Urbanity in the vernacular : narrating the city in modern South Asian literatures

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Abstract: This article explores some facets of literary urbanity in modern South Asian literatures such as Urdu, Bengali, Hindi and Marathi. Taking the proliferation of megacity research in present-day urban studies as my starting point, I intend to show that literatures in the regional languages of South Asia provide a rich archive of city representations and discourses about urbanity – an archive that is highly neglected particularly if compared to the corpus of English writings along these lines. Sections on genres such as the Urdu šahr āšob, Bengali nak'śā, Marathi humourism, Bengali theatre and the Hindi and Bengali novel, among others, will provide ample glimpses and some analysis of this archive stretching from the eighteenth century to the present. One of the guiding lines of investigation will be the quest for an alternative urbanism in these non-English sources.

Keywords: urbanity, South Asian literature, Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu

1 Introduction

The cover of a recent publication on urban studies, edited by the World Bank in cooperation with the Herrenhausen Foundation, pinpoints the present development succinctly in a few impressive figures: while in the beginning of the twentieth century 10 % of world population were dwelling in cities, one century later in 2007, the year this book was published, this figure went up to 50 %, and the prognosis for 2050 is that it will by then be 75 %.[1] So the city and the urban are with us very much, and in particular its hyperbolic forms prefixed by *mega*, the megapolis or megacity. These cities are, moreover, no longer limited to any particular part of the world, but seem to emerge all over the planet. We seem to be nowhere near the peak of this development, but only somewhere in the

1 Reference is to the volume *The Endless City* (Burdett/Sudjic 2007).

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middle of the process. While in Europe with its dwindling growth of population the big cities may seem to have reached the end of the line (and some actually surpassed it, with "shrinking cities" becoming a side-topic in the debate),[2] this is not true for other parts of the world and certainly not for South Asia, whose biggest cities (Mumbai, Delhi, Dhaka, Kolkata, Karachi) are, in terms of population figures, among the 20 top cities in the world. Coming to terms with megacities, conceptualising them, making sense of what they appear to be now and what they may become, utopian or more often dystopian imaginings of how they will manage, crisis scenarios, etc. are therefore general tasks of our days and not the privilege of urban planning offices and science fiction authors. These topics have entered public discourse in all kinds of ways.

The amount of academic publications on the city and megacity is accordingly large, and also for South Asia this list can be called substantial. A rather encyclopaedic endeavour from a macro-historical perspective, James Heitzman's *The City in South Asia* (2008), traces the development of urban settlements in South Asia from their beginnings to the present. There are many book-length surveys of the modern South Asian megacities;[3] comparative studies that follow the developmental paradigm;[4] and of course urban planning.[5] Along with these, other works focus on particular themes connected with the city, such as migration, slums, recycling, informal working conditions, and so on.[6] Publications on urban history and, more narrowly, literary city representations have naturally been more involved with urban literature and urbanity in the regional languages.[7] Denis Vidal and Narayani Gupta (Vidal/Gupta 1999) have made an

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2 Compare, for instance, an international touring exhibition in 2005–6 on "Shrinking Cities", with examples like Detroit, Halle, and others, at the Zentrum für zeitgenössische Kultur (ZfzK), Bahnhof Halle-Neustadt, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig (GfZK).

3 Such as Annapurna Shaw's *Indian Cities in Transition* (Shaw 2007), Darshini Mahadevia's *Inside the Transforming Urban South Asia* (Mahadevia 2009), and Ravi Ahuja and Christiane Brosius' *Mumbai Delhi Kolkata* (Ahuja/Brosius 2006), the latter covering colonial and postcolonial history. The article I have contributed to the last-mentioned book deals with some of the *nak'śā* writings that will figure in the following, as mentioned in footnote 1.

4 Cf. Ali/Rieker (eds.) (2009); Mertins (2008); Segbers/Raiser (2007); Roy/AlSayyad (eds.) (2004).

5 Shannon/Gosseye (eds.) (2009): *Reclaiming (the Urbanism of) Mumbai.*

6 Migration (Bates 2001; Piplai/Majumdar 1969), slums (Mohanty/Mohanty 2005), recycling (Yildiz/Mattausch 2009), informal working conditions (Mukhija 2003; Datta 2012; Shah 1996).

