenarios—can be deduced from the material and used for contextualizing the productions within a global imaginaire of the future.

urbanity, science-fiction, climate-fiction, dystopian, regional-South-Asian-languages

Introduction

> *Begam̐purā* is the name of the city where sorrow has no place / no taxes, no property, no crimes, worries, horrors and pains / brother, I have found a good home and will live there happy forever / nobody is second or third there, all are one / […] (Ravidās).[2]

As we set out to look at a few South Asian projections of modern, postmodern, or even post-apocalyptic cities, it is opportune to remember that literary dealings with the city precede modernity and go back far into classical Sanskrit and Tamil literatures. Due to Buddhism's largely urban early history, Buddhist literature, in particular, displays clear traces of urbanity. None of these representations, however, to my knowledge, are speculative in the sense we find in Science Fiction (SF) literature.

In pre-colonial literature in regional South Asian languages, a search for precursors of modern speculative works may bring to mind works such as Ravidas's famous 15th century song *Begam̐purā* quoted at the beginning. In its verses, poet-saint Ravidas (second half 15th c, Benares), a *Chamar*, tanner, a Dalit in today's nomenclature, imagines a city without

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[1] I thank the editors, Anne Murphy and Anne Castaing, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their edits and constructive criticism that has helped improve the article. Given its limited scope and rather narrow focus, I could not incorporate all their suggestions, and I thus do own all remaining shortcomings.
[2] Translation as given in Omvedt (2008: 106f.), who in turn quotes from Hawley and Juergensmeyer (1988). For the original, see Śarmā (1978: 84).

discrimination, dearth and limitation. If this is certainly not SF, but rather a utopian poem,[3] it shares with texts from the 19th and early 20th centuries—if nothing else—the idea that future South Asian cities might take a positive turn. To be clear, the city—not to speak of the megacity—is not yet at the centre of attention of those texts of the colonial period. But they do feature urban scenarios. Thus Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827-94) in his late-19th century Bengali *Svapnalabdha bhārat'barṣer itihās*, "History of India as Received in a Dream" (Mukhopādhyāẏ 1895),[4] and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963) in *Bāīs'vīṃ sadī*, "The 22nd Century" (written in 1922; Sāṅkṛtyāyan 1935) foresee Indian cities as world-class top destinations of higher learning.[5] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) in her iconic *Sultana's Dream* (1905) offers us an orderly, high-tech middle size garden city in lady land, where men have been put under *purdah* (Hossain 1993). But the days of the colonial utopian or proto-SF texts and the bright futures they foresee are gone. The closer we come to the present of speculative fiction, the more the city becomes the norm, and the more this norm becomes problematic.

The origins of South Asian SF are a debatable topic which has been taken up in several recent publications:[6] some place its history safely in the 20th century as an offshoot from international science fiction, while others date it back to as early as 1835, or even view it in continuity with pre-modern narratives that today's taxonomies would class under mythology, such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (e.g. Vandana Singh 2021). Suparno Banerjee (2020: 21-59) has provided the most extensive survey and discussion to date, and has also stressed that overlaps between SF and adjacent forms of speculative fiction, like utopias, are conspicuous in the early history of the genre. This is not the place to go into the genesis of South Asian SF in any detail, nor to discuss questions of genre formation. Two recent tendencies, however, need explicit mention right at the start. The first trend is the so-called CliFi—climate fiction—as a particular segment or subgenre of SF literature. Of course, as with SF in general, the phenomenon precedes the term, coined apparently by American author Dan Bloom in recent years, globally as well as in South Asia (cf. Harder 2020: 165f.). The proliferation of public awareness about global warming in the last two decades has left its definite imprints on South Asian SF production. The second trend is a critical engagement with authoritarian forms of governance and public surveillance. This stands in stark contrast to early-SF's positive and rather utopian imaginings of future subcontinental societies, and is obviously related to recent political climate shifts in more than one South Asian country.

Problems of visibility of non-Euro-American SF, as well as the marginality of SF and the literature's failure to address climate change concerns, have been highlighted in recent interventions. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, in his manifesto-like article on recentring Science

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[3] While utopia, following Thomas Morus's foundational, eponymous text (1516), can be seen as a genre in itself, it obviously overlaps with other kinds of speculative fiction like SF, which have utopian or dystopian 'moods', or function within u/dystopian 'modes'. So, like satire, utopia may figure both as genre and mode/mood. Utopia, initially and still often conceived of as an island, can also be shown, in many cases, to have an insular position within larger fictional frameworks, and it thus qualifies for the designation of a micro-genre. However, I reserve this discussion for a future publication, since it would take up too much space and dilute the rather narrow focus of the present article.

[4] For an English translation by Sujit Mukherjee, see Mukhopadhyay (1995). There is a detailed discussion of this in Sudipta Kaviraj's *Imaginary Institution of India* (Kaviraj 2010).

[5] Partial translation in Saint (2019: 40-50).

[6] In the span of the last five years, several monographs and anthologies dealing with South Asian/ Indian science fiction have appeared: Upamanya Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers* (2020), Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction* (2020), Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Aakriti Mandhwani & Anwesha Maity's *Indian Genre Fiction* (2019), and Tarun K. Saint's *Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction* (two volumes, 2019 and 2021). The latter contains a substantial introduction that also discusses the genealogy of the genre.

Fiction, deplores a prevailing "Anglocentrism", seconded by "Anglophonism", in the study of SF (Chattopadhyay 2013). This differentiation, largely coming down to the distinction between English as culturally embedded *versus* vehicular language, deserves more discussion than feasible in the present context; but I do stake a modest claim for what follows in venturing beyond the 'anglosphere' and taking on board a majority of non-English texts.[7] Whether or not Amitav Ghosh's three-step, seminal critique In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh claims that "serious" literature, does not deal with climate change. SF is not accepted within the canon of serious literature, and SF deals with *future* climate scenarios while it should address the *present* also. Whether or not this three-step, seminal criticism still holds true today is a question I cannot decide. But in South Asia, the recent scholarly trend to investigate SF from the subcontinent, as well as a certain surge in attention for contemporary SF writings in regional languages and English, suggest that this situation, if adequately diagnosed by Ghosh, is about to change.

In the following, I provide some glimpses, in a first step, of postcolonial 20th century SF productions from South Asia—novels and short stories in different languages—that portray cities. Thereafter, in a second step, I intensify my focus on contemporary works. It goes without saying that a larger sample of writings that would include more language-literatures, would be necessary to formulate a more solid hypothesis regarding contemporary SF in all of South Asia. But the 10 examples of contemporary SF plots I shortly summarize in the following pages do seem to indicate that climate change scenarios and critiques of authoritarian surveillance states gradually move to the forefront as important modes of addressing predominantly 'urban' futures.

Urban SF before 2000

As far as CliFi is concerned, its development is foreshadowed in a number of 20th century productions in which changed climate scenarios and their effects on city life do feature already. But in my first example of dystopia, the annihilation of Karachi comes about for different reasons. Urdu author Ghulam Abbas, in his story *Dhanak* ("Rainbow", ʿAbbās 2014: 171-224), imagines that a Pakistani team of astronauts first makes it to the moon. Notably, the story appeared in 1967, just two year before the NASA's Appollo 11 mission. In the story, the event is celebrated as Pakistan's arrival into the front row of nations, but meets with much criticism from the Islamic clergy in the country. The ensuing unrest and waves of Islamization in the country cause major upheavals, and when in the end the reader finds Karachi literally reduced to desert sand (ʿAbbās 2014: 224). It is not an ecological disaster that has led to this development, but the excessive in-fighting between different Islamic factions that has opened the country to enemy invaders.

Ecological crises are also not foregrounded in Tamil author Sujatha's short story *Nakarvalam*, ("City tour") of 1976 (Cujātā [Sujatha] 2007: 170-74), even though much of the scenario in the story may already smack of CliFi. Protagonists Atma and Nitya in some late-21st c. future take a space ship to visit the earth and Chennai, where Atma's forebearers are from. As the space ship flies over a terrestrial ocean towards Chennai, Atma reads a guide book on the history of the city. Suddenly there is an announcement that the sun deck will close, and that all passengers should retire to the inside of the ship. The space ship enters the water, and we learn that Chennai is now some 100 meters under the surface of the water. Another Sujatha story, *Aṉṉācālai 2094* (Cujātā [Sujatha] 2007: 447-450), by contrast, projects a couple dwelling on the 47th storey of a Chennai building, their living quarters framed by a sketchily drawn situation of utter resource scarcity. Especially water is in short supply and has to be drunk in

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[7] Of course, ironically but typically, I present my findings in English and thereby buttress 'anglophonism' even though a certain denial of 'anglocentrism'.

small rations, not to speak of bathing, which they are not allowed to do more than twice a month. The irony of the story is that when they are granted special permission to visit Annasalai, the former Mount Road and metropolitan area of central Chennai in today's times, they are amazed by how people can possibly live in such small houses (Cujātā [Sujatha] 2007: 450).

More pronouncedly CliFi is Jayant Narlikar's 1979 Marathi story *Him-pralay* (Nārʲlikar 1991: 30-37), or "Ice apocalypse"—however, the scenario is not one of global warming yet, but of the exact opposite. For the first time in history, Bombay is buried under snow, which despite warnings catches the city completely unawares. Due to volcanic activities, dust particles obscure the sky, and the whole northern hemisphere witnesses unprecedented catastrophes: there are three meters of snow in the north, the American capital has to be transferred to Florida, and the remaining 40% of British population have to be moved to Kenya, etc. But in the end, it is an Indian scientist who devises a strategy to defy the cold by shooting metallic particles through rockets into the atmosphere.[8] Such techno-optimism is typical of the SF written by Narlikar, who is a scientist himself, but is also distinctively of an earlier period, in contrast to more recent work that reflects a realization of a lack of easy escape routes.

Hindi author Jitendra Bhatia's *Agʲle andhere tak* ("Until the next darkness" [1998]) depicts Bombay in the year 2097. An ongoing war between two global super powers—or actually multinational companies that have overruled governments and established authoritarian surveillance states, has divided the world into *pūrvʲvāle* and *paścimʲvāle*, those of the east and those of the west. The first-person narrator Ravikumar awakens in a hospital and then staggers through terribly hot and polluted Bombay amidst flying cars. Meanwhile, he learns about new gadgets that help him to immerse himself in virtual realities, and enable delightful experiences ranging from eating to sex. Ravikumar enters a tunnel and joins a secret oppositional underground organization with some alternative institutions, including museums with old-world personalities like Chaplin, Gandhi, Jesus, Nanak and Shakespeare on display. Ravikumar then gives a speech to these underground dwellers about what Bombay used to be like, which moves his listeners to tears. But he is thereafter picked up by the security and finally wakes up again in his hospital bed (Hahn 2020: 160 ff.).

If these texts reduce Karachi to rubble, drown Chennai in the water, and cover Bombay with snow, they depict mostly climate-related urban catastrophes. But it is only in Bhatia's *Agʲle andhere tak* that the combination of climate change and increased surveillance make a joint appearance, thus setting the trend for contemporary, 21st century productions.

21st Century SF

Recently, SF literature in South Asia has seen a rise in production as well as in scholarly attention. Apparently, however, this boom does not apply equally to all the languages in which South Asian SF has been written. Suparno Banerjee has claimed that since the 1990s, SF writing has, by and large shifted away from regional languages towards English (Banerjee 2020: 48). Tarun K. Saint's Gollancz anthologies (Saint 2019 and 2021), with only about ten translated specimens from regional languages as opposed to fifty English ones, seems to support this statement, all the more since the majority of the non-English stories in the collections predate the 1990s. Nonetheless, there are also very recent SF productions in other languages, some of which have found new publication outlets in webzines and the like. The

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[8] I have mentioned this text earlier in an article on a few examples of Marathi SF (Harder 2001: 110-11). Cf. also a recent Bengali SF text by Soham Guha, translated as 'The Song of Ice' by Arunava Sinha (Saint 2021: 90-102). Here, the Yellowstone volcano erupts and covers Kolkata under ice.

following ten examples are drawn from Bengali and Tamil webzines,[9] Bengali printed books, and Saint's anthologies. Six of them are written in Bengali or Tamil, and four in English. I arrange them according to the cities whose futures they imagine.

Dhaka

In US-resident Bangladeshi author Dipen Bhattacharya's *Nakṣatrer jhaṛ* ('star storm' [2015]), it is Dhaka in 2041 that we see, depicted in a sombre vision, right before the destruction of most human life caused by a lethal electro-magnetic wave. The heat, overpopulation, and rising tides depicted in the novel resonate directly with CliFi concerns:

> I got up and made coffee. The city was still quiet. In its cage of concrete, this city of 30 million people was waiting for the night to end. My six-floor apartment house was confined on three sides by fortresses of 14 to 22 storeys. Only on the front side, where the sun rises, was a small ground, enclosed by a wall. Behind that ground was a twelve-floorer. By the side of it I could, at certain times of the year, catch a glimpse of the sun. On the ground a few bushes of grass came up every now and then; in the rains it all became muddy, and in the cold season covered with dust. That's where the boys of the neighbourhood came to play football and cricket. In all of Wari this was the only open space. And it was not that the owner had become environment-conscious and didn't let anybody build a multi-storey here – no, it was because of a family dispute about the property that it had got stuck. […] Between the shop and my house there was a little road, packed during daytime with rikshaws, cars, pushcarts and three-wheelers. Foreigners couldn't believe it that even in 2041, the rikshaws and pushcarts reigned supreme.
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> South Dhaka had almost officially been abandoned. There was no easy way to go from Wari to the northern part of the city. And for northern Dhaka the south was an impenetrable jungle. Due to demographic pressure, lack of roads and the decay of the water supply system, this part had become a battlefield, separated from the world. One could generally say that none of the city parts was inhabitable. Apart from that, all parts of the country, caught under the feet of 240 million people, were facing a severe ecological crisis. (Bhaṭṭācārya 2015: 17)

The end of the novel describes the extinction of a large majority of mankind, with the surviving protagonists strolling through spookily empty Dhaka streets and neighbourhoods in search of other survivors. Somewhat ironically, this extinction scenario is accompanied by the dispersal of Dhaka's smog cover, and the I-narrator finds himself looking up at the Milky Way for the first time in his life (Bhaṭṭācārya 2015: 104).

Even worse is the state of Dhaka that Saad Z. Hossain projects in his 2017 English SF story 'Bring your own Spoon' (Saint II: 436-447): in the 'post-dissolution era', central Dhaka is warded off from general access and is a reserve of the rich. The right to enter the city is limited to very small time-slots, and is allotted as remuneration for good behaviour to the underprivileged, traded amongst them as a sort of currency. The story is set in Narayanganj, portrayed as an extremely polluted and toxic fringe area, for fringe people. Artificial food is the rule, with things like coconuts providing only a faint recollection of bygone days. But protagonist Hanu decides to set up, with the help of a jinn, a real-food kitchen with abandoned and contaminated food found here and there. He has great success with his fringe guests—

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[9] Namely, the Bengali webzine *Kalpabiśva* (cf. also Banerjee 2020: 54f.) and the Tamil *Tinnai.com*, the latter from a printed compilation (Rājaram 2005).

until they are all discovered and driven out by drones into a wilderness outside the city which, despite all the dystopian overtones, apparently still exists.

Calcutta

Contrary to the apocalyptic image, the 'City of Joy' has acquired attention in much of post-Independence imagination. The first two examples of Calcutta SF that I have, do not portray it as the epitome of decay, or at least not in the way we might think. They also do not play the CliFi card. One of them is Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's piece of juvenile SF, a story called *Māch* ("Fish"), from a 2019 collection of short stories, in which we encounter the protagonist Garbha Ghosh who lives on the 250th floor in a pleasant, dust-free atmosphere, with a hangar for his flying car in front of the apartment. The plot presents us with Garbha and his neighbour hobby-fishing, not in a proper pond, but on the sides of an artificial pool. Garbha is unlucky and does not catch a single fish, whereas his mate's catch is abundant. Eventually, Garbha finds out that the fish have been electronically manipulated to stay away from his part of the pool by none other than his neighbour.

The other example is Sayantani Putatuṇḍa's *Ekᵈiner īśvar* ("One day's god" [2017]). In this novel, an autocrat called Rabi-Rex has made himself the god of High Tech City (alias Calcutta, apparently) in 2046:

> What had this city been, and what had he built! Garbage on the roadsides, dirty people, and the city even dirtier. A country abounding in diseases. A place humming with flies and mosquitos. Complaints about malaria, dengue, plague and various other kinds of dirty diseases. But now, thanks to him, High Tech City was squeaky clean. Its beauty would defeat any foreign city. Completely free from diseases. Now you wouldn't see any unwanted hawker or beggar in the streets of High Tech City. No labourers or people from the working class were there either. In the factories, high-class robot labourers had taken up their position. (Putatuṇḍa 2017: 9-10)

Ekᵈiner īśvar comes across as an urban utopia which, however, assumes dystopian dimensions to the degree that the hero Rabi-Rex exercises his autocratic powers to subdue significant parts of the population. On the other hand, Sandipan Chattopadhyay's 2018 novel *Mīr jāphar*, by contrast, is pure CliFi: all of Calcutta is covered by a climate shield, while the rest of Bengal wastes away in the heat. The most urgent problem is scarcity of water, and multinationals dominated by American businessmen are busy buying the last water reservoirs, placing the hero, Ashok, employee of a water company, in the dilemma of whether he should safeguard a huge water reservoir he has discovered in north Bengal for regional use, or sell it off to the multinationals. In the end, our hero turns into the antihero as he does the latter.[10]

Delhi

Sami Ahmad Khan's English short story *Biryani Bagh* (Saint II 2021: 350-367) is set in future Delhi, where quite sarcastically the "Mussaliens" (assonances with 'Muslim aliens' intended) still hold an important position after the so-called Manav Rashtra drives out the Qa'haQ, another community, to another planet. the "Mussaliens" look like humans and have adapted to human food, and eat Biryani exclusively. In this very recent story, we find lots of allusions made to the Corona situation, to the 2019 student protests, and the ensuing police action at

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[10] Caṭṭopādhyāẏ (2018). Mir Jafar, who conspired with the British to defeat Nawab Sirajuddaulah in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, has become the proverbial traitor in Bengali parlance, hence the title of the story. For a more thorough discussion of this novelette, see Harder (2020: 166-69).

Jamia Millia Islamia University etc. The novel provides readers with an encounter of Delhi's Muslim neighbourhoods as extensively surveilled spaces. Here is a passage:

> Drones and CCTVs cover the entire length and breadth of Biryani Bagh and relay the footage directly to RashtrianNews, which then airs it 24*7 to holo-screens— and BiggProtestjeeviBoss subscribers—across the world. Bluish force-fields have replaced yellow, corrugating DelUPo barricades. A small altar representing a temple, mosque, church, gurudwara and a Mussalien shrine has been constructed at the very spot where people from different faiths congregated for the first time all those years ago. Turrets, panoptowers and drones adorn the JDZ: a concrete fortification insulates it from the outside world, and no one can cross into Indraprastha without a genetic scan. (Khan 2021: 357f.)

A Hindu surveillance state is the topic of this dystopian story, with a little aspect of CliFi included in it.

Trichy and Chennai

Future city scenarios are also under negotiation in some recent Tamil productions. From amongst the stories that appeared in the webmag *Thinnai* and were then compiled in an anthology, I choose two short stories by Tukaram Gopalrav. In *Oru coṭṭu irumbu* ("A drop of iron" [Rājārām 2005: 78-82]), the first-person-narrator has escaped from a factory. Traversing the city of Trichy (Thiruchirappalli) in a train, he ponders the drudgery of factory life: work on command, rest in a cell of just a few square feet, work again. During the train ride he first talks to an aged man with the old-fashioned habit of reading, and then gets into a quarrel with a woman about seats. She calls the police, and in due course the factory owner picks him up and takes him back. When he wants to retire to his cell, he is directed elsewhere—to a workshop, as we learn in the final sentences, where his screws and metal joints are dismembered. If here the pun is that we have been reading the humanoid reflections of a robot, Tukaram Gopalrav's second story has a similarly astounding ending. In *Marabaṇu* ("Gene" [Rājārām 2005: 83-88]), the first-person-narrator finds himself in a beautiful but entirely artificial landscape in which ponds and trees are entirely roofed. He is utterly opposed to science and technology, and despises city life in what seems to be a future avatar of Chennai. His greatest worry, however, is that the ban on gene technology—which had been imposed a century earlier—is about to be lifted by corporate scientists who have become CEOs and then politicians. The narrator persuades a few friends to help him organize protests against this move. They devise slogans like "hands off the genes" and "don't destroy nature", and soon gather some 400 followers. There is not as much resistance as is anticipated, and even the police assist them as they approach the parliament and—here comes the irony—raise their third hands, clumped into fists, as they shout their slogans.

Cities appear only obliquely, although no less significantly, in these stories. The first one projects a future in which humanoid robots have taken over the production processes of Indian cities. The second imagines a future in which city life has become artificial to the extreme. The protests against genetic engineering are located at a point of what we assume to be the present-day. But the 'normal' state of things is in fact something that is abnormal or manufactured, a 'normal' that is born out of the manipulation of the past. The ironic turning point at the end is indicative of Sujatha's writing style overall. In fact, both stories would not lend themselves to being read as SF at all, were it not for their concluding lines. Thus, the cognitive estrangement that Darko Suvin (1972: 86-89) has famously singled out as the basic defining feature of SF is held back until the final dénouement, and the retrospective reversal it prompts our interpretation to undergo.

<u>Bombay</u>

Recent Bombay-related SF takes us back to CliFi-dominated imaginations, and here the main motif is that of drowning—highlighted in recent non-SF works like Rahman Abbas's 2016 Urdu novel *Rūḥzin* (author's coinage, approx. "Melancholy of the Soul") with its deluge-like apocalyptic ending, or Vishal Bhardwaj's Macbeth-inspired Hindi movie *Maqbool* (2003) where fate announces itself through the metaphor of water rising to the doorstep. In Anil Menon's 2019 English short story *Shit Flower* (Saint I: 51-73), though, end-21st century Bombay is not drowned in Indian Ocean water, but—since the sewage systems have gone bad –literally in excreta. An aged mathematician has to be summoned to help resolve the outdated AI sewage robots' problem. In my last example, US-based Vandana Singh's 2021 English story *Reunion* (Saint I 2019: 341-365), in contrast, indeed has the ocean swallowing up much of Mumbai. Storms have destroyed the inner city and has reduced the peninsula to islands again between which people travel on boats. Despite appearances, this is perhaps the least dystopian of all the stories I have chosen: we are presented with a post-'Kuber Age', named after Lord Kubera and translating roughly as post-capitalist or post-wealthy. The situation depicted in this story features the restoration of nature in small settlements on the hills around the city with intelligent, eco-sensitive sensor systems. Through this story, the author conveys a new, emergent transhumanist balance credo.

Conclusion

To what extent are these scenarios specific for the individual cities they depict? Some are consistent with existing, plausible risks and vulnerabilities, e.g., the water-bound nature of Mumbai's inundation (Vandana Singh). Amitav Ghosh gives us a detailed account of Mumbai's storms and floods in history and in the present, and predicts their likely increase under global warming conditions (Ghosh 2016: 37-54). Excessive state power display and surveillance mechanisms equally fit Delhi as India's capital and the seat of central administrative institutions (Sami Ahmed Khan). Dhaka's collapsing ecology due to sheer overpopulation resonates with Bangladesh's capital being the second-fastest growing megacity on earth (Dipen Bhattacharya). However, the majority of the stories do not feature scenarios specifically tailored to the respective cities, but rather, play randomly through the set of available options—heat, drought, drowning, state control, segregation, etc. Thus, Chennai and Kolkata, colonial harbour cities that are on or close to the water-front and not much more risk-proof than Mumbai (cf. Ghosh 2016: 53), do not get submerged under water according to the recent SF specimens we have surveyed, but fall prey to other, perhaps less likely disasters.

As stated before, a survey of ten works is far from sufficient for making solid conclusions across contemporary South Asian SF literatures. But we can see these examples as indications of the themes that acquire prominence that are in sync with global public discourse. The two themes that dominate the scene, sometimes in combination, are climate change and issues surrounding social control: increased social segregation, surveillance, and authoritarian rule. A cursory look at the long durée of city projections in South Asian literature would then suggest a double dystopian turn. The first occurred around mid-20th century when anti-colonial utopias had to confront post-Independence realities. The second arguably took place around the millennial turn that was coupled with an increased awareness of global crises. This latter combines with a surplus of critical reflexion, and apparently a decrease in nativist, golden age-type projections, which were dominant in colonial SF writings.

What is striking, I feel prompted to add in a final note, is the stark contrast of these projections with a very different, non-literary, non-fictional, but to some extent equally speculative way of modelling the future, namely computerized architectonic simulations of real-estate and

building projects. As we witness increasingly optimized three-dimensional architectonic simulations of future urban scenarios, the recent SF projections I have cited in this article may act as a reflective corrective. While the former in all their minute accuracy are utopian rather than realist, the latter are overwhelmingly dystopian. And it can safely be predicted that both these forms of projecting will have their takers and markets.

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Research Article

'Wonderful Poison': Hindi and English Post-1970s Era Novels and the Body (Dis)Morphic Dimension of the Urban Space

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As disillusionment with the Nehruvian era became the mainstay of Hindi literature in the 1970s, with the emergence of 'experimentalism' as its major vehicle, cityscapes became the principal concern of middle-class writers. These writers seek to depict how urbanisation and migration accentuate already existing social divisions that trigger an entirely fresh set of predicaments like mental distress, pollution, overpopulation, and poverty. The dystopian visions of the post-1990s era, of economic liberalisation further enhances this initial sense of disenchantment. These dystopian visions came to be sharply represented by especially those authors and protagonists who lacked access to caste and class privileges. A striking feature of such works is that they engaged with urban spaces portrayed the corrosive effects of the city on the human body and consequently the mind. They depicted phenomena like metamorphosis (*Ek Cūhe Kī Maut*), rotting flesh (*Murdāghar*), decaying bones and organs (*Animal's People*; *A State of Freedom*), or mental illness (*Maĩne Māṇḍū Nahī̃ Dekhā*). Seen from the inside, cities like Bhopal, Delhi, or Mumbai become maze-like, oppressive, and hostile spaces where daily wage workers', sex workers', clerks', but also the bodies of middle-class and aspiring writers underwent deterioration, transfiguration, and abjectification, consumed quite literally by disease and by the city itself. This article analyses these texts as pathographies and examines the aesthetic choices made by authors to describe their experiences of maladies, and the unresolvable crisis that their writings foregrounded.

urban-novels, Indian-city-lit, Hindi-pathographies, post-1970-literature

Introduction

South Asia has a long-standing tradition of city-literature. In the early postcolonial period, most writers resided in urban areas, and the city was frequently idealised, depicted in literary works as a setting that was replete with aspirations and integration. During the 1940s and 1960s, the depiction of city life as a catalyst of progress became popular, centring on characters that were seeking belonging and freedom in the metropolis. The archetypal character of the 'lonely flaneur', traversing a deserted maze of streets in the 'city of dreams' under the veil of darkness, persisted in the post-independence literary landscape until the 1960s. However, from the 1970s onward, a discernible shift emerged, marked by the occurrence of new motifs such as the concept of being lost in 'the monster which is the city' (Hahn 2020: 119). Once a symbol of infinite possibilities, the city now began to reveal its harsh and cruel realities (Varma 2012, Latham 2014). It started to be depicted as an exploitative organism and as a 'toxic gutter.' (Harder 2016: 455). This article aims to trace the shift in the tradition of Hindi and English writing in South Asia, commencing with the 1970s and continuing till the present through a specific genre of pathography. This is in keeping with what Divya Gujral (2024: 102) observes in her recent essay that examines the nature of art in the 1970s and the subsequent decades as "Indeed, the years immediately preceding the Emergency and the decades after seem to

herald a turn towards concerned art practice: art that responded to and documented the Indian public, its everyday life, and its negotiations with the state for rights, representation, and justice."