7 Interpretations of urban literature abound in artistic projects, too, but often do not transcend the confines imposed by the English language (e. g. the body.city project: Chandrasekhar/Seel (2003): *body.city. siting contemporary culture in India*). An exceptional project between urban documentation and photographical art is Peter Bialobrzeski's *Chitpur Neighborhoods* (Bialobrzeski 2007).

effort to compile a sort of urban glossary for (mostly) Hindi and Urdu languages. Swati Chattopadhyay's *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (Chattopadhyay 2006) is one of the few studies that explicitly focus on indigenous concepts of urbanity, as opposed to the countryside. Amit Chaudhuri's anthology *Memory's Gold: Writings on Calcutta* (Chaudhuri 2008) includes both English and some translated Bengali texts. Also Sukanta Chaudhuri's *The Living City* (Chaudhuri 1990) takes into account some of Calcutta's historic literary representations in a number of contributions. However, the engagement with the vernacular sphere in the last-mentioned and other works is mostly limited to somewhat "classical" colonial textuality (in the Bengali language, in these cases), and decreases with more recent material.

The point of this very cursory review is to demonstrate that on the whole, this discussion displays little focus on vernacular perceptions of the urban. I consciously use the term vernacular here, by the way, in order to evoke the existing hierarchy between English and South Asian languages and with a view to empowering otherwise side-lined representations.[8] As a result, while on-going urbanisation is acknowledged as a determining factor for millions of people and the object of economic, social, and administrative investigation, there is a remarkable lack of knowledge about how this process is perceived and conceptualised. The aim of this article, therefore, is to trace different discourses driving South Asian urbanity in the modern age by shifting the focus to vernacular sources, and ask, in a second step, whether there is anything like an indigenous urban ethos. Such an approach, of course, is not to claim any self-evident authenticity for regional language productions in South Asia as compared to English. Obviously vernacular sources also display multiple instances of transcultural flows in the way cityscapes are imagined. But importantly, in vernacular artistic and literary productions, especially popular ones, "deviant" and idiosyncratic representations are still possible because these languages, in certain social strata, continue to be tied to traditional systems of knowledge and perception that escape from being harnessed by the English language in the South Asian context.

In tracing such representations, one might want to reach much further back. The city is not a newcomer in South Asia, nor is its literary representation, and literary dealings with the city in South Asia, both wondering about its marvels and staring into its abysses, are quite ancient. Buddhist literature with its urban

8 But also, I concede, for lack of better alternatives, since a term like "modern South Asian languages", even though preferable in my opinion, does not work as a short-hand and instantly conjures up the discussion of whether English is to be counted as one of them or not.

background and, at times, urban subject matter deserves mention in this connection, as well as the depiction of cities in epic literature (Hastinapura, Ayodhya, Lanka etc.); Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra* and the *nāgaraka*, the expert city-dweller, comes to mind, just as satirical *bhāṇa* and *prahasana* literature on urban types such as the lecherous brahmin, the courtesan, the gambler etc.; the Tamil *Cilappatikāram* as a source-book on Pandya and Chola cities, especially Madurai,[9] is as noteworthy in this context as various Persian works in the decisively urban *ašrāf* culture of the northern subcontinent and parts of the Deccan.

In its search for literary trajectories leading up to the postcolonial South Asian megapolis, however, the present article is mainly concerned with city imaginings in modern literatures, and the so-called second modernity, starting in the early nineteenth century, in particular. A rather wide array of sources has been chosen, spanning more than two centuries from the late 18th to the early 21st, and several regions of South Asia, and while an effort has been made to include a representative variety of literary traditions and genres, there is of course no way of denying that the selection of the literature to be discussed is considerably determined by the present author's readings over the years. The risk of arbitrariness in corpus delimitation is an obvious drawback of such an approach. On the other hand, it is only on the basis of a large and diversified corpus that statements about vernacular literary production can meaningfully be made. The following article ventures out to explore some of the broader lines along which literature has engaged with urbanity in South Asia. It offers a panoramic vista, and it is hoped that the ratio of its in- and exclusions of material, unavoidable as the latter are, can stand the test of appropriateness and transparency. The focus lying on literatures of the so-called second modernity, a convenient beginning for this survey, illustrating the transition from the precolonial to the colonial epoch, is Urdu literature which, in comparison with other vernacular literatures on the Subcontinent, had a much more pronounced and longstanding urban background.

2 Nazir Akbarabadi and decaying Mughal cities

In the eighteenth century, while the colonial city Calcutta was on the rise in the east, Mughal cities in the Northwest witnessed a massive decline. Nadir Shah's raid of Delhi and other cities, along with the dawning of the new and rapidly

9 Dealt with in some detail in Heitzman 2008: 31–33.

expanding political regime induced by British colonialism, had increased the power vacuum caused by the breaking apart of the Mughal Empire and brought about miserable living conditions in the urban centres. This was so dominantly imprinted on literary consciousness that it gave boost to a sub-genre of Urdu poetry, the *šahr āšob*. As Annemarie Schimmel explains,