Pathographies as Narratives of Maladies[1]

In this article, I analyse three novels written in Hindi and two in English in India between 1971 and 2017 as narratives of malady or pathography.[2] These novels describe experiences of illness, both as individual experiences and as side effects of an urban lifestyle and modernity that dominates daily life in cities like Bhopal, Delhi, Mumbai, or any urban centre. The experience of dwelling in the city within these narratives is closely linked to physical pain, intangible suffering, dysmorphia, and abjectification. The protagonists' bodies absorb the residue, substances that ooze out from urban space, from places like buildings, institutions, sewage, slums, offices, police stations, and restaurants. These residues affect the physical and mental condition of citizens, infiltrating their organs, tissues, and fluids. Conversely, cities can also be viewed as consuming their citizens. Some of the narratives in the Hindi and English city-lit genre of the latter decades of the 20th century and the opening decades of the 21st thus deal with the experience of real maladies that are caused by environmental and mental hazards omnipresent in urban spaces.[3] These narratives can be variously categorised as autopathography or pathography (Hawkins 1999) as they consist of decaying figures that are being destroyed, or that are adapting to new ecosystems. The bodies of individuals from Bhopal, Delhi, and Mumbai in these works serve as maps, representing transformation through illness, understood as a process of becoming something else, such as an animal, a nonhuman, or an abject creature (see Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity [2012]). Other narratives in this genre often use metaphors surrounding disease and defect to illustrate the oppressive reality of living in a metro. The concept of 'illness as metaphor' analysed later in this paper draws on Susan Sontag's (1978) suggestion that the cultural and aesthetic reception of disease varies, depending on the type of disease. She presents a vocabulary and conceptualisation of disease that revolves around fighting (*fighting cancer*, *invisible enemy*, *invasive disease, body's defenses, killing cancer cells*), conquering, invading (*abnormal growth*, *alien cells*, *attack on organs*), consumption (*cancer spreading, body wasting away*), punishment and crisis (*stages of cancer*). Illness is often rendered metaphorically or symbolically as chaos or as an overwhelming force that an individual cannot control, something that is not part of their identity. Pathographies, therefore, aim to construct inward-looking meanings about illness, forming specific micro-stories that hold the affected person at their narrative epicentre. The emergence

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[1] I am aware of the existence of only one book from India that explores the history and cultural understanding of maladies in the Indian languages (Qadeer 2022). However, Qadeer draws on the theories of Foucault, Sontag, Charon, Arnold and other western scholars. Due to a paucity in South Asian methodology and theory, I too am compelled to focus more on well-established theories that emanate from the west. In this particular case, the distinctive plurality of South Asian medical culture is not too significantly a part of my arguments.

[2] The selection of material may appear arbitrary, given an abundance of similar novels—to name a few, *Jhīnī Jhīnī Bīnī Cadariyā* (1992) by Abdul Bismillāh, *Dāstān-e-lāpatā* (1995) by Manzūr Ehteśām, *Rāt Kā Riporṭar* (1992) by Nirmal Varmā, and *Śahar Mẽ Karfyū* (2006) by Vibhūti Nārāyāṇ Rāy. These and some others have been omitted due to the limitation of space. Notwithstanding these omissions, this article endeavours to make a modest contribution to the development of the Indian city-lit corpus.

[3] As with other North Indian languages such as Bengali and Marathi, both Hindi and English and their literatures have existed in close proximity since the 19th century. Their literatures have constantly influenced each other, with some authors alternating between English and the vernaculars. For further details on the vernacularisation of English, see Harder (2011) and Zaidi (2024). In fact, as Zaidi states, "One may reasonably claim that the Indian novel in English has finally emerged from any Western orientation to articulate new itineraries and sociological trends which overlap with writings in the vernaculars in many complex ways" (ibid.: 55).

of pathographic literature is linked to the rehabilitation of the sufferer's voice, encompassing a narrative about the identity of the sick person, which is challenged, redefined, or destroyed by the experience of illness. Pathographies constitute narratives about bodies that are affected by pain and often marked and humiliated, reconstructed through a specific language and metaphors, and centred around the subjective or objective experience of defects, deficiencies, and faults. The abundance of pathographic texts produce evidence for Bryan S. Turner's reference of a 'somatic society' in postmodernity, wherein the body is socially constructed through various medical, moral, artistic, and commercial discourses (Turner 2002: 8). City-centric literary works share a specific aesthetic preoccupation, much beyond mere thematic overlap. On the other hand, the Hindi and English 'city-lit' of the post-1970s era leans towards corporeality as a representational device. This is understood as an extensive depiction of urban bodies and their defects. Through this, the urban experience finds expression, with all its dehumanisations, atrocities, and brutalisations. Narratives of this sort depict the painful, disorienting, and isolating frustration of city life. Post-1970s Indian cities are characterised over here by abjectification with bodies being used as the sites of resistance that are presented, investigated, and measured to assess damage and gain reparations, or to distinguish them from 'good' bodies, and altogether mark their 'Otherness.' Some citizens even reject their own human identity. The defects these bodies carry vary from the loss of voice and comprehension to the deformation of limbs and organs, and to their reduction to corpses or masses of flesh.

The Hindi novel *Ek Cūhe Kī Maut* (*Death of a Rat*) by Badī-uz-zamã published in 1971, narrates such a story of a young man named "He" (*vah*), who works as a junior rat catcher in a state institution called the Bureau of Rats (*cūhekhānā*). At the start of the narrative, the protagonist is a novice in his profession and makes mistakes, such as misplacing a rat or failing an exam on the regulations regarding the method of killing rats. Besides, the job of a rat catcher is highly repetitive and lacks purpose with no opportunities for advancement from the lowest level. The novel follows *vah* at work and accompanies him on his walks around the city. The institution the story mainly describes is the Central Secretariat in Delhi, and the novel vividly mocks the nonsensical nature of a cruel bureaucracy, which treats citizens as objects of investigation, leaving even bureaucrats 'dead'. *Murdāghar* (*The Morgue*) is a similar Hindi novel by Jagdambā Prasād Dīkṣit written in 1975. The text depicts the lives of Bombay's marginalized people, including sex workers, their lovers and clients, porters, thieves, taxi drivers, smugglers, hooligans, and impoverished children. In the interest of upholding law and order, the police force is engaged in a concerted effort to remove illegal settlements, apprehend sex workers, and restrict the activities of smugglers and pimps. The author portrays the darker side of the Indian city as an 'insane world'. Dīkṣit depicts a slum that runs alongside the railway line of an Indian metropolis that is adjacent to exclusive neighbourhoods and skyscrapers. The place is a world of poverty, where inhabitants live in shacks. This area starkly contrasts nearby affluent neighbourhoods and skyscrapers that tower over the dark and unclean makeshift shelters. Dīkṣit depicts life in an urban environment where poor people from various religious backgrounds, ages, and genders struggle to survive. Their common concern is obtaining food. Many sex workers suffer from venereal diseases, malnutrition, and unwanted pregnancies. The urbanity in *Murdāghar* can be characterised as fraudulent, as a 'trickster city', a term coined by Shveta Sarda (2010: 620), which refers to the strategic coexistence of a city and the many tricksters that inhabit it in shape-shifting, non-official, and a constantly mutating manner. Resonating with this, *Maĩne Māṇḍū Nahĩ Dekhā*, a Hindi memoir published in 2003 by Svadeś Dīpak, later translated as *I Have Not Seen Mandu: A Fractured Soul Memoir* (Pinto 2021), chronicles the writer's descent into madness. The novel recounts his three suicide attempts, the third one in which he sets himself on fire, resulting in his extended stay at a hospital in Chandigarh. He is transferred between the burning ward and the mental ward and, after several months, recovers physically and mentally. Yet his state remains vulnerable and on the verge of relapsing. The book follows the author's physical transformation due to his extensive burns,

his wounds getting infected and attacked by flesh-eating worms, all this resulting in months-long immobility. The protagonist, Dīpak is tormented by *māyāvinī* , a real woman whom he meets at a party and whom his delusional mind transforms into a mysterious, goddess-like creature of extraordinary capabilities. In his mind, she attempts to seduce him, grants him extensive creative powers, and follows him around the creative circles of Delhi but demands much more than he can give in return. Dīpak exhibits paranoia, fear, spite, obsession, and envy—all at once. It is unclear whether it is the city itself, or whether it is the emotions of envy or vanity that have driven him to madness.

Coming to the Indian English stories, Indra Sinha's 2006 English novel *Animal's People* explores the aftermath of the 1984 Union Carbide chemical disaster in the postapocalyptic city of Khaufpur, modelled on Bhopal (Sarkar 2023). The narrative is led by Animal, who records his perspective on past and present events on tapes, and then hands over these tapes to a foreign journalist. The tapes are in Hindi, and the novel is fashioned as an English translation of his words. The text describes the struggle for justice faced by poison victims and their families in the light of new court hearings that involve representatives and lawyers of the *Kampani*, the organisation that is responsible for the gas leak. Additionally, it introduces the character of Elli, an American lady, who opens a free clinic and even organizes surgery for Animal, who has a congenitally deformed spine. On the other hand, the 2017 episodic novel *A State of Freedom* by Neel Mukherjee narrates five stories interconnected by the theme of migration, with recurring characters, based in Calcutta. One of the stories depicts a young NRI (non-resident Indian) returning to his parents' house, and befriending the women who work there, hoping to gain inspiration for the regional cookbook he is developing. In the second story, a man and his young son visit India to reconnect with their cultural heritage. The son identifies more with American culture than Indian, and is dissatisfied with his experience in India, which is a foreign country for him. During one of their trips, he falls ill and passes away. The third story includes the struggles of a rural family, where both brothers leave for the city in search of a better life there, and to provide for their families. Unfortunately, neither succeeds. One of the brothers dies working at a construction site and his family is left unaware of his fate, as he has stopped sending them money back home. The other brother, Ramlal, finds a bear cub and decides to train it to dance. He aspires to become a *qalandar*—not a Sufi ascetic, but a bear charmer. But he and his animal are forced to starve, and wander through the suburbs, as they lead a miserable but 'free' life. The last story is about a domestic worker, Mili, who starts working at age eight to help her family and because of that is forced to leave school. She experiences all sorts of employers, some very generous and others who enslave or mistreat her. Meanwhile, her friend back in the village joins a Maoist group and is later killed in a police encounter.

Corporeality—Excess of 'Vial Bodies'

The bodies presented in Hindi and English pathographies are portrayed as disposable and anti-aesthetic, often devalued due to their appearance and low economic status. In many cases, specific 'degradation techniques' are used to limit marginalized people's access to the city. These actions aim to materially and symbolically degrade people who are reduced to particular categories (Marcel 1995: 168) through deliberate methods used to destroy their self-respect, making them view themselves as worthless. This results in a feeling of despair that pervades all aspects of their lives. The term 'vile bodies' is thus used to describe negatively constructed individuals who are targeted for exploitation in the city. We may draw on Judith Butler's theories to analyse the categorisation of individuals as 'good' and 'bad' subjects or 'vile' bodies, and the introduction of population categories as justification for their subsequent invisibilization and removal. Subjects are thus constituted through their exclusion, which goes

into recreating a new and special domain consisting of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, and populations that have been erased from view. (Butler 1995: 47).

The novel *Murdāghar* for example recounts the stories of various characters including that of Maina, a sex worker, and her partner Popat who is mainly involved in petty theft. Popat dreams of becoming a famous and wealthy smuggler and mafioso; he drinks, gambles, and refuses to work honestly. Meanwhile, Maina is forced to resort to sex work to provide for herself and her child. She repeatedly evades the police but is finally detained and ultimately brought to court. The conditions in the overcrowded cell where she is housed, are deplorable and the women detainees are not provided for with meals or any legal assistance. Popat comes to take her away, promising to improve and asking her for one last chance. They live together briefly during which time Popat takes up work, but he soon returns to his old stealing habits. One day, he is killed under the wheels of a suburban train, which is carrying goods from a robbery. He is left dying on the tracks for hours. Although he calls out for water, he receives no medical assistance. The station master instructs Maina to proceed to the hospital morgue to retrieve the body. Several sick patients lie on the pavement outside the hospital, their bodies seemingly abandoned. The scene is graphic with the bodies of individuals from various religious backgrounds lying on the ground, stacked on top of each other. They are unclothed, and their decapitated heads lie scattered around, in pools of blood collected on the floor. As Dīkṣit (2000: 145) puts it:[4]

> And now... in front... a world... of the dead. Bright stone... floor... walls. Intense light from very high windows. A machine works loudly... slate... slate... slate. Dead chill... some kind of smell. Everyone scattered. And here... and there... all around Hindus... Muslims... Catholics... young... old... women.

> Naked corpses. Here... on this side a bearded man. Next to... crushed... young boy. (...) spilled blood. Severed head... leg... arm. Bulging eyes... open mouth... protruding teeth. There are more of them... on shelves... on benches... on boxes... in lockers. There are more.

The mortuary worker present receivers with corpses for their identification by laying them out individually. It is explained that due to the large number of corpses, not all of them can be buried or cremated. In some cases, if the family is unable to pay for the mortuary disposals, the body may be sold to medical students. The law enforcement, legal, and medical systems appear to collude and unite against the protagonists, and even after-death care involves a wide range of techniques that degrade impoverished citizens (ibid.: 147).

> Maina looks around and sees... a corpse. Then, the three of them take off. They slowly leave that world... where all around... scattered corpses... they walk towards this world... where... there are even more corpses...

In *A State of Freedom*, Ramlal departs from his hometown, leaving his wife, children, and his younger brother behind in the village, in search of a better life in the city and to escape the discrimination he faces at home, which is due to his physical appearance. He works as a daily labourer at a construction site in the city, building skyscrapers and inhaling dust and asbestos, which leads him to develop lung disease. The workers treat it with cough syrup and alcohol,

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[4] All translations from Hindi are by me, apart from quotes from *Maĩne Māṇḍū Nahī̃ Dekhā* that are after Jerry Pinto (2021).

which may alleviate symptoms but do not cure the underlying condition. As Mukherjee writes (2017: 267-268):[5]

> before the dogs something else is eating his flesh the flesh on the inside of his chest because when the coughing comes it feels like the insides are turning into the kind of cloudy wool-like dust which emerged when he was once asked to remove yards and yards of corrugated grey roof by breaking it up into chunks manageable for the women working on the site to carry them away on their heads. The transference of that dust inside him is the human flesh version of it. So he imagines a kind of red foamy wool where his chest is. And it was all fine when it began slowly, just a little cold, a cough, and when it grew from little he went to a *dawakhana* [clinic] and got a red mixture in a bottle (…) but that didn't cure it so he paid more money (…) and got a small bottle of thick green stuff which did nothing either except perhaps send him to sleep.

One day, while standing on the scaffolding of a construction site, he has an overwhelming urge to clear his throat. He loses control, and falls to his death. Ramlal is referred to by other villagers as having a 'fox-like face' because of his elongated mouth, which sets him apart from others as an exceptional and non-normative individual. This association with the animal kingdom positions him as a liminal figure, disconnected from both his rural and urban environment.

Similarly, Animal from the novel *Animal's People* is also a liminal creature who inhabits the ruins of the *Kampani*'s factory. He resides amidst old tanks, chemicals, and pipes that are partially reclaimed by nature. As a result of the gas-leak tragedy that occurred shortly after his birth, his body underwent a series of deformations. As a child, he was abandoned at an orphanage shortly after the disaster, likely due to the trauma his parents suffered. He moves on all fours because of his crooked spine and leads a life similar to that of an animal. He befriends dogs for companionship, but for the most part, he lives on the *Kampani*'s compounds, which he considers his kingdom. "I used to be human once. So I'm told" (Sinha 2006: 1), he states. It appears that the 1984 incident, referred to as *Apokalis* or "the great mela of death," has affected the bodies of Khaufpuris indiscriminately. A singer has lost his voice, a nun has lost her ability to speak and understand language, Hindi or English, which she had used for several decades, workers have developed cancer, and many have suffered limb deformities. Some children, such as Khan-in-the-jar, are extracted from their mothers' wombs and spend their lives in glass containers in medical centres. The correct medical terminology to define this phenomenon is "formalin-fixed specimen" or "formalin-fixed preparation," which describes organs, body parts, or foetus preserved in chemicals, usually for teaching purposes or to serve as exhibits. In the novel, Kha-in-the-jar and other unnamed characters, who were unborn due to their deformities and diseases, are protagonists that telepathically communicate with Animal. The *Kampani*'s lack of responsibility and financial support for those affected has led the Khaufpuris in the story to come together and resist the *Kampani*. This is also in response to new court hearings about the gas leak, and the mysterious re-appearance of foreigners in the city. However, it proves to be a challenge to provide medical assistance to the families of the deceased or to individuals like Animal, whose dream of receiving surgery in America is supported by Elli, a medical practitioner from America who opens a walk-in clinic in the city.

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[5] The original text lacks punctuation marks for the last chapter, which builds Ramlal's stream of consciousness narrative while imitating his state of intoxication at the same time.

The gas leak in Khaufpur causes numerous casualties and permanent disabilities, resulting in irreparable damage to the city. Locals refer to the event as 'that night' or '*us rat*',[6] and it remains a haunting memory for survivors who bear physical and mental scars of the leakage. The actual Bhopal gas tragedy that occurred over 25 years prior to the publication of the novel has continued to impact the lives of both new and long-term residents of the city. Sinha's retelling of the historical event now includes previously silenced voices. Although using a fictional form of recounting disguised as a reportage, Sinha, the co-founder of the Bhopal Medical Appeal that offers free medical care to people affected by gas and water poisoning, has campaigned and fundraised for the poisoned citizens of Bhopal since 1993. It is here that he gathered knowledge about the 1984 event. He stresses that the novel is not exclusive to the Bhopal disaster; it is about people struggling to lead ordinary lives in the shadow of catastrophe (Ipekci 2023, Rakshit and Gaur 2023, Alam 2022, Neti 2021). The novel concentrates on the memories and experiences of the sick, the deformed and deceased. Sinha narrates his story from the perspective of Animal, who has the unique ability to hear the voices of the deceased, providing multiple perspectives to the consequences of the gas leak. The story follows the protagonist as he learns to read and write, even while facing challenges when communicating with humans who dismiss him as abnormal. Despite this, he masters French, English, and Hindi while in the orphanage. In addition, Animal can understand and respond to the voices of ghosts, corpses, and even children trapped in jars, like Kha. Animal's speech is a unique blend of all these modes of communication. His ability to live in the deformed city is thus not limited by physical differences; on the contrary, his capabilities are expanded. Despite deformities, he can navigate multiple worlds—human, animal, and an entire universe consisting of the voices of victims and ghosts. He is a curious combination of human and nonhuman elements, making him a new and unique entity. He is well-suited for, and thrives in Khaufpur in the postapocalyptic and post-event era and states: "We are the people of Apokalis. Tomorrow, there will be more of us." (Sinha 2006: 366). His espoused group is composed of those individuals who are subjected to discrimination and constant scrutiny. Outside observers are described as having eyes that feel like acid to Animal and to others like him, forming a crowd that look for things to see everywhere. Similarly, the people of Khaufpur are trapped in a vicious cycle of constant retelling a story that no one in the city wants to remember. But nobody wants to forget the story either. All these individuals are categorised as 'poison victims'. Unfortunately, this label is nominal because, as stated in the text: "All these years after that night, (...), there's still no real help for those whose eyes and lungs and wombs were fucked" (ibid.: 24). Animal, who has become disillusioned after years of waiting for reconciliation, decides to "refuse to be some fucking bhonsdi-ka victim" (ibid.: 27). The novel continues (ibid.: 37):

> On that night all sorts of people lost all kinds of things, lives for sure, families, friends, health, jobs, in some cases their wits. This poor woman, Ma Franci, lost all knowledge of Hindi.

While Ma Franci can only hear indistinct sounds, Animal begins hearing disembodied voices of sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly, and sometimes inquisitive individuals. These voices warn him of a second impending *Apokalis* (ibid.: 274).

> It's the dead of night, in my head is this howling that makes the hairs of my neck stand on end. I have the power to understand these things, I know right away what this is, it's the dead beneath the earth, it's their bones and ashes crying out in rage against their murderers. The dead are shrieking at me that the good earth has been defiled with blood. In thick clots the blood lies, won't be washed away by the

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[6] The correct transliteration of the phrase would be *us rāt*. However, Sinha consistently uses a simplified, sometimes stylized transcription of Hindi words, as in the case of the word *Kampani*, which is neither the correct English word *company*, nor a proper scientific transliteration of the Hindi word *kampanī*.

rain. The blood cries out for justice. Once the earth has tasted blood it craves more, now the killers must be killed. This is the old and the real law, it's the price that must be paid for murder, the price demanded by the furious spirits beneath the earth. Give us justice, screams the blood. It promises years of disaster, years of illness, if I do not take revenge. It warns me that ulcers will eat my flesh with white and weeping sores.

Compared to deceased or terminally ill individuals, Animal experiences relatively higher levels of well-being. He has friends, has fallen in love, and has secured himself a job as a street watcher and spy that he carries out for a local philanthropist. Animal is aware of his unique status and states (ibid.: 388): "If I were an upright human, I would be one of millions, and not even a healthy one at that. But as an animal, I am one of a kind." Already, Veena Das in her portrayal of the narratives of pain in Bhopal has identified victim testimonies as being primarily framed by bureaucratic, scientific, and the judicial appropriation of suffering, producing the existence of victim bodies as a contested site of dispute (1995: 137-174). In this context, the testimonies of 'Animal's peoples' narratively reinforce a more expanded, integrational model and approach to the collection of memories. The characters in these novels: Animal and the other Khaufpuris; Popat and other Mumbaikars of *Murdāghar*; Ramlal and the other migrants of Kolkata, are all defined and shaped by their place of residence, their occupation, gender, status, or their appearance. Their presentation as such is contrasted with those who are not defined in such terms—those who are 'normal', 'sane', 'wealthy', and those who are 'non-victims'. *Murdāghar* is an interesting example of how the city becomes integral to the way characters develop narrative identities. After leaving the morgue, Maina reflects on her experience and realizes that her own life is similar to that of the other corpses squeezed between one another in the giant morgue, which embodies Bombay. She embraces this discovery. Similarly, at the end of *Animal's People*, Animal decides not to abandon his liminal identity and not to become an average man, choosing instead to stay on in Khaufpur and live as an 'animal'.

In both *Murdāghar* and *A State of Freedom*, the characters are distant from one another, and unable to form a community or to resist. According to Shari Daya (2019: 33), this is due to "a corporeal illegibility" of urban spaces that is symptomatic of the modern urban condition. When analysing the 2006 novel *Sacred Games* by Vikram Chandra (2006), Daya suggests that the ambiguity of the city, its lack of order and incomprehensibility, is typical of urban modernity. The author argues that ambiguity should not be eliminated but rather acknowledged and consensualized. The urban condition must be accepted if we want to be part of an urban future (Daya 2019: 32-33). In his work, Jagdambā Prasād Dīkṣit examines the same vicissitudes of urbanity when depicting the challenging living conditions of slum dwellers that includes their struggle to obtain food while competing for it with dogs and crows. The text portrays their fight for survival against a hostile world—that is akin to a giant garbage pile (Dīkṣit 2000: 25).

> A lot of time has passed. The card players have not stopped playing. The little children have grown tired and sat down. The crows... could not be seen. The dogs... have begun to nap. The flies have also gone to sleep. All around... everything has stopped. Suddenly, the door at the back of the premises opens. A boy comes out. He is holding a container. Full to the brim. All in one. Rice... pancakes... rolls... bones... lentils... fish... soup... today's... yesterday's. Rotten... smelly. They all wake up unexpectedly... start running (...). Slumbering dogs also wake up... they throw themselves into a run. Crows fly up... they caw. Buzzing... flies begin to rise. Discarded decks of cards... they start to run. Little boys throw stones at the dogs... they don't give up. Crows fly up and again sit there.

Their existence is a daily struggle for mere survival. They live in an underground world, a twin city parallel to the ordinary one. According to Mike Davis, however, it is the slum that will be the most significant component and the future of the 'megacity'. Cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of becoming cities of light, soaring towards the heaven, much of the 21st-century urban world squats in squalor, and is surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.[7]

1970s—Failure of the Socialist Model and Defective Bodies

The 1970s in India was a period of significant political and social upheaval that was intertwined with the challenges and aspirations of urbanisation and industrialisation. From a political perspective, this era was characterised by the ascension of Indira Gandhi to a prominent position in Indian politics, and her preeminence influenced the nation's trajectory. Her government introduced substantial policy initiatives that included the nationalizing of banks and the abolishion of princely privileges, moves that intended to reduce economic disparities. However, her declaration of Emergency in 1975 resulted in the curtailment of civil liberties, and centralized power more intensely. In this context, urbanisation gained momentum as rural populations migrated to cities in pursuit of better economic opportunities. The process of industrialisation, regarded as a catalyst of modernisation and progress, was propelled by a mixed economic model that resulted in the expansion of sectors like steel, textiles, and heavy machinery. Implementing ambitious engineering and infrastructural projects, which were often accompanied by land acquisition and the demolition of slums, resulted in a rapid influx of labour migrants to cities and its subsequent population density. This growth was accompanied by challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and rising urban poverty, inadequate housing, sanitation, and a strain on public services that led to the proliferation of slums, and a significant increase in socio-economic divides in the cities. While the government emphasized industrial self-reliance and planned development to modernise the economy, inefficiencies in public enterprises and bureaucratic red tape often hindered progress. Massive strikes and protests, street violence, riots, the rise of communal politics, caste- and gender-based activism, and other mass movements resulted from the anger about failed promises that independence and national movement had promised—equality, reforms, and the eradication of poverty could not be implimented (Ray 2022, Jaffrelot and Anil 2020, Merivirta 2019, Prakash 2018). The complex interplay of political centralisation, socio-economic aspirations, and urban challenges defined India's transformative yet tumultuous character after the 1970s. The artistic response to this socio-political reality manifested through depictions of pain, shock, trauma, and grief.

The turn of the 1960s and 1970s brought changes and re-evaluations in literature. Critics and scholars, such as Indranāth Madān (2000), Madhūri Khoslā (1973), or most recently, Hahn (2020) and Yamini (2023), describe this period in the novel as a time of experimentation (*prayog*) with form, theme, and language. While most Hindi and English writers focused on themes of developing urban spaces, a considerable distance from the moment of Independence allowed for a more comprehensive and objective critique of the nation's policies and their impact on humans. Metaphors about social decline, loss of identification with a collective, a collapsing family system and community, as well as the consequent turn to human psyche emerged in literature. The narratives shifted from rural to urban, social to individual, and the style shifted from social realism to psychological realism. A detailed depiction of a particular space or community, as in the *ãcalik* (regional) works of the 1950s and 1960s, now shifted to narratives that were fragmented, and more about anonymous spaces. The cryptic,

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[7] Cited in Herbert (2014: 209).

ephemeral language of the novel did not necessarily convey specific meanings, but underlined and evoked the embedded feelings of loneliness, alienation, and emptiness. Thus, narratives often resembled a collage, with interruptions and disorder. (Jain 1980: 123-124, Yamini 2023: 199-228). The protagonist of the 1940s was aligning himself with influences from the past and present in the hope to change the future of the liberated self in politically independent India. The protagonist of the 1970s had been stripped of all such choices by India's national political reality, whose sinister and surreptitious structures had overwhelmed the individual's psychological space. (Yamini 2023: 201).

In the novel *Murdāghar* for instance, we encounter a particularly gruesome scene that describes the birth of a child to one of the sex workers, Miryam. The baby is born in the dark, in the stinking mud of one of the sewers, and a drunk sex worker assists the birth. The mother is unaware of how to feed the child, as she was not even aware of her pregnancy (Dīkṣit 2000: 91).

> In the dark sky... a star is born. In the circular tunnel of the long tube, the chimney shakes. They look intently... Jamila and Parbati... pull on dirty saris. Between two shaking legs... a body opens up. Dirty water drips. Dirty blood... forms trickles and spills [...]. The birth... of a new star in a black sky. A black flash of black light [...]. Sweat and blood and dirty water. Both wiping with dirty clothes [...] Jamila and Parbati. A weak, unsteady voice... will break out crying every now and then. No one will hear. Only... curses can be heard. Not knowing at whom.

Like deaths or illnesses, birth does not disrupt the city's daily life. People continue to rush in different directions, car engines growl, workers shout, and sex workers swear. The change goes unnoticed, and the world does not stand still for even a moment. One of the sex workers, Rozi, spends most of her days begging and waiting for food, her biggest concern being her deteriorating health. She is finding it difficult to walk due to a severe foot infection. Rozi's body is decomposing gradually. Her foot rots and emits an unpleasant odour, isolating her, as no one wants to be near her. This injury paradoxically leads to her being thrown out of a pharmacy where she seeks help and medication. The reader observes Rozi's slow death as it progresses. Rozi wanders around the neighbourhood daily, despite the immense pain of moving her limbs. Her slow bodily deterioration is an obvious sign of venereal disease, which anybody can identify and interpret. Unfortunately, the city provides no medical or financial assistance to individuals like her. Popat, Rozi, and other sex workers are reduced to their bodies, riddled with defects like gangrene, deformation, or pus.

One of the most unusual and flawed characters in all the discussed novels is Khan-in-the-jar from *Animal's People*. He is one of the many voices that speaks to Animal. However, he is not dead but unborn, preserved as a formalin-fixed specimen in a jar at a local hospital, and treated as an exhibit (Sinha 2006: 57).

> Inside the jar is a small, crooked man. An ugly little monster, his hands are stretched out, he has a wicked look on his face, as if he's just picked your pocket and is planning to piss on your shoe.

Together with others like him, Khan wants to be rescued. He explains (Sinha 2006: 237):

> of all the *Kampani*'s victims, we are the youngest. We unborn paid the highest price. Never mind dying, we never even got a fucking shot at life. This is why, Animal *miyan*, we are the Board of Directors of the *poisonwallah* shares. (…) Not only have we never lived, but so long as we are stuck in this situation, we will never die.

There is no hope for improvement for the other unborn children stuck in jars either. In contrast, Animal believes that surgery in America could improve his condition and alleviate the embarrassment he experiences because of his body (Sinha 2006: 13).

> I am looking right now at my feet, which are near the hearth, twisted they're, a little bent to one side. Inside of left foot, outer of right, where they scrape the ground the skin's thick and cracked. In bygone times I've felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it (…) see this limp of skin, hard as a pebble, how easily it breaks off, mmm, chewy as a nut. Nowadays there's no shortage of food, I eat my feet for pleasure.

Yet another form of social marginalisation is caused by mental health conditions. In Svadeś Dīpak's autopathography, *Maĩne Māṇḍū Nahī̃ Dekhā*, the author shares his own experience of living with bipolar disorder that led to three suicide attempts, the last of which resulted in a nearly lethal skin burn and few-months-long hospitalisation. The condition manifested abruptly in 1991. After a theatre performance of one of his plays in Kolkata, Dīpak was approached by a young and attractive fan who asked him to accompany her on a trip to Mandu. His firm and assertive rejection led this femme fatale to issue an unspoken curse, and he later refers to her as the *cuṛail* (witch), a 'shapeshifter', and as the 'man-eating tigress of Kolkata'. The event is witnessed by several among Dīpak's friends and other artists. Later, the author is visited in his dreams by a woman he refers to as his *māyāvinī* or seductress. Following this, he experiences oscillations between feeling powerful and weak, feeling indestructible and getting suicidal thoughts, defeat and arrogance. He feels trapped ("my soul was in chains," [Pinto 2021: 1]), "in a dark deep pit" (ibid.), helpless ("prisoner of war" and the "prisoner of my own bones" [ibid.: 52, 79]), frozen (in a "state of samadhi" [ibid.: 27]) or under attack ("There is always a hand grenade in my head" [ibid.: 8]). He becomes "a vegetable without thoughts" (ibid.: 59) and "a mental cripple" (ibid.: 66). His deterioration starts when he abstains from food and basic hygiene and stops communicating with his family. "I began to turn from a man into a chunk of meat" (ibid.: 13), Dīpak confesses. He expresses feelings of impotence in both body and mind, but the most significant loss is his ability to use language creatively. As a former English literature professor, he is now unable to write or think and has lost his proficiency in Hindi. Like Ma Franci (in *Animal People*), he can no longer speak the language. His use of English often intimidates other patients at the hospital in Chandigarh. "My soul was in chains, I was addicted to English" (ibid.: 1), he recalls. Before his diagnosis, Dīpak was "the most beautiful Hindi writer" (ibid.: 84), "the dream man" (ibid.: 93), and "the man of machismo" (ibid.: 18), whose "pride is the size of a mountain" (ibid.: 52). "I enjoy telling women bitter things as much as I enjoy leaving them. It is an essential part of my strategy" (ibid.: 111), he unapologetically adds while describing his relationships with women. In Delhi, Dīpak goes to book readings and premieres and meets most of his friends. He receives compliments on his looks and talent, and other authors want to spend time with him. His ego flourishes in this environment as women of all ages admire him. Unfortunately, his attitude towards women and his narcissistic personality are his weaknesses, which are nourished and flattered in art circles full of vanity, spite, and gossip. This atmosphere proves to be harmful to his mental stability. And during his illness, he experiences vivid dreams where he sees himself as a leopard in a jungle, often accompanied by other animals. He and his *māyāvinī* fantasize about escaping the city and visiting remote places such as the Sundarbans. His illness progresses slowly, and is metaphorically described as a kind of dehumanization, with him feeling like a cockroach, jackal, or being crushed, defeated, burned, or consumed. While in the hospital, his skin condition deteriorates dramatically, with maggots being discovered underneath the bandages on his arm eventually, which means that he was quite literally eaten by worms.

Between 1991 and 2003, Swadeś experienced hospitalizations, periods of relative stability, and relapses. He lost his mental composure, skin-health, command over Hindi, and creativity, and gradually, his familial relationships suffered. Though his wife and children were initially committed to helping him, but his unusual behaviour often led to embarrassment, annoyance, or fear.[8] After seven years of recovery, Dīpak writes: "I began to take on my real identity. Swadesh Deepak: the angry one, blind with rage, who neither forgives, and is no longer a little boy" (ibid.: 336). He returns to his literary circles in Delhi and Ambala and travels to Mumbai. However, it is clear that this story will not have a happy ending.

Metamorphosis

The process of metamorphosis in *Ek Cūhe Kī Maut* begins with the protagonist receiving news of his friend Ga's suicide. He then begins to wander the city's streets, contemplating life and reality which both puzzles and terrifies him. His behaviour and attitude towards work responsibilities change drastically. He experiences a strong aversion to rats and is unable to kill them. He is punitively transferred to working in the archives, where deceased rats are stored. Over time, a metamorphosis commences within him—at first, he assimilates some of the characteristics and actions of the rats, and ultimately, he undergoes a physical transformation and becomes a rat. One day, he awakens with a peculiar sensation that everything has changed. His body behaves differently, and his surroundings appear unfamiliar. As he tumbles out of bed, his sister rushes in, and it is her scream that allows him comprehend that he has become a rat. The creature has a tail, a snout, and a body that is similar to a rat's. The sister is terrified; but the protagonist remains level-headed and pragmatic. He prioritises his job prospects over the transformation itself and ponders whether he can still carry out his duties as a rat-catcher. When he passes by ordinary rats, they approach him but quickly realize he is not one of them (Badī-uz-zamã̄ 1974: 161):

> Even the rats thought he was strange and different. The humans also ostracized him from their society, so now he is neither human nor a rat. He thought it was nothing new. He has always been like that. Even before that, he was neither completely a rat-catcher nor Ga.

He then embarks on a long and arduous journey to reach the archives. Finally, he manages to find his superior but is thrown out of the building. Undeterred, he visits the archivist's apartment and learns that it is against regulations to employ a rat as a rat catcher. An official investigation is launched against him as he is now considered a conspirator. Upon returning home, he discovers that his apartment had been requisitioned by the Bureau of Rats, and his sister, who lived with him, has disappeared. He searches the city for her and visits the market, where he attends the opening of an art exhibition of the famous painter Pa. Upon realizing that Ga actually painted all the art on display and not Pa, as the latter claimed, the protagonist becomes upset, and a fight ensues. He is then taken to Pa's office, where he accuses Pa of misappropriating other people's property. An argument breaks out during which Pa grabs the protagonist by the tail and throws him into the fire. The protagonist's metamorphosis is primarily a phyiscal deformity resulting in a slow, initially noticeable transformation; however, his change is also related to the previous stimuli he received when associated with working in an environment that was full of rats, and undertaking the eternal pretense of being someone else, who would stand out from the group. The defects he acquired in the process (becoming a rat) ultimately make it impossible for him to exist in this world. He, like Ga, would have to die

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[8] Deepak's son, Sukant, in a piece written for a volume on families with experience of mental disorders edited by Jerry Pinto, confesses that he was always afraid of his father unpredictability. Although Swadesh suddenly disappeared from his house in 2006 and never returned, his son still sleeps with a metal rod under his bed. (Deepak 2016).

because they could not fit into the system. Metamorphosis describes a unique defect because it involves a series of changes and deformities. As the consequence of killing rats and devoting his entire existence to catching them, he becomes one of them. His body transforms into the object of his actions. Malabou (2012) argues that such a metamorphosis cannot be seen as destruction because it only changes the external form of the being, and usually gradually, but without altering its nature. Changing here involves 'choosing' from a finite palette of identities consisting of different 'skins.' In the case of Badī-uz-zamā's novel, this skin is the skin of a rat and a burned file, which is a symbol of oppressive bureaucracy.

City Landscape—Corporeality in the post-'Junkspace'[9]

In *Ek Cūhe Kī Maut*, rats and rat carcasses symbolize documents—the files that line the shelves of various public administration offices. These papers need to be read and processed in any bureaucratic institution—they are described as being tied with ribbons, archived, catalogued, or burned. The rat catchers represent bureaucrats, and the Bureau of Rats symbolizes the bureaucratic system—leading institution in India—the Central Secretariat. 'Killing rats' here, indicates any mechanical action that imprisons human beings, renders them unfree, and deprives them of their humanity. Similar to *Murdāghar*, *Ek Cūhe Kī Maut* depicts landscapes of corpses and carcasses that are accumulated in various institutions that, in turn, affect and sicken humans, eventually turning them into lifeless bodies and eradicating them. These landscapes include a morgue, a slum, a police station, a mental hospital, a dilapidated factory, a construction site, and a *cūhekhānā* (Bureau of Rats), all of which become machines of oppression that cause permanent damage to the bodies of 'bad citizens'. The novels use metaphors to describe the disillusionment and oppression caused by living in modern urban landscapes that are plagued by environmental and civilizational hazards. The texts describe garbage, dirty sewage, poison, asbestos, carcasses, and leftovers as part of the new nonhuman human, which almost flows in the veins of the marked, shamed, and humiliated organism. This new abject man, often belonging to the lower strata of society, is reduced by his defects to a disgusting, malodorous, and obstructive presence, creating a disturbing psycho-somatic image of the city's geography.

The Bureau of Rats sees millions of rats die every day, imaging them as scattered body parts, corpses, blood, marked by the stench of decomposition, which is a regular part of the landscape. The Bureau is referred to as a tomb (*maqbarā*) and the archive is called the mortuary (*lāś ghar*). Working at the Bureau involves constant contact with deceased rodents. The corpses of rats are archived or immediately cremated in the courtyard and transported there in special carts. The bodies of dead rats are then treated with a inflammable substance and incinerated, creating a distressing spectacle. The resulting smoke and odour lingers on for an extended period, impeding free breathing. Any remaining rat cadavers undergo preservation procedures and are stored on shelves. They are meticulously catalogued and, if required, dispatched to other sections of the Bureau. Daily exposure to rat mortality affects everything the Bureau touches—people, objects, and places. It fits right into a city that is also imaged as being plagued by social issues such as poverty, unemployment, prostitution, violence, crime, corruption, and alcoholism. Such a city is an unnamed city that serves as an

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[9] 'Junkspace' is a term coined by Rem Koolhas who uses it to describe the grotesque and interchangeable spaces of consumption: shopping malls, airports, service stations, and pedestrianized city high streets with identical chain stores. Junkspace cannot be original or planned for any particular user of architecture (Koolhaas and Foster 2013: 19). In the case-studies explored in this article, the space that is discussed is what remains after 'junkspace' is created. This space houses commercial objects that are meant for the middle and lower middle class—railway tracks, slums, warehouses, dumpsters, backyards of restaurants, spaces behind railway stations, and factories. Sometimes, this left over space can be called 'post-junkspace', a space that is generated by the abjects of capitalism.

allegorical space of exile—claustrophobic, mysterious, and sick. According to Susan Sontag, the city thus perceived is metaphorized as the most common space for the development of diseases, especially cancer and infectious diseases, presented most often than not as a growing tumour itself. The city is a place of the abnormal, of unnatural growth and of the extravagant, devouring, armoured passions (1978: 74), and giving birth to deformities and abnormalities. Dystopian Delhi in *Ek Cūhe Kī Maut*,[10] Mumbai in *Murdāghar,* and Khaufpur in *Animal's People* thus represent 'carcinogenic cities': places where infirmity and decay reign. Khaufpuris are awaiting a second *Apokalis*. As Ma Franci professes (Sinha 2006: 62):

> Animal, when the time comes these little beasts who live in the walls of our house, they will come creeping out and grow huge. They'll reach the size of horses. They'll grow stiff red wings like locusts, that rustle when they move. They'll have faces like people and long hair like women, but their teeth will be like lions' teeth, which they'll gnash in the most horrifying way' (…) It'll sound like an army of chariots rushing to war (…) they will go around stabbing people, the ones who've done evil to others.

The city's soil has been contaminated with death and destruction, and it is only a matter of time before it causes further harm. The Animal, familiar with the area, warns readers of how "Terror will return to this city. It began here, here it will end" (ibid.: 64). The former *Kampani* compound, now a mere skeleton of its former self, is filled with corroding platforms, ladders, railings, and pipes containing toxic chemicals. Giant tanks have split and poisonous residues fill the surrounding lakes (ibid.: 31):

> Inside the warehouses I never went, they were full of rotting sacks that poured out white and pink powders. Too long near them, you'd soon be breathless, with pains in the chest. Sometimes moving through the jungle I'd get dizzy and feel a sharp metallic taste on my tongue. Those were regions to avoid.

Despite all the danger, Animal still thinks that "the forest is beautiful, you forgot it's poisoned and haunted" (ibid.: 31). He refers to the epicentre of the leak as *poison-khana*, the place of poison, yet this is his own space, where he is left alone and escapes the violent gaze of others. The concepts of beauty, shelter, home, and utility undergo redefinition. This is a space where the 'bad citizens' were and still are reduced to their biomedical conditions; their body and bodies are reduced to their biophysical components (Esposito 2008). In this "dungeon of the city," to borrow Toni Morrison's term (1984: 43), only the new type of creatures, such as Animal, can survive. He adapts and can thrive in the most challenging and the most polluted of environments.

Conclusion: A Sick City

Hindi and English pathographies demonstrate the urban environment's adverse effects on the human body and mind. They portray various phenomena, including complex and pathological defects such as body deformities, man-to-animal metamorphosis (*Ek Cūhe Kī Maut*), rotting flesh (*Murdāghar*), decaying bones and organs (*Animal's People* and *A State of Freedom*), and mental illness (*Maĩne Māṇḍū Nahī̃ Dekhā*). They present a view of the city through the eyes of the masses—often poor and marginalised, but always defective and sick, and reduced to their physicality. The literary representations of modern postcolonial cities often convey postmodern anxieties that are centred on urban spaces and their unpredictable and menacing nature. These representations depict the corporeality of the urban environment, as well as a relation of mutual and cannibalistic consumption between cities and its inhabitants, often using

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[10] The city is not named; however, since it hosts the most important bureaucratic institutions of the country, there is a likelihood that the city is New Delhi.

metaphors of infection and disease. The metaphorisation of illness in the city and illness as the city, developed since the 1970s, results from a significant economic and societal shift from a rural life to urban economy marked by mass migration, and the slow decline of community-centred culture. The new protagonist, who emerges from those narratives—an alienated outsider, and an abandoned citizen—rots, disintegrates, and fades away in the post-junkspace of the city, the experience of malady forming a significant part of his experience of urbanity. He navigates his existence as a 'vial body' in the modern space that is hostile to the poor and the disenfranchised. He develops the adaptive language and behaviour of a 'trickster', but still loses other significantly human traits—speech, mobility, skin, shape, and sanity. The city is a poison, seen as responsible for the totality of this corporeal experience.

The analysed novels in this article are a selection demonstrating a postcolonial literary trend in which the city and its inhabitants are both unwell. In this somatic world, everything decays and dies. The official city, inhabited by the 'good' bodies of the rich, develops a plethora of degrading techniques that are actively applied to the suppression of 'imperfect' bodies—spatial marginalisation, capitalism and the commodification of resources and services like post-death care, the monetary exploitation of bodies (selling corpses or forced prostitution), the creation of underpaid jobs with no social benefits, and the use of dehumanising language. The human marginalisation and degradation impacted in and by urban spaces, not only causes trauma, but also generates adaptive coping mechanisms such as trickery, or the dualistic division of cities that segregate the marginalised. These issues damage the fabric of the urban space irreversibly, and the discussed novels in this article, both Hindi and English, contribute innovatively to the discussion by creating a range of metaphors, symbols, and a new vocabulary that replaces existing metaphors which contrast the city to the countryside, like 'urban jungle' or 'fabric of the city'. The narratives under consideration in this article describe the body of the city, sometimes as a corpse, which is then subject to physiological processes—it gains weight, decays, ages, bleeds, has skin, veins, and a heart, blood, sweat, and tears. It gets sick, suffocates and suffers. These stories create a new dictionary of metaphors that relate to the urban experience, the urban illness, created and introduced into the discourse of the city.

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Research Article

Re-reading the Role of Violence in the Naxalbari Movement (1965-1975) through
***The Naxalites:* An Interaction between History and Literature**

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This paper aims to study the Naxalbari movement of Bengal through the lens of violence by making a parallel study between the historical discourse and its literary representation in *The Naxalites* (1979), a novel by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. The Naxalbari movement (1965-1975) was the first peasant insurgency in twenty years after Indian independence that developed into a dissenting movement against existing class hierarchy. While, on the one hand, violence evolved to be one of the major tools by the members of the movement to attain their goal; on the other hand, it also became an effective tool of the state machinery to suppress the movement. Taking theoretical cue from Slavoj Zizek's subjective and objective violence, this paper attempts to dissect the use of violence. Using the text, the paper also tries to engage with the aporia of violence and resolve it by suggesting an alternative modus operandi of continuing the movement. Thus, this article engages with the unravelling of the use of violence and the seeking of alternatives to it through an interaction between historical and literary narratives represented by and through *The Naxalites*.

subjective-violence, objective-violence, aporia, organization, Naxalbari-movement

Introduction

This paper aims to dissect violence in the Naxalbari movement of Bengal (1965-1975) through its representation in the novel, *The Naxalites* (2015[1979]) written by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. Though *The Naxalites* (1979), reprinted in 2015, is centred on the Naxalbari movement and its aftermath, it has scarcely received any scholarly attention. This paper therefore can be considered one of the first studies of its kind on this text and its representation of the movement through the lens of violence. The Naxalbari movement (1965-1975) was the first peasant insurgency that took place in the first twenty years after Indian independence, and it developed into a dissenting movement that was pitched against existing class hierarchy. Though the movement was disbanded in the late 1970s, it spurred a number of far-left organizations that have a presence in India till today. Many of these organizations have rejected the parliamentary system and have resorted to violence as their chief tool to bring about change to the social structure. These organisations and their leaders continue to trace their heritage to the Naxalbari movement of the 1970s. So, violence remains a fundamental feature of the Naxalbari movement. While the movement used armed violence as a means of attaining its objective, the government also used violence to suppress the movement. In other words, violence evolved as one of its chief tools also moulds the state's violent response to it, which becomes a means

to maintain a political status quo between the movement and the state. Studying the movement by keeping violence at its theoretical centre is thus crucial. For this purpose, this article uses Zizek's theorization of violence as a lens that decodes the structure of violence within the Naxalbari movement. As per the Zizekian model, violence can be distinguished into two categories: subjective and objective. Probing the use of violence in the Naxalbari movement, this article locates how the movement was engrossed in subjective violence as a means of overcoming objective violence. The article further discusses how the use of subjective violence failed in its attempt to attain its goal of removing objective violence. Through the text, the paper explores the aporia that resulted from the use of violence by the two opposing forces—the movement and the state. I argue that the clash between the two types of violence acted against the movement contributing to its downfall. Finally, I suggest attempts that can be made to resolve this aporia by suggesting an alternative modus operandi linked to the movement's sustainability.

While perusing historical records is an important way of looking into the role of violence, this article chooses to use a literary text for the purpose that can present different perspectives to particular incidents. While historical record document incidents of violence, literary texts allow for a more qualitative analysis of incidents through plot situations, dialogues, and the frame of characters. Thus, while historical analysis provides new information, a narrative may help to analyse its deep seated emotional and psychological causes that led certain characters to certain actions. The literary text under consideration in this chapter (*The Naxalites*) constitutes a direct representation of the Naxalbari movement. The incidents, the actions, and the characters are derived from the movement itself. Hence, hardly superfluous or imagined, they are derivatives of historical record.[1] Thus, the novel, I argue, acts as a bridge between historical record and literature to provide readers a nuanced understanding of the use of violence in the Naxalbari movement. In the paper, an attempt has been made to analyse historical incidents and its parallel representation to build an interactive study between the historical narratives of the movement and its literary representation through the lens of violence.

The Naxalbari Movement

The Naxalbari movement officially began with the four resolutions passed in the *Tarai Krishak Sabha* on 18th March 1967 (Singh 2006, Banerjee 2009, Bhattacharjee 2018).[2] It was the first major peasant uprising in post-independent India that attracted members of different social strata. The Tebhaga movement (1946-1947) preceded the Naxalbari movement, beginning during the colonial period and continuing in the period after independence. This movement was also centred on the rights of peasants, where the peasants' demand was to retain two-thirds of their production. This movement was followed by the Land Ceiling Act of 1953 according to which "no farmer or landlord is entitled to hold land beyond 25 acres" (Joshi 1975: 447). However, *zamindar*s or landlords escaped this act easily by transferring their excess land in the names of their wives and children (Dasgupta 1974). It was in this situation that the Naxalbari movement began, which in turn left a deep impact on the socio-political scenario of contemporary India. In the region of North Bengal, the brutality of the landlords and money-lenders made the farmers of the regions of Naxalbari, Hatigheesha, Phansideoa and the surrounding villages impatient and angry. They did not attain any help from

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[1] The text definitely uses imagination, particularly in the end where it narrates an open battle between the armed movement and the state machinery. However, imagination is also only used as a means to predict the outcome of violence that the movement engaged in.

[2] The four resolutions that formed the cornerstones of the movement are: 1) the police were not allowed to enter the village 2) they were not allowed to disarm landlords 3) or to confiscate their excess lands to redistribute it among peasants and 4) or themselves appropriate the land for tillers (cf. Mukherjee 1987), Dasgupta 2011, Banerjee 2009).

government officers or the police either since, legally, their lands were still in the names of the landlords (Banerjee 2009, Dasgupta 2011, Chakravarti 2017). While complaints were heard by officials, these were never registered or investigated (Bhattacharjee 2018). At such a juncture, "the farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers of one of the villages of Naxalbari were largely against a tyrant landlord Buddhiman Tirke. When he killed a farmer named Bigal Kishan, the farmers of the area rose against him" (Das 2015: 50). The murder of the landlord was unprecedented, and it showed how violence had been at the core of the Naxalbari movement. The areas of Naxalbari, Phasideoa, and Khoribari witnessed several instances of violent eruptions by sharecroppers against landlords (Sanyal 1978: 331-333). Indeed, as Sunil Sen records, there had been "clashes … between jotedars and peasants, and about two thousand peasants were arrested in 1958-59" (Sen 1982: 215). All these insurgencies were singularly motivated to reduce the excess and surplus lands owned by landlords, and redistributing it to landless sharecroppers who would therefore have their own lands. Deeper research discloses attempts at crop seizure by the *jotedar*s (landlords) and *zamindar*s (landowners) in South Bengal (Bhattacharjee 2018: 28-29). Several small insurgent groups were created thereafter such as *Dakshin Desh* (DD), *Chinta*, Socialist Revolution, and People's Democratic Revolution (PDR), that chose violence as the means to achieve their goals. Thus, there was a preponderance towards violence among peasantry.