> [i]ncidentally, the genre of *šahrāšūb* "what brings the city into uproar" was invented in classical Persian to sing of the charm of imaginary sweethearts from various professions in order to enable the poet to introduce the technical terms connected with each craft. In later times, and particularly in India, it developed into a threnody on the miserable situation of the artisans and the ruin of society.[10]

A *šahr āšob* by Qalandar Bakhsh Jurʾat (died 1810) demonstrates the aspect of pretension of various professional groups, ranging from doorkeepers and shavers of pubic hair to pimps, which is then castigated by the author by way of a very conservative assertion of class prestige; this text quite typically invokes the city only by implication.[11] To a certain extent *šahr āšob* poetry presupposes a precolonial urban environment, for the amount of labour division and social segmentation that these texts describe hint at an urban setting. But still, and despite the *šahr*, "city", in its title, it is not entirely clear how programmatic the urban orientation of this genre actually was. Frances W. Pritchett, for instance, contrasts a narrow and a broad definition of the genre, one confined to decaying cities and the other encompassing more generally topsy-turvy social situations.[12] One could argue that the reading *šahr-i āšob*, "city of decay/terror/uproar", which in Urdu appears to have in part superseded that of *šahr āšob*, "what brings the city into uproar", is an indication that the stress on the urban increased over time, but this is not more than a random conjecture that would require thorough verification.

Eighteenth century poets like Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda (1706–81) and Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830) are famously connected with this genre.[13]

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10 Schimmel 1975: 177.

11 Cf. Jur'at 1983; Faruqi 1983.

12 Pritchett 1984, with the title of the article ("The World Upside Down") signaling the second sense. The same argument is put forward by Khan (2014): the primary focus is shown to be the decay of a social class, and the city is concerned only in extension – there are, according to this argument, even *šahr āšob*s without reference to cities at all. There is, furthermore, an interesting discussion of interpretations by Ahmad Naim (Naʿim 1968), arguing that the crisis leads to general solidarity, and Munibur Rahman, who stresses the churning up of low-class people and the concurrent social tumult. Unfortunately I could not access these works.

13 Cf. Faruqi 2010.

As Schimmel states, Sauda's *Šahr āšob* [14] "describes dramatically the deplorable situation in the various crafts" in the Lucknow of his times. With Nazir Akbarabadi, the focus on his city Akbarabad, i.e. Agra, becomes especially intimate. It is this poet who is, in some histories of literature, celebrated for shedding the elitist aura of high Urdu poetry in favour of engaging with popular life in his locality.[15] Nazir furnishes very vivid images of city life. He is famous for his poetic depictions of the society, festivals and material culture of Agra. In his poetry, we find descriptions of Id and Holi celebrations, food items such as the *laḍḍū*, local saints and their darbars, popular games in the city (such as bird flying competitions) etc. etc. In his *Šahr-i āgrā*, he praises Agra, "whose ruins are like/better than the buildings of other places"[16] and in which a newcomer would never remember his home. This flavour of local patriotism is there also in the *Šahr āšob*,[17] written sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century, but in the garb of a *qaṣīda*, a hymn of mourning.

Agra's state is described in very drastic terms as one of absence even of the most basic amenities. The poet's words "stick in his mouth" when he sets out to narrate the condition of the various professional groups and social segments in the city. There is no money and no jobs (p. 443); the bankers, banias, jewellers, and seths hang around idly in the bazaar, and "the shopkeepers are sitting in their stores as if they were thieves locked up in a row" (p. 466). The same goes for the merchants, cloth traders, contractors, string makers and paper makers. Poverty hits everybody, and people start praying that God should let them die soon. These are bad times for religious specialists also: there are no servants at the graves of the saints, brahmans are beating their heads in the temples, and even pirzadas are sitting perplex in their homes. All factories in Agra are closed, and all houses without exception afflicted. Even nature plays along: the gardens are dry and colourless, there is no springtime, no birds etc. Nazir finishes his longish lamentation with a prayer for the well-being of the city and its inhabitants, and then gives the following remarkable last verse:

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14 Schimmel 1975: 177.

15 Cf. Husain 1954: 125–136 (Chapter 5).

16 Akʿbarābādī 1992: 483–484; 483. This poem is not traceable in the *Kulliyāt* edition otherwise used.

17 The one bearing this as the only title, i.e. *Śahr āšob* (Akbarābādī 1951: 465–471), and not Akbarabadi's *Duniyā-i dūn ke tamāše*, another *šahr āšob* translated by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and Frances W. Pritchett (Akbarabadi 1984). This text relies entirely on social topsy-turviness as its organizing principle.

> I say this prayer to my God every morning and night / That He may cast a merciful glance on Agra's population / That all may eat and drink and take care of their homes / Shower divine grace on this damaged city / May all the closed businesses open up // Whether lover or prisoner, he is from Agra / Whether Mullah or secretary, he is from Agra / Whether poor or mendicant, he is from Agra / Whether poet or Nazir, he is from Agra / For which reason he has composed these few stanzas //[18]

Why is this remarkable? Because Nazir projects the city in a very inclusive way as something that belongs to all that live in it, not just a few notables. And the mood of decline, however depressing it may be, is contrasted with a host of positive feelings for the city and its people. Notably, Nazir does not blame anyone for Agra's misfortune, nor does he profess adherence to any particular ruler. His focus is entirely on the city's inhabitants themselves, whom he describes with much emotional empathy, or a spirit of the autonomous urban centre.

As initially stated, *šahr āšob* poetry provides a valuable entry point into this article because it emerges in a transitional period between precolonial and colonial epochs and reminds us that literary city discourses precede colonial ones – not just in the shape of some remote presence as in classical Sanskrit sources, but in terms of an immediate continuity. The decline of the Mughal cities happens in a zone that is still outside the direct political command of the new European powers on the subcontinent, but nevertheless linked to their presence in broader socio-economic terms. Polished Urdu poetry adapts the older Persian genre of *šahr āšob* to this situation and makes it into a format to describe this downfall and miserable condition in great detail.

3 Satirical visions of nineteenth century boomtown Calcutta

Now let us turn from the decaying cities of the north-west to the boomtown Calcutta, from Urdu to Bengali and from poetry to prose. Calcutta had during the eighteenth century developed into the major stronghold and prime commercial centre of the British in India, attracting wealth and people, and was set for unparalleled growth at the time. Contrary to Urdu, Bengali did not have much of an urban literature before the nineteenth century, nor the elitist and somewhat

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18 Akbarābādī 1951: 465–471; 471. Also quoted in Husain 1954: 128. These and other translations, unless marked otherwise, are the author's.

transregional, cosmopolitan aspirations that Urdu had acquired. Neither, by the way, was there any literary prose worth mentioning in the Bengali language.[19] The activities of missionaries such as William Carey and Joshua Marshman, events like the foundation of Fort William College (1800) in the city for the training of newcomer East India Company employees, or the School Book Society (1817) for designing teaching materials in a number of languages including Bengali, as well as a general inclination to experiment with new forms of expression and adopt new media and genres from the realm of English, changed this dramatically. After the commissioned texts of the Fort William College shortly after 1800, it is in the 1820s that independent works of literary prose start seeing the day. And a good part of this production was quite urban in character: prose literature produced and printed in the city for the city and about the city.

One of the first attempts to create artistic Bengali prose, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's *Kalikātā kamalālaẏ* (1823), confronts the city head on and makes clear from the start what Calcutta is about: *kamalālaẏ* is the abode of Kamala or Lakshmi, and

> like the ocean is the reservoir of the water that streams into it from all the rivers, Calcutta is the place into which wealth streams from all around.[20]

The text we have is only a fragment of what was its initial design, and is set as a dialogue in which a city dweller explains a newcomer from the countryside how Calcutta works. The sense of Calcutta's urbanity as something marvellous, awesome and unprecedented is conspicuous here as well as in later nineteenth century Bengali prose dealing with this city. And the figure of the newcomer to the city that we first encounter here, in fact, is there to stay as a protagonist in South Asian literature and film until present – and that is hardly surprising, given that the process of urbanisation and internal migration into the cities of the subcontinent is anything but finished.[21]

Calcutta as a city of wealth and of lavish spending becomes the focus of attention of a whole genre of writing, the so-called *nak'śā* literature in nineteenth century Bengali, and it is in these texts that the world of Babus, flatterers, jobseekers, faction leaders, business people, bibis, fallen women and bankrupt

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19 Except some passages in mystical and religious texts like the *Śūṇyapurāṇ* and Vaishnava *nibandhas*, and some letters and documents. Cf. Gupta 1992: 212–213.

20 Paraphrasis of the simile that opens the text (Bandyopādhyāẏ 1823: 5). For a more detailed appreciation of Bhabanicharan's works in terms of humorism, cf. Ghoṣ 1989: 276ff. I have dealt with this text at length in Harder 2004.

21 Cf. below for some of the narrations of Sheikh Chilli.

spendthrifts, and also, as it were, newcomers who make a fortune, unfolds – a world that has been described by scholars such as Sumanta Banerjee, Shripantha and others. The most famous of these texts is Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom pyãcār nak'śā* of 1862, and for good reasons: the vivid descriptions of street life, festivals, wedding processions, spirit healing etc. are exceptional, and also the author's choice of Calcutta's spoken language throughout. The text consists of two parts with altogether eight chapters that, often under the pretext of describing some prominent religious festival, furnish satirical depictions of contemporary society in the city. The first chapter called *Kalikātār caṛak'pārbaṇ*, "The Charak festival of Calcutta", narrates scenes of the hook-swinging festival devoted to Lord Shiva, interspersed with a host of colloquial comments on manners, fashions, orientations, and of course hypocrisies.