After the first outburst, the insurgency took the shape of a more robust movement under the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that politically assumed a leadership position. Thereafter, the two violent incidents of Naxalbari took place on the 24th and 26th of May 1967. Kanu Sanyal (1978) writes that the membership of the Kishan Sabha leaped from 5000 to 40,000; about fifteen to twenty thousand of peasants became full-time activists (Sen 1982: 217):

> On 24th May the peasants, armed with bows and arrows, resisted the police party that went to a village to arrest … and a policeman was killed; the next day [25th of May] the police party … fired eighteen rounds killing the peasants that included eight women and three infants …

Though there is lack of unanimity regarding the initiation of the tussle, the fact remains that eight women were killed by the police force. Indeed, the dead people have a memorial commemorated in their name at Bengaijote, the mid-point between Naxalbari and Hatigheesha. The conflict between the state machinery and the civilians called the attention of the CPI(M)'s central committee. Though the four doctrines that had been passed in the *Krishak Sabha* that was headed by CPI(M) leaders working in the Darjeeling district, the central committee rejected taking any responsibility for the action. Since a few leaders from the Siliguri district refused to withdraw their support from the villagers, they were expelled from the party. These leaders, namely Kanu Sanyal, Charu Majumdar, Khokon Majumdar, and some others, formed the All-India Co-Ordination Committee for Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR) on the 12th of November 1967 that later developed into Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). It was this organisation thereafter that headed the movement and spread it to the cities. The attack and the death of the eight women popularised the movement and attracted a large section of city-dwellers to it, mostly the youth belonging to colleges. While the movement had abated by the late 1970s, it spurred a number of far-left organisations to grow such as Emancipation, Peoples' Revolutionary Group (PRG), Communist Party of India (Maoist), Marxist Communist Organisation (MCO), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) and so on, many of which continued to use violence as their chief tool. Preceding this movement, there had been numerous peasant insurgencies in Bengal. The Naxalbari incident only enabled insurgencies to be organised more efficiently. The eruption of numerous small-scale violent encounters asserted that the Naxalbari movement was not an extraordinary event in the history of Bengal or India. Looking at it through the Zizekian lens, these peasant insurgencies was a

reaction to the oppression of landlords. When these uprisings became merged, they turned out to be the first post-independence movement in India that was directed against class structures that sanctioned subjective violence. The movement aimed to revolt against invisible and the objective violence of class hierarchy that defined the social structure. Thus, this use of subjective violence by the movement responded to the objective violence of class hierarchy.

The Naxalites

In this article, I examine the 1979 publication *The Naxalites* written by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas that was republished in 2015 by Niyogi Books. Both the versions are in the English language. However, since there are many variants of this novel, the publication requires a bit of discussion. While *The Naxalites* was written in 1979 by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, the publication was followed by a Hindi film of the same name in 1980. More than a decade later, the same novel was republished with an introduction by Suresh Kohli in 2015 (Niyogi Books as mentioned above). *The Naxalites* primarily concentrates on the activities of the Naxal members of Kolkata in the 1970s. Here, it is noteworthy that the novel centres on a time when the Naxalbari movement became popular in the cities of Bengal marked by the repression of the government forces that was quite severe. By looking into the movement from the standpoint of its different characters, the text successfully provides a bird's eye view of the movement. Though a number of plays, novels, some of which are mentioned in the earlier section, are dedicated to the Naxalbari movement in the 1970s, this particular text, *The Naxalites*, stands out since it attempts to historically re-render its events. Thus, this text can be categorized as a historical novel. It does not create a plot with the Naxalbari movement in the foreground or the background; rather, the plot itself reflects the Naxalbari movement. Thus, the novel forms a bridge between historical incidents and its literary rendering, making it a meaningful read within the context of the Naxalbari movement. Such literary techniques enable the reading of the movement in ways that reveal its successes and failures. In this context, the year of its penning and its first publication is relatively important. The novel was first published in 1979 at a time when the movement had already finished reaching its peak and was undergoing steady decline. The moment thus allowed for a closer reading of the movement. Unlike contemporary novels, poetries, and short stories that contain a nostalgic reflection of the movement, the texts of the 1970s narrate the movement in its ongoing stage.[3] This text is thus not an exception, and encompassing the genre of historical fiction, it is able to capture the nature of conflicts in a subtle way, thereby allowing readers to gain a picture from both or many sides. Moreover, as mentioned, the lack of research on this particular text makes it a specially pertinent study. The lack of research, however, did not prevent the book from gaining popularity. Decades later, while the Naxalbari movement was still discursively strong, Niyogi Publishers chose to republish the novel. Under the contemporary rise of autocracy, and the presence of multiple radical leftist organisations that claim the legacy to the Naxalbari movement, the movement has never been outside of the picture of the Indian political structure. In literary renderings too, the Naxalbari movement has been a recurrent factor as a central driving force in novels like *The Lowland* (Lahiri 2013), or *The Lives of Others* (Mukherjee 2014), or it has remained in the background in novels like *Voices in the City* by Anita Desai(1965). Since the novel as I argue, is a miniature reflection of the Naxalbari movement itself, it is not surprising that it is republished after almost five decades of the movement.

In this paper, I am using a historical novel to look into the role of violence in the Naxalbari movement. One of the prime reasons for this is to locate the 'why' of the historical incidents.

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[3] Some of the texts written during the same decades include *Bashai Tudu* (Devi 1990, trans. 2016), *Breast Stories* (Devi 1978, trans. 1997), *Inquilaab* (Currimbhoy 1979), and *Kaalbela* (Majumder 1981).

As Jerome de Groot comments (2015: 14), "Historical novels participate in a semi-serious game of authenticity and research, deploying tropes of realism and mimesis, while weaving fictional narrative." While historical incidents narrate readers with the when(s), providing them a bird's eye view, literary texts explore the why(s) of the incidents, often engaging with the humanitarian aspects of history. While mainstream history might omit certain smaller incidents from the picture, historical novels often focus on these marginalised incidents, themes, or figures. Through the character of literary texts, the readers become acquainted with the psychology of historical characters and re-live them. Thus, an analytical reading of historical fiction offers readers different standpoints into looking at historical events while also unveiling the smaller and excluded episodes of bigger historical incidents. Literary texts therefore add plurality to history. Groot argues in *The Historical Novel* (ibid.: 2), "A historical novel might consider the articulation of the nationhood via the past, highlight the subjectivism of narratives of history … question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention." While literary texts on the one hand, mostly adhere to historical facts, on the other, they strive to move beyond facts to highlight excluded elements. This paper undertakes the task of looking into these otherwise excluded episodes of the Naxalbari movement through the lens of violence. While most historical records as well as literary texts depict violence, used in the annihilation doctrine of the movement, or in the repressive measures of state authority to supress the movement, a study of these literary texts also reveals the internal struggle between the members of both groups. This article and my analytical perspective intends to read the dual aspects of violence in the Naxalbari movement with special emphasis on the lesser studied aspect of internal violence.

However, this approach also has certain limitations. In an attempt to add flesh and blood to history's bare bones, that is, make it appealing to readers, historical fiction often also moves beyond historical facts using creative licence. This is partly because fiction writing is already accepted as being based on the imagination and using a subjective approach. Often history and historical fiction are thus placed in opposition with one another (Llamas et al. 2006: 40): "We can even say that history is viewed as a dominant narrative whereas the historical novel is just a counternarrative." Because fiction often diverges from historically established fact, chiefly to study neglected aspects or smaller historical aspects, it is often considered deceptive to history. In an attempt to highlight such neglected historical incidents, other historical aspects are then peripheralized. This further adds to the accusation of deviation and deception. As Richard Carroll writes (2011: 104), "Alessandro Manzoni…eventually decided that the historical novel fails through the mixing of the incompatible elements of history and fiction, which can lead to deception." However, as per new historicism, the historian cannot get rid of his subjectivity either. In the same paper Carroll argues (ibid.: 121), "Historical documents may provide a basis for a "true account of the world" in a certain time and place, but they are limited in their capacity to act as a foundation for the exploration of all aspects of reality." In fact, new historicism argues that the subjectivity of the author needs to be acknowledged before moving into a historical understanding of an era. Thus, Hutcheon coined the specific term "historiographic metafiction" to define "the presence of the past" in "historical, social, and ideological form" (Hutcheon 1988: 302). Thus, while history acknowledges working on facts, the very foundation of these facts is being questioned by new historicism. Following this argumentative pattern, both history and fiction become equitable narratives (Southgate 2009: 20). However, both history and historical fiction represent the past to the present reader. There is, therefore, as Southgate points out, "this shared concern with the construction of meaning through narrative" (ibid.: 19). This sharedness component is enough to construct a long-lasting and close relationship between fiction and history (ibid.: 19).

Since this paper studies the duality of violence internal and external to the movement, as well as the two kinds of subjective and objective violence pitched between two opposing forces of

the state and the movement, *The Naxalites* emerges over here as an important primary material. This text explores the impact of the movement's violence on its members instead of focusing only on the violence between opposing forces. While the movement tried to overthrow the systematic violence of class hierarchy, dissented against the contemporary government at the same time, this was because the government was neither playing a constructive role in reducing the problems of the peasants, nor addressing the structure of the class hierarchy. Thus, the movement encountered severe state repression that wanted to supress the rising dissent among the population. Historical scholarship on the Naxalbari movement is wide ranging, including the Emergency that enabled state machinery to use severe repressive policies (Lawoti and Pahari 2009: 185):[4]

> "Operation Steeplechase," a police and army joint anti–Naxalite undertaking, was launched in July–August 1971. By the end of "Operation Steeplechase" over 20,000 suspected Naxalites were imprisoned and including senior leaders and cadre, and hundreds had been killed in police encounters. It was a massive counter–insurgency undertaking by any standards.

The historical records of the movement also foreground the repressive policies of state machinery that sought to suppress the movement. The organisation was banned in 1972 and activities related to it became therefore illegal. Even before the ban, the suppression was carried out through various operations like 'Operation Green Hunt' and 'Operation Steeplechase'. Dipak Gupta notes (2008: 196-197),

> The situation of anarchy prevailing in the eastern state and, under the Indian Constitution, resulted in a state of emergency. Under this sweeping declaration, they suspended the freshly elected state government and imposed from the centre a "President's Rule" in March 1970 … Under the new rule, there was no ambivalence toward the Naxalites, exhibited previously by the United Front government with its Communist allies. In April, a joint campaign was launched by the Indian military (Eastern Frontier Rifles), the Central Reserve Police. They coordinated their efforts with the local police rifles.

Even in contemporary era, the repression has not diluted. The Naxalites and Maoists are declared the largest threat to internal security. As per one mainstream newspapers (Azad 2021: 3),

> …the capacity of Left-wing extremists to retaliate with ferocity indicates that Maoism still remains the biggest threat to our internal security, almost 11 years after then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged and framed the scale of threat in exactly this manner.

On the other hand, documentary records by authors like Arundhati Roy in *Walking with the Comrades* (2011), brings out the other side of the picture, where Naxals point to the inhumane and repressive measures of the state. Hence, many of these organisations are compelled to use arms while operating underground (Roy 2011: 83-91). In a similar vein, literary texts also portray violence between the two forces of the movement and the state. There are many

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[4] Historical scholarship on the movement include books such as *The Naxalite Movement: A Maoist Experiment* (Ghosh 1975), *In the Wake of Naxalbari* (Banerjee: 2009), *The Spring Thunder and Kolkata: An Epic Story of Courage and Sacrifice 1965-72* (Bhattacharjee 2018), and *The Bengalis: Portrait of a Community* (Chakravarti 2017) among others who foreground the repressive measures of the state to suppress the movement.

literary works that study the role of violence in the Naxalbari movement. For instance, *The Lives of Others* (Mukherjee 2014) and *The Lowland* (Lahiri 2013) captures the violence of the state machinery on the members of dissenting movements. In both texts the death of the protagonist emphasizes the repressive policies of the state. Similarly, the story of Dopdi from Breast Stories (Devi [1978] translated by Spivak [1997]) and the novel *Bashai Tudu* (Devi [1990] translated by Spivak [2016]), capture the government's repressive methods to maintain power and status quo. The portrayal of Dopdi (Draupadi) in Mahashweta Devi's stories, publicly exposing her breasts after being raped by state officials emphasizes brutal and inhuman repression of state machinery against dissenting movements. However, the impact of violence is not limited to the two opposing forces alone. It also impacts members internal to the movement. The memoir written by Abhijeet Das titled *Footprints of Foot Soldiers* (2015) specifically locates increasing suspicion-based violence among movement members. This growing conflict among members was one of the main reasons of his disassociation with the movement (Das 2015: 143-148). However, most literary texts have not delved into the question of internal conflict and violence among Naxal members. The text analysed in this article *The Naxalites* is hence specifically chosen to address the dual nature of the Naxalbari conflicts: firstly, between members of the movement, and secondly, between the two opposing forces of the movement and the state. My paper thus addresses a gap in scholarship by studying the impact of both internal and external violence connected to the movement.

The Naxalites is set in the Bengal of the 1970s, especially the city of Kolkata. There are several characters in the story who emerge from different social backgrounds. The story opens with a few students in a college assembling and waiting for a senior, who is called Chakravarty, to take them to Comrade Dada, the leader of the movement. After some basic interrogation, they are recruited into the movement by Comrade Dada, and various tasks are assigned to them. While hanging posters on the walls of buildings in the city at night, they are attacked by the police, a raid in which Chakravarty gets arrested. Before the police attack however, the new recruits, comrades discuss the movement, its origin, and its significance, as well as its loopholes. The novel shifts to Chakravarty's custodial torture that leads to his death. This is followed by the narrative emergence of Ajitha, Chakravarty's sister and the protagonist in the story, who is determined to avenge his brother's murder. Anand, Ajitha's lover and Ajitha join the movement after Ajitha's brother's death—"that college boy Chakravarty" (Abbas 2015: 78). However, from the very beginning, Anand is neither trusted by group members, nor by the leader Comrade Dada since he is the son of a police officer, DIG Gangooly. Yet he is included in the organisation after passing a test given to him by Comrade Dada—that of stealing bullets from his father's pistol. Though the leader instructs Anand to leave for a specific village the next night, his experience and gut feeling does not allow him to trust Anand. Thus, he assigns Shankar, an older comrade, to spy on Anand and ensure that Anand does not associate with the police (Abbas 2015: 96). But the same morning, Anand gets involved in a verbal conflict with his father in which he angrily reveals his association with the Naxalite organisation. As soon as Anand leaves the house, his father, DIG Gangooly, assigns a small police force to follow him. Thus, unknown to Anand, he is being followed by a police van. As the text unfolds, "Shankar blew the sharp warning whistle" (Abbas 2015: 108) and the course of actions that follows from it, proves that Anand's comrades have misunderstood the situation due to their distrust of him. He is convicted by the group as a betrayer without further investigation, and Ajitha is ordered to kill him. Due to circumstances and the sudden encroachment of the police, Comrade Dada does not get enough time to provide Ajitha with an escape route. He does however choose to keep the remaining members of the movement safe so that they can continue with the movement's activities. Anand enters the thatched room in the village where he is sent, and he is shot over there by Ajitha (Abbas 2015: 109). As the police who are following Anand also enter the hut at the same time, they arrest Ajitha, who refuses to fight. The plot shifts next to Ajitha, who is shown as receiving a death sentence and is jailed. This is

followed by her sending a message to her comrades through another prisoner named Haibat Khan. The latter enters a meeting where thousands of people are congregated under the red banner to discuss the future course of action for the movement. Ajitha's letter results in the generation of a debate regarding the movement's modus operandi, whereby Comrade Dada gives in to collective pressure. He is forced to give up arms and violence, as recommended by Ajitha in her posthumous letter. It is in this meeting that a police battalion led by DIG Gangooly also attacks movement members leading to an open conflict between them. According to Comrade Dada's instructions, core members of the organisation use arms to resist the police force, while other members are given the opportunity to escape. The armed conflict results in death on both sides, and all the core members of Comrade Dada's organisation are killed since the police have more guns, including canons, to their disposal.

Though the prime setting of the novel is in Kolkata, several actions, especially the last conflict between the police and the Naxals takes place in the suburbs. The text elaborates on the method of recruitment of students by Comrade Dada. Interestingly, the novel also shows how Comrade Dada is committed to the annihilation doctrine. This is an example of an extremist position where only exterminating the enemy counts, considered the benchmark for joining the movement. It is by painting this hyperbolic situation in the novel that the author hints at the importance of the annihilation doctrine for the Naxalbari movement, something that enjoys robust historical evidence as well. Three documents in *The Historic Eight Documents*, namely, three, five, and seven, titled *What is the Source of the Spontaneous Revolutionary Outburst in India?* (1965), *What Possibility the Year 1965 is Indicating?* (1965), and *Take this Opportunity to Build armed partisan struggle by fighting against revisionism* (1966) respectively, indicate the importance of the annihilation doctrine in the movement.[5] In his memoir of the movement, Abhijeet Das records his experience of the movement's senior leaders who advise him on the modus operandi of the movement: "Stay with the landless or poor peasants. Spread the message of revolution … I need them to evolve as guerrilla squads" (Das 2015: 89). Following historical records, the novel reveals that though there were many armed activities and groups in the city, the prime focus of the movement is on villages with students being recruited for the purpose of creating armed barricades in the villages.

Violence at the Core of the Movement

Before entering into a deeper study of the Naxalbari movement through the lens of violence, this section briefly describes violence, its kinds, and the theoretical approach that I take to it in this article. Political violence has been briefly defined as the "collective sphere manifested in guerrilla conflict, paramilitary conflict, political assassinations, armed conflict between political parties, rape and sexual abuse as political act" (Clark 2001: 37). Collective violence, driven by gaining and maintaining political power, or by overthrowing the ruling political party, may thus become political violence, taking the form of a revolution in an attempt to overthrow the government and establish a new reign. It can thus also be defined "as an attempt by the use of force against the government legally in power to compel change in what are held to be, by those using such force, the actual purpose of the state" (Laski 1960: 104). The Marxist school of thought argues that the root cause of political violence is the unequal ownership of the means of production, which results in an unequal distribution of wealth (Mahakul 2014: 6).

The novel, *The Naxalites*, shows that the recruitment of youths is largely dependent on their ability to indulge in violent activities and resist state repression. This prominence of violence gives us the scope to theorise violence in movement's context. For this purpose, I have used Slavoj Zizek's argument on subjective and objective violence that helps me reread the

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[5] See the historical and sociological works of Chowdhury (2009) *Revisiting Naxalbari* and Banerjee's (2009) *In the Wake of Naxalbari*.

Naxalbari movement, of how the movement's subjective violence as a response to oppression, failed to achieve the goal of dismantling the objective violence of oppression itself. Zizek (2008) has classified violence into two parts, namely, subjective and objective violence (Ibid.: 5): "subjective violence is seen as a perturbation of the normal, peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this normal state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent." Objective violence, on the other hand, mostly takes the form of systemic violence, and is usually not in the form of "direct physical violence." But it can be perceived in the "more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation" (Zizek 2008: 10). Thus, subjective violence in any movement is a response, and an endeavour to end the regular objective and systemic violence experienced by people. Looking at the Naxalbari movement through this lens, its formation in the nascent Indian nation-state used subjective violence as a response to the Indian state.

Zizek's argument is apt for because the understanding of the Naxalbari movement, and its theoretical base of the *Historic Eight Documents* that repeatedly uses the annihilation doctrine as a means of ending the systemic oppressions of class hierarchy, specifically visible through the exploitation perpetuated by landlords in rural areas. When smaller insurgencies became combined into a larger movement, violence was used as a primary tool to end systemic oppression. This is pertinent to the Zizekian model of revolution, where proletariats use subjective violence to overcome perpetual objective violence. However, this paper is more critical in its analytical approach and shows how Zizek's theory fails in practice, especially as Naxalbari violence on the ground soon became an end unto itself. In following violence as an analytical tool, this article analyses how the movement became reduced to a series of random violent activities disassociated from the movement's central goal. Further, the recruitment of youths for creating armed barricades by Comrade Dada in *The Naxalites*, provides researchers with the opportunity of discussing historical records and other sociological studies surrounding the movement. The pioneers of the movement, it must be noted, especially Charu Majumdar, had laid profound premium on subjective violence. This can be gauged from the inclusion of armed barricades as a tool, and adopting the annihilation doctrine within the tenets of the movement (*Historic Eight Documents*). The term barricade here means a defensive and leftist barrier of the people who protect each other, defend themselves against authority or opposing forces. But what made the barricades of extremist movements like the Naxalbari movement different from the barricades of other leftist movements? This difference lay in the fact that the Naxalbari was an armed movement. They were not meant to attack, but only to defend themselves against the attacks of the armed opposition. These barricades made up of peasants were small and local, consisting of one or two villages. Since violence had always been an intricate feature of peasant insurgencies, or any mass movement including the nationalist movement, the concept of armed barricades in the Naxalbari movement was felt as suitable and popularized the movement. The model of building and organizing armed barricades has also been discussed in the tenets. For creating armed barricades, educated youths would first need to stay with the villagers, instilling class consciousness among them and then forming local guerrilla squads. These squads would then declare their small areas independent from the slavery of the landlords, and seek to redistribute land among peasants. The process, it was imagined, would continue and intensify, and gradually the lands would be freed from landowners, and belong to the peasants. Thus, with time, armed barricades would own most of the lands, and they would snatch power from the hands of finance capitalists, industrialists and political parties that supported the former two (Bhattacharjee 2018: 26-27). Hence, armed barricades were an intrinsic part of the Naxalbari movement, and the presence of these armed barricades guaranteed subjective violence.

In the *Documents*, Charu Majumdar developed the doctrine of annihilation as the only way forward for peasants to attain their goals. The term annihilation here means elimination. The annihilation doctrine of Charu Majumdar recommended eliminating class hierarchy by removing the majority of the bourgeoisie that consisted of industry and factory owners in the city, and landlords in the village. The goal in the end was to attain a classless society. Since the government supported the landed and bourgeoisie, the doctrine included terminating individual holdings, official positions, or any support to state machinery. Thus, in the logic of the annihilation doctrine, subjective violence was used to remove objective violence. For Charu Majumdar, the use of the annihilation doctrine was an alternative to the revisionist policies of earlier movements. Following the doctrine, movement members propagated that "the class enemy can and should be annihilated through terrorist tactics, rather than be overwhelmed through electoral politics and any economic agenda for the rural poor must wait until the revolutionary seizure of power" (Mehra 2000: 178). Thus, the whole movement was centred on the belief that the Naxalbari incident had set forth the spark, and subjective violence would pave the way for disrupting the objective violence of class hierarchy. Moreover, according to the doctrine, a small insurgency would lead most peasants to follow suit, and annihilate the objective violence of class hierarchy.

Charu Majumdar, while making his argument, depended on the solidarity of peasants and on the territoriality that enabled any peasant insurgency to spread from one place to another. Small eruptions breaking out in several parts of the state before the Naxalbari incident convinced peasant leaders that violence was necessary for disrupting and ending the existing social system. In his study of peasant insurgencies, Ranajit Guha drew on certain features like solidarity that contributed to the spread of the insurgency. While the features were interlinked, a study of the Naxalbari movement reveals that leaders unknowingly depended on solidarity and territoriality for spreading the movement. Solidarity here refers to brotherhood between members of the same community, village, clan or caste. In fact, it is this identification with other members that enables the peasantry of a particular area to function as a unit. This sense of oneness also leads to the emulation of acts that help to spread insurgency. At times many peasants join the insurgency due to solidarity, it results in generating brotherhood, "When they [the peasants] were asked … they replied they did not know; it was because they saw others doing them" (Guha 1983: 167). The emulation thus results in territoriality and enables the spread of peasant insurgencies. Territoriality here has been defined as "a sense of belonging to a common lineage as well as to a common habitat—an intersection of two primordial referents…the two types of union—by blood tie and local bond—are in reality intertwined" (Guha 1983: 279). Insurgencies spread as much as territoriality expanded. Territoriality therefore lent locality to any peasant insurgency. In his book Sumit Sarkar (1983) has argued that locality constitutes a dominant trait in most peasant insurgencies in colonial India. The problems and solutions of peasant insurgencies are thus restricted to specific areas, and to problems of the peasant community of that locality. Hence, resorting to violence can only provide a temporary solution albeit of an immediate nature to the problem. Indeed, Gandhi and other nationalist leaders united local peasant insurgencies into the anticolonial nationalist movement. When the two theories of territoriality and locality are combined, peasant insurgencies were local only because they could spread territorially, depending on solidarity. Territoriality is also restricted to local demands (Guha 1983: 125-126), and peasant insurgencies did not undergo any sudden change due to the transfer of power in 1947. The continuation of the Telangana movement, the Tebhaga movement after independence evidences this. The Naxalbari movement was not an exception either.

However, its leaders failed to realise that the basic criteria of solidarity between peasants lies in their sharing of similar problems that emerge from belonging to the same groups: "Solidarity is thus a categorical imprint of peasant consciousness, and there is hardly a rebellion that does

not bear it" (Guha 1983: 169). Such solidarity was impossible and could not be instrumentalized if the cluster of individuals in the group did not share a common feeling of brotherhood emerging from similar experiences. In the Naxalbari movement, there was a union between different classes, resulting in the movement gaining a large middle-class base. The problems shared by the different classes was definitely not similar, and thus uniting them in a common frame would also obviously fail. So, the axiom of territoriality that could spread the movement would also not work in case of a lack in solidarity, since there would be no emulation.

Violence in *The Naxalites*: Violence within the Organisation

The use of subjective violence resulted in other unforeseen problems that have been well represented in the novel *The Naxalites*. As discussed, Comrade Dada was focused on the annihilation doctrine of the movement while recruiting members in the organisation: his questions to students centred chiefly on their ability to participate in armed barricades and executing the principles of the annihilation doctrine. This hyperbolic situation points at how, on one hand, the movement focused on annihilation, while at the same time marginalising other principles of the movement. Beyond historical narratives, Abhijeet Das in his memoir *Footprints of Foot Soldiers* (2015) locates this gradual increase in the prominence of the annihilation doctrine among young leaders, "One section was confused and frustrated, and the other highly charged up" (ibid.: 144-145). This prominence overshadowed other principles and hence backfired and sabotaged the movement: violence turned out to be an end itself without any ulterior motive.