Hutom pyãcār nak'śā portrays a city that bears very discernible signs of English colonial rule. The English language is heard in the streets; English newspapers are distributed before breakfast; and turbans are vanishing because they destroy the fashionable Albertinian parting.[22] Church bells announce the passing of measured time;[23] the streets smell of alcohol, and the veranda of a brothel is filled with male watchers of the festival; some babus have imbibed "civilization" sufficiently to "hate" the Charak puja, while some others, members of the reformist Brahmo Samaj, participate despite their reformism in order not to compromise their family allegiances.[24] Kaliprasanna Sinha's narrator *Hutom pyãcā*, "Hutom the owl", describes two kinds of English-style babus, the "cowdung busts of high-class sahibs" and the "abominable reflections of westerners (*phiriṅgī*)", and this is how the first are portrayed:

> The first group follows English style in all matters: assembling on chairs around a table, tea in cups, cigars, water in jugs, brandy in decanters and glasses of water covered with sponge-wood tops, cotton-covered stools. They have the Harkaru, Englishman and Phoenix newspapers, and there is always much fuzz about politics and the "best news of the day" [Engl. in the orig.]. They eat at the table, shit on the water closet and wipe their arses with paper. They are embellished by various virtues such as kindness, mercy, philanthropy, modesty etc., were there not all the time sickness, quite dead drunkenness from too much alcohol, and servitude towards their wifes – [due to which] enthusiasm, unity, high aspirations have been exiled from their hearts. They are the old class.[25]

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22 Siṃha 1991: 35, 41, 42.

23 Siṃha 1991: 39, 43; cf. Ranajit Guha's reading in terms of temporalities, with a metropolitan office time and the essentially non-colonial festival times contending for the everyday. Guha, after convincingly underscoring the text's intimate relationship with Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*, seeks to understand, not so convincingly, *Hutom* as a parody of the latter (Guha 2008: 344ff.).

24 Siṃha 1991: 43.

25 Siṃha 1991: 46.

Similarly punching remarks on the way a young heir of a fortune is besieged by hordes of alleged relatives; the fashion in which a Christian missionary in black dress distributes bibles like a puppet player and preaches sermons to water carriers; flagellants removing the hooks and entering a liquor shop; and low-caste people adopting chicken curry and European-style bread in order to climb the social ladder, conclude this chapter.[26]

It is amazing to consider the satirical sharpness of the 22-year old author and his "global vision", at least according to an illustration of the 1861 edition that shows the narrator sitting on a globe and letting his "sketches" – the literal meaning of the Persian loan word *nakʾśā* – fly into space.[27] More important in our present context, however, is an assessment of the approach to urbanity that we find in *Hutom pyãcār nakʾśā*. In its dense descriptions of public life we can discern an attempt almost in a *šahr āšob* fashion to cover all parts of the population. It is in its bluntness and vividness, not in any care for polished language, that this text excels and finds its strength. *Hutom pyãcār nakʾśā*, in one way, is a celebration of colonial Calcutta's vigour. As in the *šahr āšob* tradition and also with its more direct predecessor, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's *nakʾśā*s, the focus is laid not on the city's physicality (buildings, layout) or history, but on the city as a social entity.

Kaliprasanna Sinha was a well-known personality with many ideas about the betterment of contemporary society, and his reformist agenda is occasionally foregrounded quite explicitly in the text, though not in the part portrayed above. What remains conspicuous even without such authorial interventions, however, is the revelatory gestus concerning the lack of proper virtues and the pretensions of the babu class as a whole and the newly rich in particular.[28] But despite the occasional harshness the attitude towards the city is not cynical, not devoid of sympathy.

As stated above, the colonial character of Calcutta is very graspable in the pages of *Hutom pyãcār nakʾśā*, both through the presence of English and Englishmen and by the all-pervading imprints of colonial discourses, material culture, lifestyles etc. *Hutom* had plenty of imitators and successors, such as Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay, Ramsarbasva Bidyabhushan, and – way into the twentieth century – Binay Ghosh with his *Kalo pyãcār nakʾśā*. The function of

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26 Siṃha 1991: 48–53.

27 "Hutom sitting on the globe and releasing his sketches into the sky": copper engraving of the partial 1861 ed. of *Hutom pyãcār nakʾśā*, probably by the author. Cf. Harder 2011: 115.