The Naxalites explores how the annihilation doctrine became dangerous to movement members. There are two instances of this in the story, first when organization members attempted to kill a comrade under orders from their leader, and second, the murder of Anand, a college student who had newly joined the organisation due to suspicion. In both situations, Comrade Dada directed the murders. He prioritised the movement and the organisation over the lives of individual comrades. But this had a repercussion. A journalist, Ajoy Bose, who acted as Comrade Dada's informant, notified the press about the police torture of Surendranath Chakravarty, a Naxal member who got caught by the police while painting slogans on the city walls: "That college boy Chakravarty could not stand the torture and has told them the address of this place" (Abbas 2015: 78). Despite knowing that Chakravarty had blurted out information about the movement due to brutal police torture, Comrade Dada failed to sympathise with the youth (Abbas 2015: 87-88). Instead, he shifted to a new location and ordered two of organization members to kill Chakravarty (Abbas 2015: 90) so that he might not give away any other information. However, these members did not need to kill Chakravarty because he had already succumbed to the pain of torture and the remorse of exposing the organization's hide-outs. He had killed himself (Abbas 2015: 124). Comrade Dada's actions discloses severe problem in the use subjective violence, used as an organisational tool. The killings made the members fearful of each other. Significantly, the use of violence within the organisation reduced its number of members since once the police captured any of its member, they would either be killed by the authorities or by a member of the organisation.

The organization members assigned the task of murdering Chakravarty were not in favour of murdering their old comrade either. Chakravarty had been their leader in college, and he had been the one to take them to Comrade Dada to join the movement. But they were left with no option. Their conversation on reaching Chakravarty's house shows readers that this task was forcefully imposed on them, "Sinha was not sure that they must kill their former comrade who was their leader in college. But Inder answered, those are the orders of the leader and the party. We have to carry them out" (Abbas 2015: 91). This conversation also reveals an

atmosphere of fear among organization members. Again, through this conversation, one can recognise the hierarchy implicit in the movement, through words like 'order'. Orders or commands are passed from the higher authorities to be carried out by lower and younger cadres. So, as this incident shows, young members of the organization were compelled to follow the orders of their leader without any discussion or disagreement. Questioning the leader was too frightening a task for any of the comrades. Thus, the movement developed into an autocratic organisation where members were frightened of one another. Due to the constant fear, the youth could not rely on each other and lived under constant threat and suspicion. Ironically, a movement that claimed to bring equality to society became driven by autocracy. Members failed to trust one another and were always under danger of being killed, not only by the police force, but also by their own comrades. As the plot unfolds, the lack of this faith that led to the murder of Anand becomes more than evident. Though Ajitha shot Anand, the person directing the murder was Comrade Dada. He did not give Anand a second chance. It was similar to Chakravarty's case, Ajitha's elder brother, with whom Comrade Dada did not even speak after his release from police custody, but instead sent members to kill him. Both incidents indicate that using violence as a tool for too long, had made Comrade Dada suspicious. Not only did he doubt organisation members, but out of the need to preserve the movement, he rather chose to kill arrested or suspicious members. Comrade Dada's actions clearly prove that the use of subjective violence weakens the movement by making the members doubtful and fearful and suspicious of each other. The murder of Anand and the death of Chakravarty are instances of how the members become a threat to one another. Thus, the annihilation doctrine becomes a tool of controlling members of the movement, and produces an autocratic operating structure to organisations that head the movement at the local level.

Looking into the narrative incidents, it can be said that such problems also arose due the movement's inability to harness subjective violence, and channelise it in the proper direction. Historically speaking, the use of subjective violence has always been a tool of the peasantry to attain its immediate goal (Sarkar 1983). They have also been successful since these goals were usually limited to local issues that could be resolved in a short period. So, subjective violence could also only be used successfully when pertaining to local issues. Using this subjective violence to disrupt systemic violence is hence problematic since it is impossible to harness violence in a particular direction for a long time within a large population. Moreover, the success of subjective violence lay in its limited and localized nature since it did not have the power to dismantle a system. Using subjective violence in a movement that attempted to dismantle the system of class hierarchy would thus fail, since the task of dismantling any structure was neither local nor limited to a short period. Channelising subjective violence on such a large scale and such a long period was thus impossible. It led to a loss of direction for most movement participants who failed to grasp the use of subjective violence. As historical records show, this was how the movement degenerated into random murders. Since subjective violence could not be controlled, it led to further disassociation between subjective and objective violence. The annihilation doctrine was a tool to attain the elimination of systemic violence, and killing was never the goal of the doctrine. However, killing turned out to be a motive in itself over time. This became so prominent that the main motive of the movement became diluted for members. As a result, subjective violence became an end in itself, while the goal of removing objective violence gradually dissipates. So, amalgamating subjective violence within the movement's tenets through the annihilation doctrine with the goal of disrupting objective violence was a failure. It weakened the movement by destroying its democracy and degraded it to a murderous endeavour. Hence, though the movement's aim was not to indulge in useless killings, its subjective violence disrupted its ideology and degenerated it into what became labelled as terrorism.

The use of subjective violence instead provided the state an opportunity to use brutal repression. While the retaliation of Naxal members against government attack was natural, widespread repression and the organization's short span, and its large scale retaliation, in the form of an open conflict was also unsustainable. However, *The Naxalites* (as any literary text) also moves beyond historical narratives to demonstrate the brutality of government repression. The final conflict in the story took place when the police, led by DIG Gangooly,[6] cordoned off a gathering of 30,000 people from different sections of society who had assembled under the red flag of Mao Zedong (Abbas 2015: 139).[7] They were debating the annihilation doctrine in the meeting, and reconsidering an alternative path to continue their movement (Abbas 2015: 140-141). They had been warned about the approaching police, but the force had already cordoned off the area before they could escape (Abbas 2015: 146-147). On being trapped by the police on all sides, Comrade Dada took a leadership role and ordered, "Let the people go in silence the way they came … the armed men with their weapons will hold the post and keep the police at bay. That will give our comrades enough time to escape" (Abbas 2015: 148-149). To help most of the members escape, such that the movement might continue in some other form, Comrade Dada and the core committee members decided to stay back and fight the police. Though they were reconsidering their path; on being cordoned off by the police , some members were compelled to resort to violence in order to protect themselves. Thus, Comrade Dada said, "There is no way out of the web of violence. You may be non-violent, but will the police be non-violent? We will not fire the first shot" (Abbas 2015: 148). Comrade Dada's words assert that state authority would unleash arms on them to suppress any dissenting movement that questioned the system and questioned government authority. Comrade Dada's words also hint at objective violence within the social structure that continues to function in systemic ways. From his experiences, Comrade Dada knew that the state would try and crush every dissenting voice and the conflict between the two forces resulted in deaths on either sides. The police killed all the core Naxal committee members, and there were many casualties on the police side as well (Abbas 2015: 152-153). The conflict between the two forces and its subsequent results proved that subjective violence could never be a successful modus operandi in impacting any significant structural change, since the authorities having their own systematic power would easily crush them. The author declares prophetically that this is the death of all dissenters (Abbas 2015: 28):

> The burst of howitzer shell was the climax of this grim, bloody dialogue between two inexorable forces—the arrogant force of law and order at all costs, and the impatient battalions of instant revolution.

Alternative of Subjective Violence: A Confluence of History and *The Naxalites*

The aporia created by violence is disentangled in *The Naxalites* through a new modus operandi that continued the movement. In this context, it can be argued that the novel stands against the use of subjective violence. But it also needs to be recognised that being a historical novel,

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[6] Here it is to be noted that DIG Gangooly also had a personal motive since his son, Anand, was killed by the Naxal members.

[7] The Naxalbari movement in Bengal was largely Maoist in nature, based on the cultural revolution in China. Major historical works on the movement that include Ghosh (1974), Singh (2006), Ghosh (2009), Ray (1993), Sen (1982), locate the ideological base of the movement to be Maoist. Beyond historical and sociological records, novels like *The Lives of Others* (Mukherjee 2014) reflect on how the protagonist and his brother used to listen to Peking News on the radio every evening to learn about the progress of the movement. In *The Naxalites* too, there is a similar conversation between two comrades while they are out hanging posters. One asks the other, "Can't India have great leaders like Mao?" (Abbas 2015: 103). This broad commitment to Maoism continues especially while characterising the Naxalbari movement to an idea of the people's democratic revolution.

The Naxalites also reflects history. Historical evidence shows that the movement failed, and, beyond state repression, internal conflict within the movement played a contributing factor in its failure.[8] Thus, the novel chooses to showcase both factors: it explores police brutality and simultaneously shows the internal conflict of the movement due to the excessive use of arms. The alternative pathway is suggested by Ajitha in the story, who is one of its main characters. After she murders Anand, her lover and a comrade, Ajitha is arrested by the police and sentenced to death. During her trial, she ponders her course of action, and the disadvantages of the annihilation doctrine. Finally, she comes up with an alternative and non-violent mode of protest based on creating class consciousness among the masses, accommodating larger numbers of people in the struggle and movement, and thereafter challenge the authorities. Such an alternative ensures the rebuilding of an alternative social structure (Abbas 2015: 146-147). Ajitha sends her message secretly through Haibat Khan, a fellow prisoner who escapes from prison (Abbas 2015: 92-96). He reads the message in the meeting, before the gathering is cordoned off by the police. In the letter, she suggests that movement members need to address the disadvantages of the annihilation doctrine and rethink their modus operandi, "You have been killed enough—and a sufficient number of you have been killed…Think whether it has led us to the goal of revolution. Not murder, but mass awakening, a mass organisation is the way of revolution" (Abbas 2015: 147).

Connecting Ajitha's dialogues with the historical records of the movement, this article uses the text of *The Naxalites* to bring out fissures in subjective violence that degenerated the movement into random terrorism perpetuated by urban youths. As Partha Mukherjee points out (Mukherjee 1978: 69-70), "The movement was no longer based on peasant worker solidarity but urban-based youth." As a result, the movement failed to draw more people into its fold.[9] In the alternative model proposed by Ajitha, she recommended including more people in the movement, instead of frightening them by random murders that only led to casualties on both sides without producing any positive impact. Though Comrade Dada disagreed with Ajitha's suggestion, other members in the meeting consented to it (Abbas 2015: 148):

> I propose we reconsider our plans and programmes in view of Comrade Ajitha's message…another man…said, comrades, individual terrorism won't do. We must organise the poor, landless labour for revolutionary action…yet another man…said, people mistake us for common murderers.

The majority of members thus voted in favour of mass organisation, for continuing the movement. In this manner the text of the story forecasts the change in the movement's modus operandi through Ajitha's proposal and its acceptance by a majority of members in the meeting. Thus, the story successfully presents an alternative path in the movement's progress that is without violence.

This meeting and the decision taken in disagreement to Comrade Dada's views also subverts of the movement's growing autocracy. Though its earlier autocracy was reflected in how young members were compelled to follow the command of their leader, this meeting emphasised how decisions regarding the movement were adopted through a majority of votes. Though Comrade Dada did not agree to Ajitha's proposal, he was compelled to consent to the majority decision. Against this majority vote that favoured a change in modus operandi by rejecting the tool of annihilation doctrine (subjective violence), Comrade Dada's standpoint on the use of arms did not hold. Ajitha's proposal, therefore, confirms that parliamentary democracy

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[8] Abhijeet Das's memoir (2015) as well as historical documentation, both for and against the movement, point to the drawbacks of internal conflict within the movement and to how it led to its downfall.

[9] This has also been pointed out by historian Sunil Sen (1982: 231): "no stress had been given to agrarian revolution; the CPI(ML) did not focus on the agrarian programme."

constitutes the ultimate form of change to be wrought within the structure. This resonates with Alan Johnson's argument (2011: 153):

> …for Marx the 'rule of the proletariat' meant the working-class leadership of an 'immense majority block,' while the governmental form of that rule was the democratic republic…universal suffrage, representative democracy, a democratic constitution, and truly mass involvement in political decision-making.

Thus, while Zizek criticises democratic means as a stumbling block to achieving the rule of the proletariats, critics like Hal Draper (1977, 1986). Johnson (2011) have pointed out that democracy is the only means to achieve a permanent resolution of the problems faced by the have-nots, when considering changing the social structure. Indeed, Draper has continuously argued in various ways that only democracy can ensure the rule of the working class. In a similar vein Ajitha also urges her comrades to concentrate on uniting the people through democratic means instead of focusing on the annihilation doctrine. If we move beyond gender differences here, the conflict between Comrade Dada and Ajitha can be regarded as an imaginary extension of the movement's historical records.[10] Historical studies on the movement confirm that before final arrest, Charu Majumdar had reconsidered the annihilation doctrine, particularly after a meeting with the core committee members of the CPI(ML) and the Communist Party of China (CPC). He recognised the backlash generated by the annihilation doctrine, and was about to omit it from the movement's working principles of the movement (Bhattacharjee 2018: 78-79). However, before he could discuss it at the official level and initiate a step to favour this step of reconsideration, he was arrested, and he died in custody during police interrogation (ibid.: 80). Through Ajitha's letter, *The Naxalites* tries to fulfil the incomplete work that Majumdar planned by before his sudden capture and death. Perhaps, materialising this change in the modus operandi of the movement would change its whole course, leading to its success.

Conclusion

This paper explores the Naxalbari movement through the lens of violence. By analysing the relationship of the members within the organisation in Abbas's novel *The Naxalites*, and the mode of its working, this article uses literary text to make a critical assessment of the drawbacks in the movement's use of subjective violence. The repressive measures of the government, the failure of the movement in harnessing subjective violence resulting in the killing of its members, and the open conflict between the two forces in the end affirm that using violence constituted a setback for the movement. By means of analysing Abbas's novel, this article attempts to resolve the aporia that results from violence, proposing and highlighting an alternative modus operandi that can facilitate the continuation of the movement. Following a new modus operandi enabled by omitting the annihilation doctrine, the article shows how Abbas's novel proposes the use of democratic means to gain support from every section of the society to make a larger collective. In this article, I have thus engaged in an assessment of the use of unnecessary violence in the Naxalbari movement exemplified by the interaction between historical narrative and multiple layers of its fictional and historical representation in literary texts like *The Naxalites*.

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[10] I have explored this theme elsewhere (for more details see Sarkar [2021]).

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Book Review

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Rethinking Untouchability offers a unique vantage point in the growing body of literature on B.R. Ambedkar, reflecting on Ambedkar's life, from his childhood to his political activism. Apart from a biographical outline, the book also provides us with a distinctive perspective about Ambedkar's intellectual legacy, delving into how Ambedkar reconceptualised untouchability by reconnecting it to broader themes like "race, liberty (*swaraj*), space (the village), labour, Pakistan and internationalism" (p. 1). Ambedkar had a dual project that entailed elevating the discourse of untouchability to global debates while simultaneously framing this debate as a national political problem in India. In this process, Ambedkar intended to unite heterogeneous groups under one umbrella that recognised Dalits as a national political minority. Through a meticulous analysis of Ambedkar's writings and political activities, Cháirez-Garza presents us with a nuanced portrait of a thinker whose ideas transcended easy ideological categorisation, while at the same time remaining profoundly relevant to contemporary discussions on social justice. This significant effort to analyse Ambedkar's intellectual history is based on his political ideas, his concern about nomenclature, racial theories, and his critique of the left, as well as of rural-urban dichotomies.

The first chapter, the *Introduction*, lays down the foundation of the book and provides a detailed reflection on the critical role of language in shaping how untouchability was understood and contested. Cháirez-Garza examines the historical evolution of terminology—from *Depressed Classes* to *Scheduled Castes* to *Dalit*—showing how each term carried specific political implications (p. 4). The text highlights Ambedkar's preference for the term *Untouchable,* which underscored the oppressive nature of caste discrimination rather than its sanitisation through the use of euphemism. The introductory part of the book illuminates one of the major theses–transforming the discourse of untouchability into a national political problem in the twentieth century, which shows the depth and nuance of this book. Chapter 2, titled *A Politics of Ventriloquism: The Politicisation of Untouchability in Late Colonial India C. 1900–1930*, offers a comprehensive historical account of the politics of untouchability in different phases of nationalist movement in 1900-1930. The chapter generously connected linguistic politics, an analysis of what the book brilliantly terms the *politics of ventriloquism*, the practice of colonial and nationalist leaders who claimed to speak for Dalits while marginalising their actual voices (p. 27). This concept resonates with what scholars like Spivak have termed *epistemic violence* (1988); it offers us a more politically grounded perspective that is specific to the Indian context. Cháirez-Garza demonstrates how nationalist leaders constructed Dalit identity to serve their own political agenda, arguing that Dalits were part of the Hindu community. This was only a way to claim their support even while rarely advocating the abolition of untouchability itself. Further, Cháirez-Garza also brings interesting facts about the role of colonial government and nationalist leaders where both entities depict Dalits as "living corpses', 'mute', 'dumb', and pre-political being to exclude them from politics" (p. 27). In the political marginalisation of Dalits, colonial government and nationalist leaders are often found on a similar page to understand Dalits as a 'homogenous and national category', which certainly excludes Dalits from the political realms. Against this backdrop, Ambedkar emerges

as a fierce critic who insisted that only Dalits could represent their own interests and rejected the notion that upper-caste leaders could speak for them. In his testimony before the Southborough Committee, Ambedkar explicitly challenged this ventriloquism by highlighting the significance of a separate electorate for the depressed class (Dalits) and generously arguing against the politics of Dalit appropriation and ensuring "political concern [of Dalits] could only be voiced by themselves" (p. 24). Ambedkar's insistence on authentic representation prefigures some contemporary discussions on the subject that revolve around standpoint epistemology and the politics of representation in marginalised communities. A significant contribution of this analysis is the exploration of how Ambedkar's education at Columbia University (1913-1916) shaped his approach to understanding untouchability. Cháirez-Garza traces Ambedkar's intellectual lineage through his encounters with pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and anthropologist Franz Boas, whose influence led him to reject racial explanations for caste in favour of cultural and psychological interpretations. Ambedkar dismissed racial theories of caste, asserting that the Indian population was ethnically heterogeneous, comprising various groups. From Boas, Ambedkar adopted the view that it was cultural bonds rather than racial differences that defined social hierarchies, and this allowed Ambedkar to further argue that untouchability was not a hereditary condition but a state of mind that could be changed through education and awareness. In the discourse of 'national untouchable', Cháirez-Garza bring forth most of the significant events and discourse around the transition, formation, and unification of Dalit identity–*Mahar, Namashudra, Chamar, Bhangis, Harijans* etc., which also highlight the regional and religious notion associated with the identity formation of Dalits. Besides, what is more interesting is that how Ambedkar was succeeded in raising voice for the political representation of Dalits in colonial government which he later used to protect political interests of Dalits and minorities under the shadow of World War I.

Chapter 3, *Touching Freedom: Ambedkar, Untouchability and Liberty in Late Colonial India* provides a nuanced illustration and analysis of Ambedkar's struggle and challenges to ensure liberty for Dalits in the late colonial era. Indeed, the chapter revolves around the question that 'Dalits were really free?' even Ambedkar questioned "…the end of British power in India would liberate Dalits" (p. 80). Cháirez-Garza offers one of the significant analyses of Ambedkar's political choices and preference for Dalits by highlighting that "…for Ambedkar, India's independence from the British Empire was not valuable unless the subjection suffered by Dalits was resolved beforehand and their liberty could be secured" (p. 79). It is indeed fascinating to see how Cháirez-Garza delves into tracing various facets of liberty (*swaraj*), the *Ambedkarite* vision of republican liberty, and argues untouchability as slavery. Ambedkar's political action transformed into fierce activism to compare slavery with untouchability and questioning the British law, which failed to address caste-based domination and inequality. Further, Ambedkar strongly advocated for the political participation of Dalits through the idea of a separate electorate. Ambedkar believes that the state may address inequality and arbitrary domination through special political representation. Cháirez-Garza provides comprehensive narrative of Ambedkar's position in making untouchability as problem, and Dalit's political representation as key element for their freedom and liberation; hence the chapter is completely devoted to bringing discussion between untouchability and liberty.

Chapter 4, entitled *Touching Space: The Village, The Nation and The Spatial Features of Untouchability,* explores the spatial trajectory of untouchability and highlights how social and spatial segregation reinforce and reproduce untouchability. The most original and significant contribution of *Rethinking Untouchability* is the attention to spatial dimensions of Ambedkar's thought. The book explores how Ambedkar viewed space, particularly the contrast between village and city, as fundamental to the understanding of both untouchability and the possibility of national unity (p. 117). Cháirez-Garza contrasts nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Lala

Lajpat Rai, who idealised the village as a site of democracy and authenticity, with Ambedkar, who viewed the village as a site of oppression, where untouchability was not just prevalent but institutionalised. Ambedkar perceive villages as "…a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness [and] communalism?" (p. 115). This perspective directly challenged Gandhi's vision of a village republic that the latter considered the foundation of Indian democracy. For Ambedkar, the village was not a 'little republic' but a space of exclusion that reinforced caste divisions and local particularism, hindering national unity (p. 127). However, in contrast, Ambedkar saw urban spaces as potentially emancipatory spaces for Dalits. Cities or the urban space provided anonymity and reduced the visibility of caste identities, allowing Dalits greater social mobility. Moreover, discriminatory practices were less pronounced in urban settings, and the state could enforce laws more effectively in cities. For Ambedkar, physical movement away from the village represented geographic relocation and a path to liberation from oppressive social structures.

Chapter 5–*Ambedkar and the Left: Theory and Praxis* generously offer a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Ambedkar's engagement with various political ideologies. Analysis in this chapter resists the tendency to force Ambedkar into rigid ideological categories, instead highlighting what might be called his strategic eclecticism. Cháirez-Garza notes that Ambedkar identified as neither a Liberal nor a socialist and that his thoughts cannot be easily categorised into a single ideology (p. 136). Instead, Ambedkar engaged equally with socialism, communism, and liberalism while prioritising Dalit emancipation above doctrinal purity. This analysis of Ambedkar's critique of socialism and communism is particularly insightful. While attracted to these ideologies and their emphasis on equality, Ambedkar believed that they underestimated the significance of caste in Indian society and were, hence, impractical for India. Ambedkar feared that vested interests in the caste system would hinder the unity among classes and that the abolition of private property would not resolve caste discrimination. Cháirez-Garza documents Ambedkar's labour activism, including his opposition to the Industrial Dispute Bill of 1938, which aimed to restrict the workers' rights to strike. As the leader of the Independent Labour Party, Ambedkar argued that the bill would lead to the virtual slavery of workers by criminalising strikes. Even in his labour advocacy, Ambedkar maintained a focus on Dalit issues, emphasising the importance of Dalit organisations in labour movements to ensure that their concerns were addressed.

Chapter 6, *Nobody's People: Pakistan and The Erasure of Untouchable Politics* illustrates a significant traverse of Ambedkar's political position for Pakistan and Partition, which was often changed as per the political situation of Dalits. Moreover, the chapter delves into detail about Ambedkar's priority for Dalits and his political mobilisation amidst the partition and the formation of Pakistan. One can understand Ambedkar's pragmatism through his political choices to join Nehru's administration and become chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. Indeed, Cháirez-Garza offers very critical insights into the narrative that often claims, "Ambedkar and Gandhi are reconciled on the name of nationalism" (p. 165). He argues that the changing national and international political landscape due to the influence of Partition and World War II resulted in Ambedkar's changed attitude towards Congress. Further, he also provides a detailed illustration that how Cripps Mission tried to strengthen relations with Congress and the Muslim League while excluding Dalits from the discourse. Indeed, Ambedkar was very disappointed from the colonial government's ignorance to the issues of Dalits, and he asserted that "They [the British] offer them [Dalits] nothings, stone instead of bread" (p. 171). Ambedkar called for *satyagrahas* across the country in demand to repeal the Poona Pact of 1932. Further, he emphasised the creation of separate settlements to relocate Dalits within India and make untouchability an international problem. These effort of Ambedkar shows his tireless journey and commitment to ensuring the rights to Dalits.

Chapter 7– *The Internationalisation of Untouchability c. 1939–1947*, offers a nuanced analysis to understand Ambedkar's political struggle in making untouchability international importance in the same way as one sees slavery and persecution of minorities, etc. Even the period 1939-1947 was very crucial for Ambedkar's political struggle to ensure Dalit's rights because major negotiations for the minorities, including Dalits, took place within this period. Ambedkar's meticulous effort to meet some international figures like Winston Churchill, Jan Smuts, and members of the Indian Conciliation Group helped him to make untouchability an international concern. Through these efforts, Ambedkar tries to reach out to the wider community to present the plights of Dalits. Indeed, the changing political landscape due to World War II was an opportunity for Ambedkar to draw international attention to the untouchability in which he succeeded to some extent through his series of writings. This was also a time when the partition issue was getting wider attention, which was even supported by Ambedkar under the pretext of 'the principle of self-determination' (p. 193). However, the changing political scenario due to Jinnah's demand for Muslim political parity significantly influenced Ambedkar to change his position from "the importance of self-determination towards the primacy of the minority rights on an international scale" (p. 193). Indeed, Ambedkar's vision to make untouchability an international issue intensified greatly with the proposal of the Cabinet Mission in 1946. He holds a series of conversations and writes many letters to the British government to ensure the protection of Dalits.

Rethinking Untouchability does not merely summarise Ambedkar's tireless struggle and effort to ensure the politicisation and internationalisation of untouchability in *the Conclusion* chapter but also provides a scope to see Ambedkar's vision for an equitable and just society from a different worldview. Cháirez-Garza offers a fascinating analysis of Ambedkar's vision for abolishing untouchability beyond religious and social interaction. Indeed, Ambedkar's effort was much driven towards making untouchability a national political matter and resolving issues of Dalits before India's independence. By placing Ambedkar in conversation with global debates about race, nationalism, and liberty, Cháirez-Garza demonstrates the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's ideas to the contemporary struggles for equality and dignity. As India and the world continue to grapple with the hierarchies of caste, race, and class, Ambedkar's insights, as illuminated in this thoughtful study, offer us vital resources for imagining more equitable social arrangements in the present and future. Ambedkar also re-interpreted the colonial and nationalist notion of liberty, which was compatible with the political suppression of marginalised and disadvantageous communities. Ambedkar was also very critical of Gandhi's idea of liberty in which "liberty reproduced caste hierarchies by placing those who could rule themselves above those who could not do it" (p. 215), unlike transcending liberty through access to politics and political representation. It is indeed fascinating to see how Ambedkar and his political legacy have been continued and cut across the social and political realm through various social, cultural, and political outfits in the country.

Cháirez-Garza's *Rethinking Untouchability* offers us a nuanced interpretation of Ambedkar's political thought that moves beyond reductive ideological labels. By examining how Ambedkar engaged with questions of language, race, political ideology, and space, the book provides readers with a multidimensional portrait of a thinker whose ideas continue to challenge social hierarchies. The book's central insight is that Ambedkar's greatness lay not in doctrinal consistency but in his ability to draw from diverse intellectual traditions while remaining firmly committed to Dalit emancipation. As Eleanor Zelliot noted in her pioneering work (1992) that Ambedkar's thinking was not a single coherent philosophy but a developing set of ideas focused on the problem of untouchability. *Rethinking Untouchability* extends this understanding by demonstrating how Ambedkar's thought evolved in response to changing political circumstances while continuing to maintain its emancipatory core. The work complements recent scholarship by Valerian Rodrigues in *Ambedkar's Political Philosophy:*

The Grammer of Public Life from Social Margine (2024), Aishwarya Kumar's *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy* (2015), and Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009). Additionally, Cháirez-Garza offers readers a distinctive focus on how Ambedkar's ideas about untouchability intersected with his spatial critique and his engagement with global intellectual currents. Unlike Christophe Jaffrelot's influential work (2005) that emphasises Ambedkar's relationship with Gandhi, *Rethinking Untouchability* foregrounds Ambedkar's independent intellectual trajectory and his efforts to internationalise the question of untouchability. While exploring Ambedkar's critique of the 'politics of ventriloquism' reminds us of the importance of authentic representation in political discourse, his spatial analysis challenges us to consider how physical environments can either reinforce or undermine social hierarchies (p. 212)*.* Engaging with many such debates, the book *Rethinking Untouchability* is of special interest to scholars of political theory, social justice movements, and Indian history, as it provides readers with valuable and new perspectives on Ambedkar's intellectual contributions.

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Book Review

Michael Baltutis. (2023). *The Festival of Indra: Innovation, Archaism, and Revival in a South Asian Performance*. Albany: State University of New York Press. ISBN: 978-1438493336.

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Michael Baltutis's *The Festival of Indra: Innovation, Archaism, and Revival in a South Asian Performance* is a welcome addition to studies of religion and ritual performance in South Asia and in Nepal specifically. The annual, public Indra festival in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital and urban centre, is one of Nepal's most prominent festivals. It is remarkable that this festival is only now the subject of a dedicated research monograph. Further, given that the prevailing narrative about Indra largely confines the god to Vedic texts, for Hinduism scholars and students and Hindu devotees outside of Nepal, the mere existence of a living Indra festival continues to be a source of surprise, which reinforces the importance of this study.

This book is more than the sum of its parts: a textual analysis of ancient and early medieval Sanskrit texts, a discrete historical account of 19th century Nepal, and a contemporary ethnography of a dynamic living practice. Baltutis weaves together all three to produce a textured, holistic narrative of the Indra festival as a unitary performance tradition. He is careful, however, to not characterize it as a linear survival story from the ancient period to the modern day. Rather, through a close reading of both historical texts and contemporary practices—and the significance of the gaps between or silences in them—Baltutis uncovers and examines instances of archaism, innovation, and revival, overarching themes stated in the book's subtitle. He simultaneously highlights another set of recurring themes, namely, (local) kinship and (universal) kingship, royalty and rivalry, and urban power. At the literal and symbolic centre of these discussions stands the ritual pole or *dvaja*.

In the ancient and early medieval Sanskrit textual world, the pole represented Indra, and festival activities and associations were oriented directly toward kingship. Baltutis reaches this conclusion through a close reading in Chapter One of five instances of the Indra festival in the *Mahabharata*, *Naṭyasastra*, *Visnudharmottara Purana*, *Samarangana Sutradhara*, and *Bhagavata Purana*. Departing from prior scholarship, he approaches these texts not as a group but individually, and draws out themes that he revisits in the contemporary Nepalese performance context in subsequent chapters, including *dharma*, drama, royal power, architecture, and devotion. The *Mahabharata* holds a place of primacy in Baltutis's reading because, as he argues, the *Mahabharata* begins with an account of the Indra festival and purposefully revisits the festival several times throughout the epic narrative. Further, in Chapters Six and Seven he aims to situate Nepal's living Indra festival in a larger network of living folk *Mahabharata* festivals that also include one in the Garhwali Himalaya and the Tamil Draupadi cult in south India.

Despite the central role of the pole in these earliest texts, Baltutis explains that such a pole was either never actually used much in practice in Nepal or it had fallen away as a prominent practice until the 19th century, when king Pratap Singh Shah "introduced the raising of Indra's pole into a festival classically known precisely for this singular event" (p. 120). This revival was in fact an act of innovation that "plays on the archaism of the classical festival" to bolster and reorient the festival through a presumed Vedic origin and toward the royal *darbar*, the king,

and his worship of the Kumari, the Living Goddess. He argues that this was part of a larger process promulgated by the Shah rulers who conquered and subjugated the Newar Kathmandu Valley in 1768-1769 to Sanskritize the Hindu and especially Buddhist Newar population. Baltutis examines this development in Chapters Four and Five through a close reading of two 19th century Nepali Sanskrit texts, the *Nepalikabhupa Vamsavali* (previously widely known as the *Wright Vamsavali*) and *Indradhvajotsava Kathanam*, respectively. The Shah revival of the Indra-pole-centred Indra festival conflated the city, the (Shah) king, and a universalized form of Hinduism that was rooted in and familiar to Brahmanical Indian Hinduism. In any of the aforementioned textual accounts, that this is *Indra's* festival, laden with an association to kingship, power, and victory, is clear from the many Sanskritic names given to it: *Indradhvajotsava*, *Indramaha*, *Sakramahotsava*, and *Indrayatra*, which in the Nepali vernacular becomes its widely known name, *Indrajatra*.

There is, however, one name for the festival that belies its local practice and orientation. Locally among Nepal's Newars, who are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, the festival is known as *yem yah* (*punhi*), or the "(full moon) festival of Kathmandu." That Indra as king has only a peripheral presence in local celebrations is evident in Baltutis's rich ethnographic account in Chapters Two and Three that describes the dynamic, multifaceted performance of the festival in Kathmandu. Through his participant observation of the eight-day festival ritual activities, he argues that the festival's contemporary local performance in Kathmandu focuses on death, danger, and ancestors. These themes align with many other Newar festivals, especially those leading up to the Indra festival, such as Gai Jatra, which explicitly mourns and celebrates the recently deceased. For Newars, the Indra festival celebrates the city and its divine, human, and ancestor populations. It is not the pole itself, but Indra's *mandala* or sacred region that is *around* the ritual pole that serves as a representation and recreation of Kathmandu. The main ancestral rite of the festival is the walking of the perimeter of the old city, and it is the local Bhairav Aju (Grandfather in Newar)—not a universalized Indra—who is the figure at the literal geographic and also symbolic centre of this rite. Indra's pole in Kathmandu today therefore "serves merely as a signal to the important rituals that are being performed nearby," most notably those dedicated to Bhairav and Kumari (p. 83). Baltutis teases out these various local elements to highlight the Nepalese innovations that reflect prevailing Newar orientations and practices that were steeped in Tantric practices associated with Bhairav and Kumari. While both headline their own processions during the multiday festival, Bhairav remains surprisingly understudied outside of Baltutis's own earlier work, so these elaborations on his identity, manifestations (such as the quasi-demonic dancer Lakhe), and associated practices are important contributions. Baltutis similarly explores other local Newar features of the festival and its several processions, such as the Matrka/ Ajima (Mothers/Grandmothers), and other Newar figures associated with the masked dance and processional performances, such as Indra's elephant in the local form of Pulukisi and Indra's mother Dagim (Dagi), adding to a critical corpus of Newar ethnography. Many of these central entities and pivotal ritual moments or events are also visually illustrated in more than a dozen images peppered throughout the book.

At the same time, Baltutis weaves in comparative details from other festivals in Nepal, especially other *jatras* in the Kathmandu Valley or celebrations that feature ritual poles. Most notable among these is the work of esteemed Newar anthropologist and ethnographer Gérard Toffin, who has examined and chronicled the Indra festival in the Pyangoan village (in Lalitpur district in the Kathmandu Valley) since the 1970s. Baltutis also draws examples from India, which highlights lines of continuity or patterns that exceed the confines of Kathmandu and Newar culture and religion. He is attuned to both parallels and discontinuities in practices, and also to silences in preexisting scholarship that afford opportunities to probe and rethink previous accounts of the Indra festival.

Similarly, Baltutis is attentive to the historical moment in which he conducted the initial research for this project, namely, the tumultuous end of the Maoist civil war (1996-2006) and the collapse of Nepal's 240-years-old Hindu monarchy. In the book's conclusion, he offers a necessary update on the status of the Indra festival in Kathmandu today—approximately 20 years since the fall of Nepal's Hindu monarchy—and the actors involved in its performance. This makes a further contribution in addressing religion and politics in post-monarchy Nepal. Baltutis argues that it is the dual focus on kingship *and kinship*—namely, ancestors—that has enabled the Indra festival to continue in Kathmandu without a king.

For all its important contributions to the fields of Nepali and Newar Hindu formations and festivals, South Asian performances studies, and kingship and kinship studies in South Asia, *The Festival of Indra* expects its reader to have some background in classical Sanskrit literature and scholarship, especially regarding the *Mahabharata* epic, and also of Kathmandu's geography and Nepalese religious orientations and practices. This makes the book more appropriate for scholars and more advanced students. The book would have also benefitted from two supplementary apparati: a map that visualizes the geography of the Kathmandu festival, including the forest from which the sacred pole is cut and its various processional routes, and a glossary of Newar and Nepali terms. These critiques, however, are minor and do not detract from this innovative and richly layered study of the Indra festival.

Book Review

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The entry of citizens of India regardless of caste, class, gender, and religion into Hindu temples has always been a contentious issue. While temple entry campaigns have always attracted considerable attention from the public and historians alike, the results have always been ambiguous, getting bogged down in legal niceties. Hallmark instances like the Vaikkam *satyagraha* and the Guruvayur *satyagraha* in Kerala in the first half of the 20th century yielded only partial results despite, or because of the intervention of Gandhi. Making haste slowly has been the watchword in the face of intransigent temple authorities, respect for Hindu custom, considerations of the personality of gods, and questions of the public or private nature of temples. Courts have been hesitant to rush in where conservatives fear to tread, and the idea of deferral rather than resolution has been the main feature of judgements. Or, when firm and bold decisions are made, appeals have postponed a final judgement to a future date.

The case of the pilgrimage shrine of Sabarimala in Kerala, with its presiding deity, the 'bachelor god' Ayyappan, and its annual inflow of over 6 million devotees presents some peculiar characteristics. Women between the ages of 10-50 were not allowed into the temple during pilgrimage season by custom, given the special character of the Ayyappan deity at this temple. Of course, this was not cast in stone; women had been allowed to enter the shrine during off season and some women also claimed to have entered the shrine during the pilgrimage season, their cases receiving much publicity since they were screen actors. In the case of the actor, Jayamala, she 'confessed' in 2006 that she had entered the shrine in 1987, upon which charges were brought against her. The Kerala High Court dismissed all charges against her in 2012. This book marked by acerbic wit and sparkling prose, takes up two judgements on the Sabarimala entry of women issue. The first is the 1991 *Mahendran vs Travancore Devaswam Board*, and the second, the historic 2018 *Indian Young Lawyers Association (IYLA) vs State of Kerala* which resulted in the historic Supreme Court judgement that allowed all Hindu pilgrims regardless of gender to enter the temple. Moreover, the majority decision held that the ban violated the both the right to equality and the right to freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution.

The *Mahendran* case had been occasioned by the fact that the *Rani*s of Travancore had visited Sabarimala, added to the very Indian complaint that 'wives of VIPs' too had access, so why not all women? Moreover, till 1950 it appeared that all women had been allowed. The judges KS Paripoornan and Marar decided that there was no relation between the length of a practice and legitimacy, and extended the ban to all days and deeming the ban on women an essential religious practice. As Acevedo observes, the judges preferred the prescriptive over practice and gave importance to "consistency and predictability" (p. 126) regardless of lived traditions. What was interesting was that neither the petitioner nor the court referred to religious texts, preferring the authority of *aachaaram* or customary law instead. The court decided to view "religion as a zone of citizen autonomy" (p. 127) and so despite whatever may have happened in the historical past, the temple was closed to women between 1991 and 2018. By the time the case came up before the Supreme Court, much had changed, including the idea of a more interventionist court, now committed to the idea of constitutional morality. As also the crucial

fact that in the case of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) the petitioner needed no special *locus standi* of being personally affected by the law being challenged.

In 2006, the IYLA filed a petition before the Supreme Court challenging Sabarimala's discriminatory admission practices. As Acevedo observes, the petition spent over a decade in "pleading purgatory" (p. 69), and many questions of law were ponderously mulled over. If Sabarimala were to prevent female devotees from entering the temple in violation of contemporary practices, did Ayyappan devotees constitute a religious denomination that was separate from Hinduism? Is the practice of excluding women between 10-50 years of age merely associated with Hinduism or was it essential to the Ayyappan religion? There was of course, the rule under the *Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship Act* that allowed temple authorities to exclude women at such times as they are not allowed to enter by custom and usage, a euphemism for menstruation. It was mentioned specifically in Justice Chandrachud's decision that gendered exclusion constituted a form of untouchability (p. 80). This vagueness was probably intentional due to the Constitution's ambiguity of what exactly untouchability was (p. 82). The dissenting judgement by Justice Indu Malhotra seemed somewhat behind the times on many fronts. Her argument insisted that personal standing was necessary for PILs, that the Court should stay out of religious disputes, and that the Article on untouchability was not meant to apply to Sabarimala. As Acevedo argues, Malhotra's dissent was outmoded because of the way Indian judges "have become comfortable with the idea that they and not the texts are the arbiters of religious authority" (p. 77). Rationalism and high modernism rule in the main.

This is not to say that all women were delighted by the decision of the 2018 Supreme Court. There was considerable "feminine disdain for a feminist victory" (p. 42) as the author observes. Even as individual women and organizations attempted to enter the temple in the wake of the decision and a *vanithamathil* or female wall extending 600 km along the length of Kerala was formed by women standing in a chain, many counter movements were launched amidst appeals to renaissance values and to denounce 'secularism'. 'Internet Hindus', Hindu nationalist organizations, and educated women under the banner of *#ReadyToWait* emphasized the point of view of they being "already liberated mothers" (p. 43). Meanwhile the temple adopted its own procedures of purification, with the chief priest Kandararu Rajeevaru purifying the temple after Bindu Ammini and Kanakadurga had entered the temple in January 2019. This prompted Bindu Ammini to argue that the offensive act of purification established an equivalence between female fertility and *avarna* (or in unreconstructed language, 'lower caste') status (p. 47).

This is an excellent study of a legal and social conjuncture, written with verve, and a fondly sceptical understanding of Indian legal procedures. Acevedo points to the contradictions, ironies, conservatism, and the idiosyncratic radicalism that attends on legal logic. The book would have benefited from an engagement with legal anthropology. Much of the messiness of custom, individual beliefs, and understanding of religion is set aside in concentrating on the legal angles at hand. The contingency of excluding women from worship after all arose out of a renewed patriarchal moment in Kerala where the unreconstructed male establishment felt itself beleaguered by female redefinitions of comportment, sexuality, and challenges to the occupation of public space. The irony is that despite the Supreme Court judgement, it is highly unlikely that women will enter the Sabarimala shrine in large numbers, given the inherent conservatism of the society and its institutions. And this will sit alongside the legal victory which will further promote the idea of Kerala as a progressive state.

Tous ca change…

Book Review

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Mallarika Sinha Roy's monograph *Utpal Dutt and Political Theater in Postcolonial India* is part of the series *Elements in Theater, Performance, and the Political* published by Cambridge University Press. The monograph examines the theatrical oeuvre of one of postcolonial India's most towering and illustrious playwrights, theatre directors, and actors, Utpal Dutt (1929–1993), whose career, spanning over several decades, traversed much of the spectrum of contemporary dramatic art, ranging from the alternative to the popular and the space in between. Beyond his home turf in West Bengal where he was instrumental in defining the contours of a fiercely political and at the same time remarkably popular theatre practice for generations, Dutt is unfortunately mostly remembered by a larger Indian public for his association with commercial Hindi cinema and more specifically, for the humorous and light-hearted roles he became famous for in the 1970s and 1980s.

Dutt's involvement with the sphere of mass entertainment with its (at best) dubious ideological propensities did not, however, entirely contradict his vision of a politically engaged, leftist theatre. This vision had less to do with the outlook of the experimentalist avant-garde, and had far more in common with the fervour of political agitprop, albeit being informed by meticulously thought-through, aesthetic considerations. An unapologetic 'propagandist' for transformative, leftist politics, which in the Indian context refers primarily to the communist movement, Dutt was strictly against 'intellectualizing' theatre and thus limiting its popular appeal. Hence, despite being an admirer of Brecht, he did not think the Brechtian model of epic theatre with its emphasis on activating the critical consciousness of the audience through distantiation and defamiliarization could be successfully transplanted in the Indian cultural environment. In his view, this was both because of the peculiar emotional complexion of the Indian audience and the class composition of Indian society with its staggeringly asymmetrical distribution of cultural and intellectual capital. Spectacle and melodrama, therefore, constituted crucial elements in the kind of 'revolutionary theatre' he envisaged and sought to realize in practice, at the core of which lay the dual impulses of politicizing and making affective connections with audiences.

In her monograph, Sinha Roy takes us through the trajectory of Dutt's multifaceted theatrical career, beginning with his association with Geoffrey Kendell's influential theatre company Shakespeareana in his early years, through to his brief spell with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1950s, to his longstanding involvement with the Group Theatre scene in post-independence West Bengal. Dutt came to predominate this latter scene with a series of hugely influential plays during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Amidst this all, he also had a productive spell with *jatra*, an indigenous form of traveling theatre in rural and semi-urban Bengal. The author tries to situate these attempts on Dutt's part to forge an aesthetic of political theatre in India "as a significant part of the process of decolonization" (p. 9), drawing upon Achille Mbembe's characterization of the spirit of decolonization as predicated on "an active will to community" (p. 52). In doing so, Sinha Roy foregrounds how Dutt's idea of political theatre evolved over time in response to the demands of the tumultuous political reality of

postcolonial India and West Bengal as well as to the exigencies of the embattled international situation at the height of the Cold War. She focuses on particular aspects of Dutt's work which she explores through a survey of the texts and available performance histories of some of his most celebrated plays, revolving around the questions of 'people's history', of 'revolutionary truth' as opposed to historical 'facts', of international solidarity and the necessity of 'taking sides in a history of violence', and of the gendered subaltern. This allows readers to gauge the underlying logic and recurring concerns of Dutt's otherwise vast theatrical repertoire. At the very outset of her monograph, Sinha Roy highlights the relevance of her endeavour in the light of the continuous staging of, and a resurgence of interest in, Dutt's plays in contemporary West Bengal amidst the rising tide of Hindu nationalist euphoria and its sustained offensive against the left across India.

The monograph is divided into four short chapters, each analysing specific clusters of Dutt's plays centred on connected concerns. The first, *People's History as People's Theatre*, charts Dutt's journey from his initial involvement with English-language theatre productions and particularly the plays of Shakespeare, which cast a long shadow over his dramaturgy in subsequent years, to his growing embroilment with the communist movement. Here, Sinha Roy elucidates how, as a result of this ideological embroilment, Dutt's theatre came to permanently espouse concerns about how to represent people's history in ways that would capture the 'revolutionary truth' of particular moments of resistance, revolutionary upsurge, or subaltern insurgency and in doing so, create emotional resonance with audiences.

The reader is also offered glimpses into the formation and break-up of the theatre groups with which Dutt was intimately associated, namely the Little Theatre Group and the People's Little Theatre, as well as of the chequered history of his involvement with the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s, and his subsequent self-distancing from it under political duress. The three plays Sinha Roy examines here are *Kallol* (*The Sound of Waves* 1965), based on the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy in 1946; *Ajeya Vietnam* (*Invincible Vietnam* 1966), set against the backdrop of the American aggression on Vietnam, and *Titu Mir* (1978), centred on the peasant rebellion led by the Islamic reformer Syed Mir Nisar Ali aka Titu Mir in Bengal against the British East India Company from 1827 to 1833. The author highlights the range of influences marshalled by Dutt, which informed the aesthetic strategies and stagecraft deployed in these productions as they sought to forge "a political theatre of the postcolonial contemporary for modern India" (p. 4).

The second chapter, *Theatre at the Limit of History: Critical Reflections on Political Theatre*, takes a close look at two particular plays. One of them, *Tiner Tolowar* (*The Tin Sword* 1971), is considered to be Dutt's masterpiece and is set in the backdrop of 19th-century colonial Calcutta (now Kolkata). The city of Calcutta is seen here through the lens of a fledgling professional theatre group whose class and political complacencies are about to be shaken up by an emergent nationalist political fervour. The second play the chapter analyzes is *DaNrao Pathikbar* (*Stay Passerby* 1980), based on the life of the maverick Bengali poet and playwright, Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873), whose trailblazing innovations heralded modernity in Bengali poetry. The author views these two plays as the embodiment of Dutt's simultaneous criticism of and fascination with the reformist movements that swept 19th-century Bengal or, more specifically, Calcutta, and his exploration of both the achievements and limits of their attempts at societal modernization.

These limits, the author argues, were perceived and represented by Dutt with particular reference to the women's question, with the female subject being both at the centre of and revealing the inherent patriarchal constitution and exclusionism of the much-vaunted 'Bengal renaissance'. This theme is further pursued by the author in chapter 4, *Decolonizing Feminism:*

Revolutionary Women in Dutt's Plays, in which she examines the role of female protagonists in several of Dutt's plays, focusing specifically on *Teer* (*Arrow* 1967), *Suryashikar* (*Hunting the Sun* 1971), and *Agnishajya* (*Berth of Fire* 1988). All three plays grapple with the question of women's agency both at the individual and the collective level at different moments of Indian history. According to the author, these plays demonstrate an unusual sensitivity and boldness in addressing the silences and stereotypes that obscure the experiences of women, their suffering, camaraderie, resilience, and survival in the face of oppression of various stripes. In depicting the struggle of women against both colonial aggression and ruthless patriarchal traditions prevailing in their own societies, these plays expose the emptiness of any simplistic colonizer–colonized binary within the context of the politics of social emancipation. It would have surely enriched the analysis had the author also used this opportunity to pay closer attention to the role of transformative politics and feminism in the broader struggle for decolonization, particularly given the reactionary, right-wing co-optation of the concept of decolonization in contemporary India, and other parts of the global South. This is both a conceptual and a political issue, which the monograph would have benefited from addressing. Dutt's theatrical practices indeed offer a fertile ground for an investigation of this kind, with their unequivocal investment in fostering a culture of the left popular in the context of 20th-century decolonizing South Asia.

The third chapter of the monograph, *In Love and War: Nationalism and Decolonization in Jatra*, deals with Dutt's stint with the itinerant theatre practices of *jatra* in the 1970s and 1980s. Dutt initially became associated with *jatra* as a matter of survival in a period of isolation from the group-theatre fraternity of Calcutta in the aftermath of his controversial withdrawal from the Naxalite movement. However, he soon came to realize the potential of *jatra* for connecting with large numbers of audiences and provoking their political consciousness. Involvement with the *jatra* enabled Dutt to move beyond the urban, middle-class milieu of Calcutta, and to try and inscribe his 'revolutionary intent' in a different kind of performative idiom, even while staying within the remits of its stylistic and commercial constraints. The author provides valuable information about the themes Dutt wanted to—and was allowed or not allowed to—explore within these constraints and the changes he could successfully implement. This included having "flawed subalterns" as his heroes who "were never dulled by an excess of virtue," as was the convention in *jatra* performances, "while his women characters were often bold, revolutionary and iconic […]" (p. 48).

The author elaborates on Dutt's handling of the role of gender and nationalism in the *jatra* plays (or, *pala*s, as they are referred to in Bengali) he came to write, direct, and perform in, with a specific focus on the representation of love and political violence in the *pala* titled *Sannyasir Tarabari* (*The Crusade* 1932 [a more literal translation would be *The Ascetic's Sword*]), which is set in the backdrop of the famous *Sannyasi-Fakir Rebellion* of late 18th-century Bengal. The author mentions but does not delve deeper into how Dutt's treatment of this historical theme significantly differed from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's conservative, Hindu nationalist depiction of the same period of Bengal's history in his novels *Anandamath* (1882) and *Devi Chaudharani* (1884). Pursuing this comparison could have broadened the scope of the play's analysis, particularly with regard to disaggregating the question of decolonization and demonstrating the significant differences between various ideologies and political currents that shaped the history of decolonization in South Asia.

Sinha Roy's study is an important addition to the existing and growing body of critical scholarship on Utpal Dutt in both Bengali and English. Since a comprehensive investigation of Dutt's corpus and his dramaturgy was not the book's primary objective, the classificatory strategy used by the author has given the monograph analytical coherence, even though more references to and critical engagement with scholarship on Dutt in Bengali could have further

augmented the analysis. For those unfamiliar with Dutt's works, the monograph would prove a useful resource, as it provides sufficient background and valuable summaries of the plays it examines. The notion of the 'political' in 'political theatre', however, needs more conceptual elaboration along with its relation to the competing aesthetic ideologies of the 'popular' and the 'non-popular', particularly in the context of the various leftist aesthetic radicalisms of the 20th century. A less celebratory narrative voice could also have been useful in capturing the feverishly political climate within which Dutt and his generation of ideologically committed artists operated and the risks and challenges they had to confront in making the kind of aesthetic decisions they did. It is worthwhile to mention the specific attention the monograph pays to the contemporary revivals of Dutt's plays, which attest both to their enduring relevance and to the significance of scholarly undertakings of this kind. Unfortunately, the book is riddled with copy-editing errors (Achille Mbembe is spelt as Achilles Mbembe in p. 53, to cite just one instance), which hinder the reading process considerably and will hopefully be rectified in future editions.

Book Review

Dunja Rašić (2024). *Bedeviled: Jinn Doppelgangers in Islam & Akbarian Sufism*. New York: SUNY Press. ISBN: 9781438496894

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William Blake famously wrote the following verses in his poem *Auguries of Innocence* (1988: 490): "To see a world in a grain of sand/ And a heaven in a wild flower/ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/ And eternity in an hour." Dunja Rašić's incredibly erudite study of a particular kind of *jinn*, the *qarīn* (pl. *quranā*) in the Akbarian tradition, but also beyond it, in the ample realm of Muslim cultures and societies, does precisely that. The specific 'grain of sand' that is the figure of the *qarīn*, through Rašić's meticulous and comprehensive account, allows the reader to 'see a world' that is enormously vast and complex, which she acknowledges could not be fully explored in a single book: that of *jinn* narratives in Islam. Indeed, this book offers not only a meticulous understanding of *jinn* doppelgangers, but, through it, a general view of an entire field of knowledge, that of 'jinnealogy'. To navigate this complexity, Rašić organizes her study in four chapters that guide the reader through different dimensions of the topic of the *qarīn*. The first chapter introduces the topic and defines the concept of a *jinn* doppelganger through a literature review of other Western scholars who have worked on the matter, what she calls the Islamic normative tradition and folktales. She also focuses more specifically on the Akbarian tradition which includes the works of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī and some of his followers, as well as theologians who opposed the celebre mystic's ideas. Among the most interesting distinctions of the first chapter, are those between the concept of the *qarīn* (a *jinn* doppelganger that inhabits the bloodstream of humans) and the demoness Qarīna, a character found in many folktales in the Arab world. Through distinctions like this, the author carefully delineates the specificities of the *quranā* and corrects previous misunderstandings that had overlooked the importance or even the existence of this kind of *jinn* in their sources.