28 Cf. the section *Hathāt· abatār* that contains the biography of such a nouveau riche; there is a German translation of this episode in my bilingual edition of Bengali satires, *Verkehrte Welten* (Harder 2011).

a social mirror that these texts professed apparently continued to hold attractions for a growing urban middle class public in Calcutta until the late days of the British Raj and even beyond.

I have hinted at some points of convergence between *nak'śā* and *šahr āšob* poetry. It would not be accurate, though, to over-emphasize these continuities. First, *nak'śā* is basically a prose genre that grants the individual writer great formal freedom as compared to the rule- and rhyme-bound *šahr āšob*; and it can be argued that the advent of prose in the urban milieu of the colonial city is not entirely accidental but betrays a certain correspondence.[29] Second, in sharp contrast particularly to Nazir Akbarabadi's well-meaning portrayal of the various classes in decaying Agra, and arguably also to the *šahr āšob* genre as a whole, it is the satirical mode that comes to dominate depictions of the city in *nak'śā* literature.

4 The dystopian colonial city of erased values: Bharatendu Harishchandra

This is even truer for the following instance, a Hindi play authored a decade later by the famous Khari Boli Hindi pioneer Bharatendu Harishchandra of Benares (1850–85). *Andher nag'rī*, "The dark city", written around 1880, is a symbolic play that deals with an urban dystopia – one that can to a large extent be identified as the modern colonial city of the nineteenth century. The piece has certain precursors, most notably Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Baṛa bājār* episode in which the modern colonial world is shown as a big market of goods, values, education etc.,[30] but *Andher nag'rī* is an original writing by Harishchandra.[31]

The play, as Prabhat Kumar has recently shown,[32] builds upon a well-known folk-tale that also appeared in print from Naval Kishore Press in Lucknow. The plot, in short, is as follows: a guru and his two *celā*s, disciples, approach a city, and the disciples go there for alms. On the marketplace they learn that in that

29 In fact, I have tried to make this point in the above-mentioned article on "The Modern Babu and the Metropolis" (Harder 2004).

30 For a bilingual Bengali-German edition of this text, see again Harder 2011: 174–189.

31 Unlike his *Iṃrāj'stotra* and some other short satirical pieces which are Hindi translations of texts originally written in Bengali by Bankimchandra. A very thorough monograph on Bharatendu Harishchandra and various aspects of his works is Dalmia 1997, but *Andher* is not discussed in it.

32 Kumar 2011: 124–125.

city, all goods are equal and cost one rupie per kilogram. The market people include fruit sellers, sweet makers and greengrocers, but also Brahmins selling caste pedigree, conversions and social upgradings:

> Caste, get caste, one rupie per kilogram. Give us a rupie, and we will right now sell our caste. For money, we will make the Brahmin into a washer and the washer into a Brahmin [...,] [...] we will make lies into truth [...,] we make Brahmins into Muslims and Hindus into Christians. For money we sell our religion and pedigree, for money we give false testimony. [...]. *Veda, dharma*, family status, truth and show, all is one rupie per kilogram.[33]

Delighted by this one price society, one disciple decides to stay on, while the guru leaves with the warning that such equality of all and everything is a sign of doom. The disciple lives happily in the city and grows fat from eating sweets. One day, however, a wall crumbles and falls on someone's sheep, and that person asks the king to punish the mason. But the mason blames it on the cement maker, the cement maker on his distributor and so on, until the town keeper [*kotʿvāl*] is found guilty for walking by at the wrong time; the rope for hanging him, however, proves too large for his thin throat, and thus the disciple is caught in his stead – and it is only with the guru's help that he escapes.[34]

Even this brutally abridged version shows that the modern city, and by implication the colonial system, severely upsets the value system: no more hierarchical ranking of substances, goods, and most importantly, of castes. The king viz. government is irrational, arbitrary and whimsical and fails to bestow order, and in a sense it also follows the rule of indiscriminate equality by requiring one person to be punished without caring who it is. Thus, Harishchandra's play can be read as a general denunciation of egalitarianism that has its social base in upper caste anxieties of degradation. Bharatendu Harishchandra is renowned as a pioneer of modern Hindi writing, a reformer and educationist; but simultaneously, in *Andher nagʿrī* and in a couple of other writings, he displays a decisive upper-caste conservatism that is just as much part of his agenda. The same goes for some of his younger contemporaries, and especially for the authors of the circle of writers following his ideals and known as the *Bhāratendu maṇḍalī*. Radhacharan Goswami, for example, in his *Nāpitʿstotra*, satirizes the barber caste and their aspirations for increased payment and rise in status in the form of a mock hymn of praise (*stotra*).[35] In this text, the reader perceives an inkling of city life on the background of which the

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33 Hariścandra 1986: 45–46.

34 For a more detailed summary, see Kumar 2011: 124ff.

35 Cf. Kumar 2011: 122ff. for an analysis.

mobilization described must be imagined, and also an echo of Jurʾat's *šahr āšob* with its lament about the cultural pretensions of lower orders of society by a courtier poet.

At any rate, Bharatendu's city, unlike the Calcutta of *Hutom pyãcār nakʾśā*, is not a factual, historical urban entity. The reader does not know and is certainly not led into believing that the play is about Benares or any other actual city, and outwardly there is nothing about it that would at least make it identifiable as a place under British rule. It is rather the traditional imagery of the (more or less urban) capital of some little kingdom that is conjured up. But this nameless allegorical city serves as a much more fundamental critique of the British Raj than *Hutom*, and indeed also of contemporary urbanity: the colonial city is shown as a place of doom, of cultural decay and of darkness. Its namelessness, or allegorical appellation, is not so much due to the necessity to camouflage the critique, but rather a distancing device commonly found in allegory and satire. It allows the author to transform a statement from concrete directness to general potentiality. Thus Bharatendu does not write about one particular city but about "none and all" and thereby extends his criticism to contemporary colonial society as a whole.[36]

This dystopian image of the city is not to be interpreted as a simple criticism of the British colonial masters or colonialism as such. As other texts by this author, such as his play *Bhārat durdaśā*, amply bear out, it contains a good amount of self-blame, one of the major points being laziness, *ālasya*, which even appears on stage as an allegorical character endemic to contemporary Indian society. On the other hand, *Andher nagʾrī* is clearly in line with a whole series of writings projecting the modern city as an aspect of the dark *kali yuga*. This foreshadows twentieth century anti-urbanism of the kind that is famously found in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* where the modern city and the railways are portrayed as morally corrupting[37] – even if it is probably not from Harishchandra that Gandhi got these ideas but rather from Thoreau and Tolstoi.

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36 "None and all" with regard to Calcutta Babus is a statement from the introduction (*bhūmikā*) to *Hutom* – a text that chooses a different distancing device by veiling the authorship (it was first published anonymously) and relegating the narration to an outsider: a night owl.

37 "They [the Indian forefathers] further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages. They saw that kings and their swords were inferior to the sword of ethics, and they, therefore, held the sovereigns of the earth to be inferior to the Rishis and the Fakirs. A nation with a constitution like this is fitter to teach others than to learn from others. This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds. Everybody knew that these professions were not particularly superior. Moreover, these vakils and vaids did not rob people, they were considered people's dependants, not their

It would of course be mistaken, though, to submit that the sombre picture of Harishchandra's "dark city" and Gandhi's village ideology set the tone for the time and discredited urbanism for good, and one should remember that these literary interventions were countercyclical insofar as they were written at times that were invariably characterised by rapid urbanization. As for more positive literary representations of urbanity as a possibility for South Asia, one might point at early Bengali educationist Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain or Begum Rokeya and her narration *Sultana's Dream* of 1923 – the only English piece of fiction in the Bengali oeuvre of this author and a celebrated feminist utopia. Located in the capital of a small kingdom called "Lady Land", this dialogue, which is in the end decoded as a dream, describes a beautiful garden city in which women dominate public life whereas men have been locked up in the house and have to observe purdah. The I-narrator and visitor to this city is told that "[y]our Calcutta could become a garden even more beautiful than this". She learns about the way solar energy is used to run and defend the city, and is taken to a balloon by her host to fly from place to place.[38]

Nevertheless, it is very natural to expect anti-urbanism to emerge particularly at times of forceful urbanization, especially when in much of popular discourse on the topic, the urban came to be equated with the modern and the rural with the traditional in a colonized society which was engaged in a process of nationalist mobilization that involved a quest for its cultural roots as opposed to the coloniser's. As is well-known, Gandhi's emphasis on the rural did not have a long-lasting impact in the political arena beyond symbolical gestures, and very soon Congress policies, in Nehru's hands, came to favour the building of large-scale industries as vehicles to modernization. Such a move can be expected to also imply ideological shifts and reformulations, and it appears plausible to suggest that the dominant perception of the dizzying commercialized character and multifariousness of the modern city as intimidation and alienation was, on one level, tackled by Nehru's unity in diversity model. This ideological construct was designed to capture the variety of ethnic, linguistic

masters. Justice was tolerably fair. The ordinary rule was to avoid courts. There were no touts to lure people into them. This evil, too, was noticeable only in and around capitals. The common people lived independently and followed their agricultural occupation. They enjoyed true Home Rule." Part of Chapter XIII: What is True Civilization? of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), quoted from Gandhi's Collected Works (Gandhi 1963: 6–64; 37–38). As I have argued elsewhere, the idea that Indian civilization was essentially found in village communities goes back, in part, to Orientalist scholars such as Elphinstone who elaborated the historical concept of village republics (Harder 2008: 47).