The first chapter also introduces the sense and significance of *jinn* studies from an Akbarian perspective, which allows us to understand that the topic of the book is not about mere curiosity over a detail of Islamic cosmology, but rather a matter that is central to Islamic and Sufi studies. Because of the *quranā*'s position inside human bodies, their role as obstacles to spiritual advancement becomes crucial. The author describes how struggling against one's own *qarīn* becomes synonymous to the struggle against the lower soul (*al-nafs al-'ammārah*), a crucial part of the Sufi path at large. In this context, the example of prophet Muhammad, who is said to have converted his *qarīn* to Islam is of particular significance to Sufi discussions on how to deal with one's own *qarīn*. The second chapter, titled *Signs on the Horizons* is the largest in the book, and in fact occupies almost half of its total extension. The difference between this chapter and the other three in the book however creates an imbalance that can affect the reader's attention. It would perhaps have been better to divide it into two shorter chapters: one on a comprehensive description of the different kinds of *jinn* and another on the distinction between the *quranā* and the other kinds of *jinn* with which they could be confused. This chapter is all about details, but none of these details are decorative. As the author likes to wittily point out a few times: the 'devil' is in the details. The complicated distinctions between different kinds of *jinn* and the diversity of accounts about these

creatures present us with a complicated cosmology that more than doubles the number of beings that populate the world when seen from a modern secular perspective. The author describes the modern western perception of reality, often understood as a realm of abstract concepts (often moral ones), through this cosmology and through a description of physical entities with whom humans and animals establish different relationships. This is crucial in the case of the *qarīn*, because rather than the inner struggle of an individual, the presence of this kind of *jinn* in the human bloodstream implies an inner struggle between two beings. The third chapter of the book, *The Devil Within* elaborates on what is perhaps the most important characteristic of discussions on *jinn* doppelgangers: its connection to the theological and philosophical problem of evil. One of the most important characteristics of Ibn 'Arabī's thought is his understanding of humans as a microcosm, which he also refers to as the Great City (*al-madīna al-kubra*) with the heart (*qalb*)at its centre. This representation is important moreover because it facilitates a description of relationships that are involved in the spiritual struggle in spatial terms: "A *qarīn* is said to reside in the heart- together with the soul, spirit, and, possibly, God Himself" (p. 82). Thus, it is possible to visualize the spiritual struggle of a Sufi Seeker in terms of a conquest of the heart, and the *qarīn*'s work against this struggle can be perceived as the veiling of the heart. This representation also requires us to make a distinction between *actants* of this struggle: the body, the soul (*nafs*), and the spirit (*ruh*). First, in the author's account, it becomes clear that the body is more than a scenario for an otherwise abstract struggle. There is a spiritual dimension to physical practices or, rather, a physicality to matters that we could imagine as purely spiritual. The distinction between *ruh* and *nafs* is crucial. The spirit (*ruh*) is of divine origin and in Ibn 'Arabī's conception, "it can either succumb to the darkness of the gross matter or turn to the Divine light" (p. 84). What determines this fate, and where free will can be seen to function in this struggle, is the soul (*nafs*) in all its complex and multidimensional character. Here, the *qarīn* becomes relevant again for its relationship with the lower soul, a relation so enmeshed that the two could be confused with each other. However, the author clarifies that Ibn 'Arabī did distinguish the lower soul as an integral part of humans as separate from the *qarīn*, which is another being inhabiting the body. It is more accurate to say, rather, that the lower soul and the *qarīn* are partners in the act of tempting us to do evil acts.

Having explored the importance of *jinn* doppelgangers to understand the problem of evil from an Akbarian perspective, chapter four, *The Red Death* deals with the spiritual struggle against evil. This implies an engagement with the Sufi concept of the annihilation of the self, which the author explores through the specifically Akbarian classification of four deaths that the Seeker must experience to achieve union with God: the White Death (hunger), the Black Death (patience), the Green Death (poverty), and finally, the Red Death (the final killing of the *nafs*). One of the most interesting aspects of studying this struggle is an understanding of the *qarīn*'s positive role: "The evil ego and vices both serve to remind humans of their Lord. If it weren't for them, the human spirit would fancy itself the ruler and sustainer of the soul. A qarīn's presence is another reminder that humans have limited control over their minds and bodies" (p. 106). This perspective is fundamental to an understanding of why evil actions and their instigators respond to God's will, and how one is supposed to deal with one's *qarīn*. Throughout the book, the author repeatedly emphasises that Ibn 'Arabī as well as other Muslim and Sufi thinkers saw the existence of *jinn,* including evil *jinn*, as part of God's will. This means that *jinn* play an important role in God's perfect plan, and that humans have a responsibility to find the best way to deal with them. In this chapter, Rašić elaborates more on this point. Two actions illustrate the importance of the existence of evil and the beings or dimensions of the soul that instigate it: the act of overcoming temptation, and the act of repentance. These would not be possible if there were not temptations to struggle with. The

author illustrates different aspects of this struggle with several key references in Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Revelations of Mecca).

The book closes with a quote from a much earlier mystic, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, that illustrates how Ibn 'Arabī approached the problem of evil with all its specificities as something that was rooted in the larger Sufi tradition. Rašić's study of *jinn* doppelgangers is a wonderful contribution to specialists in Islamic studies, who now have a comprehensive account of this matter and the discussions around it at hand. At the same time, the book can also be of great interest to a wider audience who, through its clear prose and detailed explanations, can approach the richness of Islamic cosmology and the complexity of Sufi theologies without much background knowledge.

References

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Book Review

Ahonaa Roy. (2022). *Cosmopolitan Sexuality: Gender, Embodiments, Biopolitcs in India*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 253. Price $110.00. ISBN: 978-1108490443 (hardcover).

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In the book *Cosmopolitan Sexuality*, Ahonaa Roy, professor at IIT Mumbai, provides us with an ethnography of the everyday reality of the *hijra* community in Mumbai and Pune that is conducted from a biopolitical perspective. The author draws on an entire bibliographical repertoire on biopolitics to discuss the different ways in which capitalism brings forth a specific dynamics of exploitation of the body. Roy mobilizes the idea of embodiment, according to which a cultural and bodily dialogue is necessary for the development of an individual's identity. She specially focuses on the way beauty standards impose themselves on the community studied, ultimately creating a new normative order from which the *hijra* modify their bodies. For Roy, Mumbai *hijras* place themselves in a position beyond traditional values as they seek legitimacy in a world of consumerism and beautification techniques.

Based on a 16-month ethnographic approach conducted in 2008, 2009, and 2013, Ahonaa Roy establishes a multi-site investigation in the urban areas of the state of Maharashtra. Roy argues that a transgression of social norms is a means for *hijras* to construct a narrative process that relates the society to the environment. As such, the author believes that the rejection of universal norms of power, particularly in the case of the *hijra*, creates a particular aesthetic: one that is a product of lived experiences, of the notion of personhood and of shared intersubjectivity. The urban environment plays a central role in shaping social and sexual relations. Here, the body is revealed as the target of a strategy for manipulating a power that is constantly being challenged. The transgression of 'transgenderism' therefore consists of two central elements: symbolic representation, and the meaning of the ambivalences in the male versus female differentiation. The act of becoming a transgender is rooted, in this perspective, in a reflection on collective identity that is both the consequence of certain practices and discourses, and in the way of asserting one's agency. In the case of Mumbai, this is transformed into a new conception of citizenship, giving rise to a new social condition in which the space of the city is mobilized, while also intensifying neoliberal ideology of supposed universal equality through values such as democracy and globalization.

In the second chapter, the author recounts her own insertion into the field, especially in a Mumbai slum, through the network of NGOs operating in the region. Here, Roy examines how the neoliberal market in a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai generates sexual desire. In this sense, sexuality is the product of several cultural processes, resulting in a negotiation between identity and subjectivity, given the different bodily representations that are available in this environment. Desire is then a social phenomenon that emerges from today's market economy. As in the case of transgender persons in the West, Ahonaa Roy argues that the beauty and recognition of the *hijra*'s body depends on a capitalist logic of control through the eroticization of the latter. This way of monitoring and oppressing transgender bodies traverses an *anatomo-politics* (p. 49) of the human body. The quest to achieve a specific body model is carried out through the internalization of bodily practices that bring meaning not only to the body as a material artifact, but to the individual as a subject. With sex work at the heart of her interlocutors' daily lives, Roy suggests that sex work incites a new regime of perceived beauty

through the wearing of Western clothing, which, in turn, might induce the pleasure of local masculinity. In this sense, the embodiment of feminine signs generates attractiveness while concealing traits of masculinity. This process, also conceived as *beautification*, relies on three elements: the production of attractiveness and the resulting economic profit; the ability to integrate the body into a capitalist economic system; and prostitution as a means of subsistence. Urban space manifests itself as a cosmopolitan space, enabling a *democratic sex appeal* (p. 54).

One of the most popular practices among *hijras* is breast implant surgery. As breasts are considered as a strong sign of femininity, those who have them can demand higher prices for their sexual services. The result is a new representation (and normativity) of the *hijra* body. Consequently, in the third chapter, the author traces the path taken by some of her interlocutors to highlight the way in which their social relations cross their bodies, and form new mechanisms for expressing power. Breasts, for example, can become the epicentre of power negotiations. Roy illustrates the case by observing a scene in which a mafia leader meets one of her interlocutors, Leela, and she mentions her new breasts in order to demonstrate her own power. The man asks her to support for a friend of his, who, having lived in Canada, wants to bring his son back to India. The *hijra* in question offers him a helping hand through her contacts in Delhi, in the hope that he will be able to return her favour in the future. The dynamic of exchange structures the relationship between the *hijra* and the mafia leader. However, the contact between the two actors in this negotiation is made through their bodies. In this particular scene, Leela's breasts become a signifier of erotic femininity, confirming the *hijra*'s legitimacy in the face of the mafia leader. Leela's claim to power within the mafia, while playing with her own feminized body, consolidates a sense of power, as well as political authority.

The *hijra*'s encounter with violence is not just something that affects them tangentially, though. Violence, in fact, becomes a central part of their world and even invades their kinship relationships. Traditionally, a *hijra* must never contradict or confront her *guru*. Their relationship must be based on reverence and respect, especially shows by the *cela* (disciple) for her *guru* (master). Ahonaa Roy describes an anecdote from her field when a *hijra* argued with the *guru* and even assaulted the latter. The *guru* in question was known locally for the violence she embodied; being accused of having already killed several *hijras*, and even confronting the local mafia. This *hijra guru* had demanded a monthly payment of 10,000 rupees (around 107 euros/ 120 US dollars) from her disciple. The latter rebelled against her superior and assaulted her both verbally and physically. This episode illustrates Roy's argument that power intertwines coercion and force, revealing itself to be a Gramscian enterprise directed at dominating of a political and cultural structures: in this case, the *hijra* kinship network. From this perspective, the power embodied in the internal relations of the *hijra*'s cultural structure seeks to propagate its own political regime, and does so through means of violence, particularly symbolic violence. The violent *guru* thus personifies a regime of power that defies the dominant political authority of the state. In other words, it challenges a structure that reverberates with masculine power, the state itself.

The fourth chapter relates the *hijra* to their sexuality. Analysing the dargah festival *(urs)* of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, in Ajmer, Rajasthan –which Mumbai *hijras* regularly attend— Ahonaa Roy highlights the link between *hijras* and other non-heteronormative gendered and sexual performances, such as the dargah priests (*khadim*). Roy argues that homosexuality is subtly practiced by *khadims* as well. Although they normally have a family and several children, they also seek sexual partners outside the family home, that includes in the environs of the *dargah*. This close relationship between *hijras* and *khadims* is forged over time primarily because of the presence of non-heteronormative identities within certain contexts that eventually enable the development of romantic relationships. One of the *khadim* that Roy met

had a relationship with a *hijra* who occasionally offered him money to demonstrate her affection. The space of the dargah thus allows for the insertion of individuals acting within their own sub-cultural context in order to produce agency. Indeed, the multiple gender and sexual identities encountered in and around the *dargah* in Ajmer emphasize a semiotic dimension of performance (p. 121): the self-representation of individuals is effective. In other words, the *dargah* space features subversive performances that attract the attention and interest of the devotees by conferring them with a "sense of grandeur" (p. 122). Hence, it accomplishes the main objective of bodily display: the consumption of the image.

Addressing the relationship between body image and biopolitics, the fifth chapter is interested in arguing that the body, in a "new" India, is commodified with the aim to construct a new subjectification that is both neoliberal and medicalized. In so doing, Roy argues, drawing on theories of postmodern (and post-structural) feminism, that bodily materiality establishes a stability of gendered identities. Thus, the use of surgical techniques to modify the body enables a desired identity to become reality. In effect, there is a process of bodily display along with the act of becoming a subject. To illustrate this, the author tells the story of Anita, a middle-class transgender woman from Mumbai. She highlights how doctors imposed a surveillance on her body during her transition process. For this reason, transgender identity, which is perceived as 'transsexual' by the medical establishment, is subject to regimes of power and so-called scientific knowledge, such as psychiatry and endocrinology. These regimes serve to verify the individual's 'new' identity that requires a modification in genitalia. From another point of view, the medical milieu enables body modification through what Roy calls '*bioengineering*' (p. 149), or the technical capacity to transform the individual's body by producing a legitimate subject of both body and identity. This possibility of having access to this kind of treatment enables the mobilization of class, which is an essential identity marker. In this case, the determination of womanhood produces a symbolism not only of gender, but above all, of class. As a result, trans-identity—especially the possibility of claiming it—turns out to be an intersection between identity politics and the neo-liberalization of medical care. Subsequently, the role of identities takes on a new meaning, which the author calls 'identity-hub' (p. 159), that marks a proliferation of the medical market and the use of surgery to shape gender identity. Therefore, biopolitics becomes a decisive mechanism for identity construction.

In order to analyse the consequences of this new biopolitical regime, Roy dissects the way in which collective action, in particular action that is promoted by an associative environment intended for HIV prevention, creates new mechanisms of governance. In other words, the author seeks to demonstrate that the participation and development of a political community give rise to a decentralization of local political power. The sixth chapter testifies to an event that makes visible the way in which institutional power is diffused in the spaces of sociability and activism, such as the occasion of the World AIDS Day. During this event, the author identified the commitment of the different actors who attended it (university students, workers from local NGOs, educators, Bollywood celebrities, sex workers and journalists) against the contentious power of the State that oppresses sexual minorities. This brings to light a dynamic of participatory democracy that is contextualized in a spatial construction that brings together a range of power relations, while also creating the possibility of both a new social movements and the generation of a new Self (regarding sexual and gender minorities who participate in it), on the other. It is a radical resignification (p. 180) that demands a new discourses, and makes space for new bodily representations. In fact, this decentralization in reconstitutes skills—particularly for those who wish to work in the NGO network—that implements a reconstruction of self-empowerment through the capacity-building initiatives focused particularly on sex workers. It is then notable that there is a professionalization of the agenda through the production of knowledge, and, in return, a resignification of the role played by the actors involved in this process of participatory development.

Once the issue of space and its appropriation by sexual and gender minorities is introduced by Ahonaa Roy, the author approaches a crucial social fact that reinterprets Mumbai as a social space: cosmopolitanism. Roy considers the latter as a procedure that established reformulated relationships in a transnational style. Indeed, cosmopolitanism evokes different kinds of flows, of money, images, people, ideologies and structures. In doing so, new subjectivities are constructed by an exchange of new norms of behaviour, which Roy considers to constitute a deterritorialization (p. 200). With the liberalization of the economy in India, a new aesthetic emerges, one that is linked to overconsumption. Sexual and gender minorities belonging to the middle classes articulate a queer subjectivity and at the same time internalize international images. A global gay identity is thus formed (p. 206). The latter combines a local homosexual identity with an international gay discourse, revealing that capitalist expansion becomes a material force that causes the internalization of the so-called global gay identity (p. 206). In short, the development of cosmopolitanism in Mumbai shapes new social norms—of consumption and consequently, of aesthetic construction—implemented by the advancement of the liberalization of the national economy.

Finally, the book's postscript closes the discussion while approaching two concepts that run through Ahonaa Roy's ethnography: desire, and *gendering*. The question of desire refers to the possibility of a multiplicity of sexual identities. Roy describes it as a *transcendental symbolic signifier* (p. 227), that is outstandingly an image constructed by the performativity of gender. That being said, the act of becoming something implies a deterritorialization of the body and, consequently, a resignification of the presuppositions concerning the relationship between body and gender. The author then defines *gendering*, on the other hand, as an eternal process of becoming (p. 230). In other words, as a means to manifest and become one's gender, the subject must emancipate themself first from symbols that negate a hegemonic order of gender, notably the male versus female binarity embedded in heteronormativity. To do this, sexual and gender minorities resort to a '*technological embodiment*' (p. 229), a new model that allows for, through the adoption of values associated with capitalist expansion, a diversity of gender representations, desires, and aspirations free of body surveillance.

Cosmopolitan Sexuality constitutes an innovative contribution to the study of sexual and gender minorities in India. The author's approach, that of biopolitics, incorporates the importance of economic liberalization policies for *hijra* subjects, which has traditionally been marginalized in social sciences. However, Ahonaa Roy's writing, imbued with a vast theoretical knowledge of gender studies and political science, deprioritized her ethnography. The weight of her theoretical discussions sometimes makes invisible her fieldwork observations and experiences. Moreover, the book's structure, organized in independent chapters, makes the discussion a little redundant at times. The author ends up explaining her approach repeatedly, albeit subtly, in every chapter to justify her analyses. Nevertheless, this work remains a vital contribution to an emic interpretation of the lives of sexual minorities in a country where neo-liberalization is becoming more and more the focus of political ideology.

Book Review

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1930s and 1940s were decisive decades, not just for Germany, but for the world at large. The years witnessed, not just the Second World War and anti-colonial movements in large parts of Asia and Africa, but also the emergence of fascist forces in several parts of Europe, in Spain, Romania and Italy. This period, however, is best remembered for the emergence and spread of one of the most terrible fascist forces of the 20th century, viz., the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Known popularly as the Nazi Party, the political entity, following a long, drawn-out electoral process, came to power in 1933. Hitler, the leader of the Party, became the Chancellor. Of course, the victory of the Nazis was not bereft of treachery. They had, in order to gain political power, falsely accused the communists and minorities, including the Jews, of conspiring against the German state. And incidents like the burning of the Reichstag should be read against this backdrop. Subsequent research on the incident has, however, convincingly demonstrated that the fire was the handiwork of the Nazis, and not of the communists. The episode, if anything, highlights the desperation of the Nazi Party to win the elections of 1933. Historical studies on the Nazi period have usually focused on the rise and expansion of the Party as well as the atrocities inflicted by it on minorities that included Jews and other political opponents, like communists. While works of scholars like William Shirer (1959) and Richard J. Evans (2005) provide us an expansive view of the Nazi era, the Party, its structure as well as its workings; historians like Martin Gilbert (1999) have focused mostly on the Holocaust.. In addition, the memoirs of Holocaust survivors, as well as biographies of Third Reich leaders like Hitler's, Goebbels's, Himmler's, and Mengele's to name a few, have further enriched our understanding of this defining moment. Philosophers like Hannah Arendt have moreover added a new perspective to the study of the Nazi era.

A majority of studies on Nazi Germany have focused on certain select issues like the rise and fall of the Nazis, the atrocities perpetuated on political opponents such as the communists, the Holocaust, and the military campaigns of the Second World War. On the other hand, works analysing fascinating themes as the everyday life under the Nazis, the experiences of non-Germans visiting the region between 1933 and 1945, and the importance of medical drugs during the Nazi era, are comparatively not too many, at least not in the English language. Julia Boyd's (2018, 2022), and Norman Ohler's works (2017), are two exceptions to this that have explored these problems at length. Again, while the relations of Nazis with contemporary fascist forces in Spain, Italy, Romania and Japan, and with non-fascist countries like France and Britain (in the context of the Munich Pact in 1938), have been investigated thoroughly, their relations with countries located outside Europe have remained under-explored. North Africa and, to an extent, Argentina, are, perhaps, the only two exceptions to this. The military campaigns of Nazis in North Africa under the leadership of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel (1891–1944), and Argentina's role in providing asylum to Nazi fugitives after 1945, during the presidency of Juan Peron, have been studied extensively by scholars. A study of the incident involving the Bialystok children have, for instance, allowed historians to understand the relations between the Nazi regime and countries in Asia, particularly Palestine. Again, Mihir Bose's book (2017) is interesting in this regard. He was member of the erstwhile Kirti Party

and helped Subhas Chandra Bose to escape from India in 1941. His writing has provided important insights into the influence that the Nazis were trying to exert in Central Asia and South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province.

The address, 38/2 Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani (formerly Elgin Road) is well-known and revered in Kolkata. This is where Subhas Chandra Bose, not just lived, but also the place from where he escaped from and left India, never to return again. Bose's escape from India in 1941 and his travels to NWFP, Afghanistan, Russia (formerly USSR), Italy, and finally Germany, have been extensively documented. This, as a matter of fact, is the only connection that most lay people as well as specialists of the subject are aware of, as far as India-Germany connections are concerned. However, there was another close connection that existed between the Nazi state, German Indologists, and non-specialist knowledge providers from India. This connection has seldom been appreciated. Given the complete absence of works that are centred on this theme, Baijayanti Roy's book is quite important. Titled, *The Nazi Study of India & Indian Anti-Colonialism,* it is the first study of its kind that critically deliberates at length on the understudied theme of the political and intellectual connections between four distinct socio-political groups: a few German scholars specializing in Indian studies, non-academic 'India experts', a section of Indian anti-colonialists, and various organs of the Nazi state.

Divided into four chapters (and an Introduction and Conclusion), Roy's book examines diverse ways in which different knowledge systems pertaining to India, especially those concerning the colonization of the country and the anticolonial movements therein, were used by individuals belonging to the aforementioned groups within several German organizations to fulfil the demands of the Nazi state. The four chapters may be read as four case studies, each shedding light on the workings of four organizations which, as the author notes, incorporated the complex relationship of knowledge and power. While the first case pertains to the India Institute of the *Deutsche Akademie*, alternatively, DA or German Academy, the second case study focuses on the *Sonderreferat Indien* (SRI), or 'Special Department India'. The remaining two chapters or cases are centred on *Auslandswissenchaften* or 'study of the foreign countries', and 'India experts', respectively. The 'India experts' belonged moreover to an organization known as the 'Indian Legion' or the 'Tiger Legion'. The Legion, it may be mentioned, was established by Subhas Chandra Bose, with the help of the German Armed Forces or *Wehrmacht*. Together the four case studies shed light on little known facets of the Nazi regime, not least the so-called intellectual aspects. That the primary objective of these four organizations was the deployment of knowledge about India beneficial for Nazi politics, has been demonstrated quite convincingly by the author.

Through these organizations and concepts, the Nazis were trying to, not only disseminate fascist ideology and increase Nazi influence in India, but also inciting Indians to rise in armed rebellion against the British colonial state. The founding of these four organizations suggests that despite its strong anti-intellectualism, Nazi leadership did repose trust, albeit to a limited extent, in research scholars, not least those who had obtained doctoral degrees and *Habilitation*s. This, rather unusual exception stemmed from, as Roy notes, the "residual prestige associated with the university as a signifier of cultural capital in German society" (p. 9). This, as a matter of fact, was the primary reason which drove Hitler's trusted aides, including Heinrich Himmler, Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels, to appoint doctoral research scholars, including those from India, to prestigious and 'high' positions in pseudo-scientific research organizations like *Ahnenerbe*, as well as to academic councils and in various university courts. Given the limited academic knowledge of the Nazis, it is not surprising that between 1933 and 1945, scholarly profiles were considered more important than actual scholarship. The 'India experts' consisted of academics as well as non-academics. In fact, as Roy notes, the Nazis were quite practical when it came to using the services of these people.

This is attested by the fact that individuals belonging across the rightist as well as leftist political spectrums were part of the 'India experts' group. As is known, all the shades of leftist politics were anathema to the Nazi world view. Moreover, organizations ignoring the racial policies of the Nazis and according Indians different resources, was also a reflection of Nazi pragmatism. And of course, only those Indians who could satisfactorily demonstrate their use as knowledge providers were 'hired' by Nazi organizations. Noticeably, in none of the four organizations discussed here, do women ever figure. Nazis, it seems, never perceived women as experts on India. The French-born Greek citizen, Savitri Devi (1905-82), was, perhaps, the only exception to this rule. However, this self-proclaimed 'India expert' who studied the twin concepts of Hindu revivalism and Aryanism from a Nazi perspective was never part of any of the four organizations that Roy examins. Women were considered intellectually inferior by Nazis, and were hence marginal to the Nazi worldview, with a majority them being perceived as children-producing machines, primarily responsible for giving birth to male offsprings who would carry forward the Aryan legacy of Nazi Germany. Though there were young women, many of them part of the Hitler Youth, who, following the implementation of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question (1942), actively took part in the annihilation of Jews, Communists, Roma and Sinti people, they chiefly worked as barrack commanders, SS overseers (SS-*Aufseherin*), and as medical nurses.

Baijayanti Roy's work reveals that the members of the organizations concerned with India, namely, India Institute of the *Deutsche Akademie*, 'Special Department India', 'India experts', and institutes where *Auslandswissenchaften* was conducted, employed various ways to please their fascist masters and, at the same time, to propagate Nazi ideology. Conducting workshops, seminars, special lectures, conferences, and publishing 'research papers', and booklets and pamphlets, were ways through which the propagandists sought to achieve their objectives. And, as the book shows, Indians as well as senior Nazi 'intellectuals' and leaders, participated regularly in these exercises. Among others, the academic activities of Taraknath Das, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Karl Haushofer, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, Walther Wüst, Ludwig Alsdorf, Abid Hasan, Abdul Rauf Malik, and A.C.N. Nambiar, have been discussed at length by the author. The list shows that as far as the Indian side was concerned, scholars, not just from the Right, but also from the Left participated in fairly large numbers in the activities of the four organizations. Of these, only the India Institute was established in the pre-Nazi era; the remaining two were founded during the reign of Hitler. While the India Institute of the *Deutsche Akademie* was active since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the 'Special Department India' and 'India experts' group was founded between 1933 and 1945. The latter two, in fact, were the brainchild of none other but the Indian anti-colonial activist and political fugitive, Subhas Chandra Bose. The India Institute of the *Deutsche Akademie* and the concept of *Auslandswissenchaften* were primarily concerned with cultural aspects. The institution as well as its idea were responsible for spreading German influence in India. These also played an important part in inculcating nationalist and anticolonial sentiments. As part of this project, the Institute invited eminent public and intellectual figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, and C.V. Raman. While both of them continued to exist, their character underwent a discernible change under the Nazis. The India Institute for instance, as Roy notes, was used as a propaganda tool by the Nazis. The non-political nature of this organization was used extensively by fascist forces to further their ideology. At the same time, it was also being used to conduct espionage in British India by "using different Indian religious sects, particularly certain Hindu revivalist groups and individuals, as conduits" (p. 14). Through a study of rare correspondence and archival documents concerning German Indologists, Indian nationalists, and Nazi agents who acted as go-betweens, the author has examined the evolutionary history of interactions that took place between Nazi politics, Indian nationalist aspirations, and Hindu revivalism. The idea of *Auslandswissenchaften*, likewise, was in vogue since the days of the Wilhelmine Empire (c. 1890-1918). Prior to the beginning of *Machtergreifung,* or the Nazi consolidation of power,

Auslandswissenchaftlichen or the study of foreign countries was taught primarily in German institutes such as the Oriental Seminar of Berlin, which was founded in 1887 due to the colonial ambitions of the German Empire. With the rise of Hitler and his deputies, the concept was elaborated upon. And thus, between 1933 and 1945, in addition to the Oriental Seminar of Berlin, studies on India were introduced and taught at various other institutes and faculties, including those founded by the Nazi regime, like the Academy for the Study of Foreign Countries or *Auslands Hochschule* (1936), and the Study of Foreign Countries or *Auslandswissenchaftlichen Facultät* (1940). The latter was a faculty that was part of the University of Berlin. A research organization by the name *Deutsches Auslandswissenschchaftliches Institut* was also established for the study of foreign countries in 1940. Importantly, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) almost totally controlled the aforementioned faculty as well as the organization. The fact that the intelligence wing of the Nazis supervised the workings of these bodies, shows the keenness of incumbent authorities to gather as much information as possible about their allies and foes.

While these organizations studied several foreign countries, including those in Asia, Africa, and Europe, Roy's monograph, as expected, focusses almost entirely on India. Roy examines the diverse ways in which the 'living' knowledge of India was disseminated in Nazi Germany. Apart from other facets, an important point that the author further makes is that from 1933 onward, teaching posts for India related subjects, including various Indian languages, were increasingly offered as soft jobs and as 'rewards', particularly for those individuals who were perceived as being capable of offering politically relevant knowledge concerning India and Indians, which could be used by the different arms of the government. Amusingly, the Nazis adopted this method despite the fact that India-related subjects were the least popular in the German institutes. Again, teaching Indian languages and subjects was not the exclusive purview of Indian intellectuals. A noticeable number of German scholars were also capable of teaching these subjects, and were employed in the faculties of Indian studies in various universities.

Baijayanti Roy's *The Nazi Study* suggests that with the arrival of Bose in Germany in 1941, a new phase in the history of these institutions began. While a new fervour was palpable among members of the 'India Institute' as well as teachers teaching Indian subjects and languages in the two new departments, the 'Special Department India', and the 'Indian Legion'. Also known as *Sonderreferat Indien* or SRI, the 'Special Department India' was established by the Nazi Foreign Ministry at Bose's behest. The latter was keen to gain military support from the Nazis to combat the British Indian government. Bose experimented with German military policies and tried to mould it to, and replicate it in India. And significantly, the Nazis were quite willing to support Bose in his endeavours. Of course, the support, as the book suggests, was not out of any love for Bose. Rather, through such an organization, the fascist regime was primarily trying to produce 'politically effective' knowledge regarding India. SRI noticeably provided a platform of convergence between Nazi foreign policies and the Indian anti-colonial movement.

The 'Indian Legion' or 'Tiger Legion' was, as mentioned, the brainchild of Subhas Chandra Bose. The group primarily consisted of select volunteers consisting of the Indian prisoners of war (POW). These POWs, Indian soldiers, had fought against the Nazis, led by Erwin Rommel (also known as the Desert Fox), and on behalf of the British Indian government in North Africa. Numbering to around 3,500, these volunteers acted, we are informed, as interpreters of the 'Indian Legion'. Given Bose's desire to integrate the Legion into the *Wehrmacht*, training Indian soldiers in German military tactics became a prerequisite. In this regard the role of Indian POW interpreters was indeed critical. Among other issues, an important point that Roy makes, is with regard to the social status of ordinary Indians in Nazi Germany. Indians, despite the fact that they were able to get sinecures, and went out of their way to appreciate the Nazis and

their ideology, were subjected to insults and humiliations by elite Germans as well as the country's media. Perceived as an inferior 'race' and as non-Aryan, Indians on many occasions were subjected to derogatory remarks. Besides the reduction in the number of Indians in the academic institutes, large scale protests by students were staged against the mistreatment of Indians in Nazi Germany. While Bose objected to this attitude of the Nazi elite towards Indians, his objections were not treated seriously.

Roy's study makes it evident that Bose, rather than being a critical figure, was marginal to the political worldview of the Nazis. So, while he was allowed to set up the Free India Centre (FIC) in Berlin in 1941, which comprised communists, anti-colonialists as well as members of the Indian Students' Association, it remained under the control of the SRI, which was a body associated with the Foreign Ministry. And SRI, in the same year, in 1941, was placed under Wilhelm Keppler, a trusted aide of Hitler, Himmler and Ribbentrop, and an important member of the SS. Likewise, Bose's persistent demand to establish a provincial Indian government in Berlin was never met by the Nazis. Hitler's personal and political worldview was largely responsible for this, in that he abhorred the Indian anti-colonial movement and wanted to come to an understanding with England. Significantly, despite the fact that Hitler disliked Mahatma Gandhi and looked down on his ideals of non-violence and *satyagraha,* the regime made it clear to Bose and his comrades that the apostle of peace, who was perceived as the legitimate face of Indian nationalism by the British colonial state, was never to be criticized directly in German propaganda. This was yet another way in which the Nazis tried to come to an understanding with the British. Even though Bose and his men went out of their way to please the Nazi regime, and regularly endorsed rabidly anti-Bolshevik and pro-Nazi pamphlets like *Bhaiband* or *Brotherhood*, also referred to as *Kamerad* or *Comrade* in German, the Indian anti-colonial activist was seen by Nazi leadership as a nuisance, to say the least.

Deftly written, Baijayanti Roy's book is an important academic intervention. Going beyond the oft-discussed themes of the relations between the Nazis and the Indian right wing organization, the *Hindu Mahasabha*, the study sheds important light on several little-known factors concerning Nazi 'intellectualism'. Through lengthy discussions on the active participation of Indian intellectuals in the racial and anti-minority projects of the Nazis, Roy is able to convincingly demonstrate the close relationship between Nazi Germany and India. That German intellectuals, between 1933 and 1945 employed diverse ways, including the study of Hindu religious texts like the *Bhagavad-Gita*, from the Nazi perspective, this was only to make German racial policies acceptable to Indians, and in the process broaden the political base of Nazis. This aspect has been brought out quite well in the present work. The rare set of archival photographs in the book, provide us not only with a rare glimpse into the lives of lesser known Nazi officers, but also shows us how comfortable Indian intellectuals and anti-colonial activists like Subhas Chandra Bose were in the company of the Nazi merchants of death, including among others, Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels. Roy's book, given its jargon-free language, will be of interest to more than one type of audience, and include specialists of the subject, as well as enthusiasts of history.

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Book Review

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The word chastity is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the state of not having sex with anyone or only having sex with the person you are married to', and from this definition, sex outside wedlock is considered a key criteria that defines chastity in modern times. However, the situation was different in ancient India, according to Oly Roy, whose book shifts the focus to 'male consent' by identifying it as a key criteria to define a woman's chastity in ancient Indian society. The book comprises six chapters besides an introduction and a conclusion, and author critically engages with "a collection of narrative literature from ancient India… to understand the social facet related to the' central theme, i.e., chastity" (p. 2). Her analysis highlights the role played by narrative texts in convincing people to "follow what the authority of various traditions wanted the society to pursue' by conquering their minds and also by telling 'the audience about the laws and customs of the society that should be followed" (p. 136). While the narrative literature (*Maha-Puranas*, epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Hala's *Sattasai*, and the Buddhist Jatakas) developed an image of an ideal married woman by making chastity an integral part of her life, this book argues that this image of an ideal married woman was socially constructed by upper caste males, predominantly, brahmins in ancient India.

We are told that the man "played a major role in forming the ideology of chastity and maintaining it" (p. 61), and that the status of a woman's chastity depended on the degree of her husband's control over her body and mind. A married woman's body belonged to one man (p. 27), and a chaste (*pativrata*) woman was expected to always think and be interested "in the welfare of her husband" (p. 66). In addition, "it was also important for her to give birth to a son", and according to Oly Roy, the "welfare of the husband was supposed to be the sole purpose of' a chaste woman's life" (ibid.). The "entire concept of *pativrata* is spun around the institution of marriage, which was patriarchal in nature" (p. 67). Contrary to a chaste woman, a *vesya* (prostitute) was an independent woman: someone, who could have multiple "sexual relationship out of her own choice. Such a woman could live without her husband and was not dependent on any male counterpart" (p. 73). And like *vesya*s, *apsaras* (celestial damsels) too were considered "public women as they were denied marital status by the gods and the demons" (p. 41). In view of the author, both *vesya*s and *apsara*s, who were 'independent' women, "challenged the norms of society, and thus degrading and demeaning their character was the only way to control them" (p. 73). Owing of her ability to decide on her own body, a *vesya*—and also an *apsara*—were characterised as the anti-thesis of a chaste woman in early Indian literature.

Seemingly, if a woman indulged in a sexual act with another man, but with her husband's consent, primarily for progeny, then she was still considered chaste (*pativrata*), according to ancient Indian Brahmanical tradition (p. 50). Giving birth to a son was not only expected from a woman, but a man too required a son to continue his lineage (p. 137), and therefore, wives were supposed "to do what their husbands tell them to do, even if it meant going to another man for progeny" (p. 56). To support her proposition, Oly Roy cites several examples from the Indian epics and the *Maha-Puranas*. For instance, Pandu, who "could not get sexually involved

with his wives, Kunti and Madri, due to a curse," allowed his wives to have sons from other men, who were male divinities (pp. 57, 59). However, if a woman engaged in a sexual act with another man or with a sage or a divinity willingly or unwillingly, but without her husband's consent, then she was seen as a fallen woman, and the story of Ahalya in the *Ramayana* is an example of this. Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama, was violated by Indra. Indra disguised himself as sage Gautama and copulated with Ahalya, and when Gautama came to know of it, he cursed his wife and called Ahalya unchaste (*dushta chaarineem*) (p. 60). Another example cited by the author is of the *Ramayana*'s female character Sita, who was made to undergo a fire-ordeal (*agnipariksha*) to prove her purity of mind as well as of character. Since she had been abducted by Ravana against her will, Sita stayed under the control of another man without her husband's consent, and therefore, Sita's chastity was subject to social scrutiny (pp. 32-33). Not only during her husband's lifetime, but a chaste woman was expected to remain under her husband's command even after his death. She was made to prove her loyalty to her dead husband either by committing *Sati* (self-immolation), or by living a life devoid of all sensual pleasure. Widow remarriage was despised, and the *Skanda Purana* "prescribes a widow not to speak or listen about sexual matters or to look at a man with impious intention" (p. 74).

Caste too played an important role in shaping the definition of chastity in the writings of the brahmin authors of the *Maha-Puranas*. In Oly Roy's words: "The hierarchical structure of the society was maintained through women, and thus maintaining the purity of the first three *varnas* was a matter of great concern within the Brahmanical tradition" (p. 67). According to the author, a woman's body was an instrument through which caste identity and purity was ensured. The concept of chastity is argued to have been "a vigorous attempt… to stop women from forming any union with men of lower caste" (pp. 50-51). In case, a man fails to give birth to a child due to impotency or any other reason, then with his consent, his wife could copulate with another man of brahmin caste or any divinity for progeny. However, such copulation with a man of a lower caste (e.g., a shudra) was strictly condemned. In the epics and the *Maha-Puranas*, a woman's body was transformed into a symbol of purity and honour of a community. She was considered to be the pivotal agent in maintaining the balance of social stratification, and therefore, the concept of chastity was defined along the caste lines. This implies that the upper class/ caste women could either be chaste or unchaste, but the same was not the case for lower class/ caste women (or shudra women). They were invariably branded as unchaste (p. 14). For instance, Rama and Lakshmana in the *Ramayana* had been mostly self-restrained in their behaviour towards women, but their conduct towards Surpanakha, a Raksasi, is morally unacceptable. According to Roy, it "reflects how the Brahmin-dominated society became intolerant towards" people who did not follow their conventions (p. 42).

In her discussion on chastity based on legends and stories contained in the epics and the *Maha-Puranas*, the author particularly underlines the question of brahmin privilege, and we are told that in most of the stories present in the *Maha-Puranas*, "the husband sends his wife to a brahmin" to obtain a progeny (p. 92). Privileges enjoyed by brahmins in the case of adultery are further glaringly visible in one of the several stories of the *Maha-Puranas* that describe the liberation of an adulterous woman, owing to her indulgence in sexual acts being associated with a brahmin man (p. 94). In Oly Roy's words, these stories in the *Maha-Puranas* clearly show that "the caste of the partner with whom a woman is involved in the 'illicit' relationship determined the code of conduct towards the offender" (pp. 94-95). Furthermore, "women are portrayed as 'fickle', 'ungrateful', 'treacherous', 'insensible', transgressing every law, shameless, and acting according to their desires" (p. 22) in Buddhist literature (Jatakas). And yet, according to Buddhist traditions, a woman could attain spiritualism without getting married. Contrary to this principle, Oly Roy writes that the epics belonging to Brahmanical

tradition mostly portrayed the salvation of female ascetics, for instance, of Sabari, and Ahalya in the *Ramayana,* to be made "possible only through a man", i.e., Rama (p. 40).

In brief, the book under review has successfully shown the role of narrative texts in the creation of a male-centric definition of the expression of chastity that privileged male consent over a woman's will in her everyday domestic life in ancient India. The book enables the reader to enter into a complex world of ancient Indian myths and legends and acquire an in-depth understanding of a multilayered discourse on chastity as well as its divergent precepts, its practice and portrayal in early Indian literature. This book authored by Oly Roy is a valuable addition to the gender studies in particular, and to studies on ancient Indian society in general, and it will be useful for students as well as researchers.

Book Review

Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Mirashi-Barak (eds.) (2023). *The Routledge Companion to Caste and Cinema in India*. London: Routledge. Pp. xviii+440. Price: $298. ISBN 9781032160993. Hardcover.

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To state this right at the outset, this is a very important volume. Any serious attempt to sensitise people for forms of discrimination and inequality involves *Shifting the Gaze*, as the *Introduction* by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak is titled (pp. 3-14). The two editors make it clear straight away that in order to make visible and bring to consciousness the invisibilized and denied, it is actually not one, but two shifts that are required. The first is learning to see and to acknowledge the discrimination at all. This is still comparatively easy compared to the second shift, namely learning to see that this discrimination is not simply a problem of the discriminated, i.e. of 'others', but intrinsically implies the self. If one has to learn and see discrimination in the first place, it invariably means that one has not experienced it. And as an ignoramus, one is likely a discriminator, if not a direct perpetrator. To realize this personal implication in various forms of inequality and injustice, however, appears to be more actively and loudly rejected today than at any other point in history. One can safely assume that this is because never before have more discriminated people claimed their rights to equality so vehemently. At the same time, as Olúfémi O. Táíwo reminds us (2022), both the claim of being discriminated against and the politics of anti-discrimination have never before been more skilfully appropriated by political and corporate power.

The practice of caste is probably the most entrenched form of structural discrimination in various societies and communities of South Asia. Concurrently, the historically most influential medium on the Subcontinent—cinema and the film industry—has hardly been the ideal field to help generate a critical visualisation of caste and caste politics. As one of the key cultural institutions of modern India, it continues to grossly marginalise filmmakers and actors/actresses from the *Dalit-Bahujan* communities (former 'Untouchables'—the majority of the lower castes). But cinema has also been a central historical agent in concealing and reproducing caste hierarchies. Particularly under the current Hindu-nationalist government, moreover, the medium finds new ways of 'othering', appropriating, denying, or reinforcing caste to the advantage of the *Savarna* ('twice-born') castes. Crucially, this Companion's editors Abraham and Misrahi-Barak extend this problematic to the scholarship on Indian cinema as they open up the volume to readers with a reflexion on their own editing process. They ended up declining a number of proposed contributions that had assumed this to be a compilation of 'Dalit cinema' or 'Dalit representation in Indian films' and whose 'misreading of the call was symptomatic of the way one can easily forget that caste exists for everybody living in India' (p. 3). It is equally crucial in this context that readers are presented here with the format of a Companion (rather than a Handbook), which reflects an evolving, critical field of research. While much can be said about Routledge publishing (and I will return to that below), the anthropomorphic companion, less than a friend and more than a stranger, unfolds an innate capacity in taking its readers—at times sober and patient, at times angry, and at times enthusiastic—to confront and engage with the 'actual' visibility of caste in Indian cinematic productions.

Before I introduce the book more structurally, let me give you some examples of the sensitisation of the gaze that the Companion enables. A film that is repeatedly centred across the eight thematic sections and the 29 chapters of the book is *Article 15* (2019), directed by Anubhav Sinha. A mainstream Hindi production that ran internationally on Netflix and won critical acclaim, *Article 15* refers to the respective article in the Indian constitution which guarantees a citizen the fundamental right to equality by prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or birthplace. The plot line of the film revolves around a young police officer, Ayan Ranjan, who was elite-educated in the capital New Delhi and abroad. On his return to India, he is posted to a remote village, where his very first task turns out to investigate the gang rape and murder of two Dalit girls and the kidnapping of a third missing Dalit girl (the film is based on a true incident). Ayan is thus thrown into an environment that is depicted as rural, traditional, caste-ridden, and utterly unrelated to his own urban background, which comes across as progressive, liberal, and caste-free/ post-caste. In her historiographic analysis, Debjani Banerjee, in chapter 5 (pp. 79-90) sets an affirmative and pragmatic frame. She understands the movie itself to function like a companion that leads the likely caste-blind mainstream audiences along with its protagonist Ayan, through a successive 'unmasking of upper-caste privileges' (p. 87). Indeed, this perspective—perhaps not coincidentally placed early into the book—appears at first to go all the way towards 'shifting the gaze' and marks, as such, an important contribution. Subsequent chapters, however—notably the ones by Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis (6), Chinmaya Lal Thakur (14), and Rituparna Sengupta (15)—suggest different angles and allow the reader to successively realize how *Article 15* actually retains the privileged blindness towards the own caste. In their view, the consequence that Ayan is shown to draw from his learning about caste discrimination is not that he begins to fundamentally reflect on caste. Instead, he puts his unquestioned *Savarna*-status to the best possible use by indicting the murderers and saving the missing girl against all odds. What this results in, is the generation of a neo-Gandhian vision of an 'upper-caste messiah' (p. 97), a guardian of the Indian constitution, without whose help lower castes are lost, and against whose heroic charisma all potential Dalit and gender subjectivities fall by the wayside.

While these chapters allow for an evaluation and serve to intensify the journey of the reader's gaze, Purnima Mankekar and Sucharita Kanjilal follow in chapter 8 (pp. 117-131), the travel of caste and cinema into transnational contexts. Aired on the so-called Over The Top (OTT)-platforms, caste surfaces in new formats, in this case the reality TV show *Indian Matchmaking* (Netflix since 2020). Pivoting the contemporary avatar of the most central of Indian social institutions, arranged marriage, the show has been enormously popular and highly controversial both in India and among NRI (non-resident Indian) communities in 'Indian America'. Moreover, it has also found enthusiastic audiences among those 'unschooled in Hindu-Indian cultural codes of chromatics, community, and respectability' (p. 118), and hence likely to become ready consumers of upper-caste, pop-cultural imaginations of 'India' and of 'Indianness'. Like many of the contributions to this Companion, Mankekar's and Kanjilal's analysis is set against the repeatedly-mentioned rise of anti-Muslim and caste-based violence in India in conjunction with the Hinduisation of 'Indian' culture. The very focus on marriage—a space of physicality and intimacy, taste, and sexual desire as much as of economic power, aspiration and social influence—underlines not simply the absence of "'lower'-caste, Dalit, Muslim, or Christian characters in *Indian Matchmaking*" (p. 120). Rather, caste is embroiled in an unquestioned way, as part of the various stories that revolve around the organized meetings between strangers, hence reinforcing an 'absent presence': it turns into a category that is rendered invisible in the image but becomes all the more legible in the seemingly harmless, everyday practices and things that are talked about (p. 117). Particularly because of the way the authors treat the intersection between caste/ class, race/ chromatics/ skin colour, and heteronormative sexuality/ erotics, I wonder whether the theoretical underpinnings of an 'absent presence' might have gained from Ruth Frankenberg's theory of critical whiteness

(2001). Equally, Roland Barthes' crucial concept of 'exnomination' comes to mind, which understands the bourgeoisie as "the social class that does not want to be named" (1972: 138) because it projects itself as the 'normality' against which all else becomes the 'other'. Overall, however, it is fascinating to be led to see, through this current medial example, how precisely liberal notions and discourses of choice and cosmopolitanism that are deemed to have replaced traditional practices and regimes of strict arrangement and endogamy are instrumental for the intertwined normalisation and denial of upper-caste definitional power.

A third, and closely related example of a potentially shifting gaze takes off from chapter 3 (*To Kill or to Allow to Live*, pp. 49-62) in the first section *From Spectatorship to Agency* that again resonates with various chapters in the later parts of the Companion. Rajesh James, Binu K.D., and Aswin Prasanth approach a selection of recent Malayali films through Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003/ 2019). The authors' objective, however, is not simply to point to the detectability of upper-caste necropolitics, i.e. the applied power of letting live and die. Rather it is to question that the very criticism of such politics towards Dalits and Adivasis is in any way sufficient. Even as this chapter, like many along the Companion's way, introduces the reader to films that are far off the beaten track even in relation to regional mainstream cinema (notably *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* [2015] and *An Off-Day Game* by Sanal Kumar Sasidharan), the authors make it powerfully clear that the Dalit dead body on screen does not even necessarily represent an accusation of caste discrimination. It might as well be a normalised occurrence. Even more crucial, however, than this shift of seeing, is the underlying argument that informs large parts of the book, namely that the spectre of the killed/ disappearing/ absent Dalit equals the denial of Dalit agency and subjectivity, and hence of the space and freedom to speak and act and be seen without having to fear physical and/ or psychological violence, including the act of pity, and of the (upper-caste) pursuit of an 'inclusivist politics' (p. 51).

Finally, I deeply recommend the section *The Entanglement of Caste and Nature* (pp. 237-274), which opens up perspectives towards caste hierarchies that become naturalized through different registers of human-animal relationships, for instance, the increasingly belligerent sacralisation of the cow through Hindu(tva) Brahminism and the equation of Dalits with 'polluting' and 'fungible' animals such as sheep and pigs (p. 253). Shalmali Jadhav in chapter 18 (pp. 249-259), introduces us to the symbolic world of Dalit-Bahujan agency in another frequently mentioned film: Nagraj Manjule's Marathi-language *Fandry* ('The Pig' 2013). Jadhav shows how Dalit agency is always contingent on the fear of dehumanisation and of upper-caste hypocrisy and selectivity. Yet, drawing on John Berger's gaze theory, her analysis reveals the imagination of the young protagonist Jabya's to be incredibly potent. She describes how he fights the humiliating spectacle of his family's subjection to a pig hunt in front of cheering villagers through the metaphor of hunting a black sparrow. The bird appears as a fleeting yet recurring messenger both of animal liberation and of the undoing of caste, asking us to keep in mind that as long as we can imagine freedom, freedom remains a possible reality. These examples only indicate the richness of cinematic material as well as of interpretative and analytical perspectives that this Companion offers in supporting a shift of what 'we' as readers of this volume are ready to see and acknowledge. In addition to extensive references and an additional bibliography, the volume compiles a very large corpus of films, spanning across blockbuster Bollywood productions and regional cinemas to include Punjabi, Kannada, and, of course, Tamil productions, complete with a filmography and a topical index. The eight thematic sections build meaningfully upon one another, engaging, next to the areas already mentioned, the complex tensions between caste and gender and the tensions between justice and judiciary that are explored in *Caste on Trial*. The final section *From Closer Up* offers us a more in-depth reading of single films, notably of mainstream Hindi films *Lagaan* (2001) and *Padmaavat* (2018), as well as the Tamil action-drama *Kaala* (2018), set in Mumbai's Dharavi.

Apart from the partly perfunctory copyediting, which has unfortunately become a hallmark of Routledge books, the less than inviting typesetting in a dense font size 10 (or even smaller) on rather large pages, often containing only two or less paragraphs, coupled with the exorbitant pricing, somewhat foils the great effort underlying this Companion. Two other downsides should be mentioned. One is the impression, contrary to the introductory statement, that caste is basically confined to India's Hindu majority society rather than really existing for everybody living in India (p. 3). There are two notable and very interesting exceptions to this overall impression: Amandeep Kaur and Sahil Sharma touch upon caste among Sikhs in their engagement with Punjabi cinema (chapter 21), and Grace Mariam Raju analyses the visual representation of Latin Catholics in the Malayali film *Ee.Ma.Yau*. (2018) in chapter 28. Positioned at the end of the volume, though, they appear almost like an addition, and neither authors introduce their understanding of caste sufficiently. On the other hand, whereas Muslims are referred to in many chapters as a category of analysis, the significance of caste in South Asian/ Indian Islam remains unmentioned, hence reproducing rather than questioning the homogenisation of Muslims in Indian cinema(s). Secondly—and this makes for perhaps less of a downside than an alert—this Companion is almost exclusively the fruit of literary film-as-text analysis, i.e. of cinematic representation. While the *Introduction* provides a few early examples for the importance of caste in the production of films (and by indication their distribution), this approach is not, beyond the critical relation to audiences, taken further in any of the chapters. Such empirical research, however, would also require an ethnographic, archival or systems-analytical methodology. Thus, this Companion's important groundwork virtually calls for a second volume along those lines.

Overall, these qualifications do little to diminish the insights and potential realisations the volume offers its readers. In particular, the contributions make one thing abundantly clear: in contrast to virtually all other discriminated groups, Dalits have no adequate representation to fight for, neither in cinema nor in politics (quotas/ reservations are only a necessary auxiliary). In their case, there is no distinct identity that could be freed from discrimination and be defended as 'normal' or 'positive'. There is positive womanhood, or positive Black life, because neither exist to be discriminated against, but there cannot be a positive Dalit identity. Theirs is a truly invented category, designed through the ages by the powerful to be exploited and dehumanised. Their struggle can only be, in Ambedkar's terms, for the annihilation of caste through a struggle for a humanity that understands, unlike both liberalism and Hindu nationalism, that the declared rejection of caste discrimination is worth nothing if it refrains from questioning the structures that (re)produce it. This Companion shows us that a critical understanding of caste in cinema can help in this precarious process of questioning the structuredness of caste, if we allow it to take us along.

References

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