38 Hosen 2009: 395–404. For a thorough discussion of this work and the Bengali novel *Padmarāg*, cf. Bagchi 2005.

and religious communities under one nationalist umbrella and not to vindicate urbanity, for sure, but was in its genesis, we may suppose, intrinsically related to an urban experience – for where was this diversity more conspicuous as a tangible reality than in the big cities of the subcontinent! Moreover, emancipatory discourses could assume a decisive anti-rural bias. For Bhimrao Ambedkar, for instance, the city brought with it the potentiality of change whereas the villages bore the suffocating weight of centuries of suppression.[39]

These loose-ended intermediary remarks need much more nuancing if they are to outline the development of discourses on urbanity in South Asia, and for now do not achieve more than a demonstration of the ambiguity of the city and the complexity of its cultural perception. And before moving on to the next section, it is also important to stress that, of course, some more differentiation is called for in this examination of representations of urbanity. The question is not just whether the texts are pro or contra urbanity, i.e. utopian or dystopian, and how they are related to cultural identities in South Asia. We also ask, more broadly, in which ways South Asian literature engages with the city: whether the city is treated as a *pars pro toto* of the society at large, as in Harishchandra's play where it represents a particular social order, or whether one discernible individual city is dealt with, as in Kaliprasanna Sinha's work; whether the stress is on the *new, modern* metropolis, or whether it is employed as a mere metaphor for a social phenomenon.

5 Celestials in traffic jams: Gods and tricksters in modern cities

In this section we will address a less well-known literary way of picturing urban life. Like the preceding city representations, the following texts are also linked with the *kali yuga* trope, but they are far less dystopian in character. The strategy here is rather to alienate the perspective on the city so as to bring out its adversities and oddities. This type of humoristic texts is not limited to any one South Asian vernacular literature, but can, it seems, be found all over the place. The recipe is simple: take a Hindu god, a celestial (preferably Narada) or *avatāra*

39 "The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is of course infinite, if not pathetic ... What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?" is the famous quotation from Ambedkar's speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 4, 1948 (pointed out to me by Benjamin Zachariah). Quoted in Malaviya 1956: 258.

down from heaven, or alternatively bring to life a *mūrti* in a temple, insert these into present-day urban realities and enjoy the resulting incongruencies and anachronisms. The blueprint for such texts and one of their possible sources is a popular narration that refers us back, to some extent, to the *nak'śā* tradition, namely Durgacharan Ray's *Deb'gaṇer martye āgaman*, "arrival of the gods on earth", of 1880.[40] This mixture between a mock-*purāṇa*, a travelogue and a guide book uses narrative devices of mythological accounts and applies this frame to contemporary India: the Vedic gods Indra, Varuna, Brahma, Narayana etc. set out for a travel through various Indian cities (Mathura, Delhi, Patna, Munger, etc., and of course, quite prominently, Calcutta). In the introduction, set in heaven in consonance with pauranic conventions, Lord Varuna invites Lord Indra to behold the marvels of the British capital Calcutta in the following words:

> It is because you have not seen the gadgets and dexterity [*kal-kauśal*] of the English race that you feel proud and think that there is no more beautiful place than your Amaravati; but you won't even want to return to Amaravati if you have once seen the English capital Calcutta. Here you are happy with average-pretty Shachi, but if you go to Calcutta and see the Armenian ladies, you'll maybe not even turn around to look at Shachi anymore. Here you sit around till late in your mediocre forest *Nandan-kānan*, but if, one day, you enter Eden Garden in Calcutta, you will perhaps not want to return. You call the celestial rice-wine ambrosia, but if you go to the English empire and drink sherry, champagne and brandy, you will not even touch this ambrosia. The English light lamps without oil and wick. They fetch news through iron wires. They cure fever instantaneously by quinine. [...][41]

A longish chapter of the book is accordingly devoted to the description of Calcutta. The gods are told to beware of thieves while bathing in the Ganges, get an introduction to the who's who of the city (sahibs, firingis, keranis, sailors), visit a bank and the high-court, witness a water-pipe smoking session, etc. (pp. 468ff.).

More than 50 years later in the twentieth century, this pattern of narration is still used as a literary device and seems to grow especially popular with Marathi humourists as we shall now see. In the chapter *Puṇyācī saphar* ("Trip to Pune")

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40 Pabitra Adhikārī, in his anthology *Tin'śo bacharer bāṃlā byaṅga nak'śā*, "Bengali satirical sketches of three hundred years", features the section on Calcutta and thereby includes the text in the *nak'śā* genre (Adhikārī 2003: 206–214). Arguably this is due to his loose notion of the generic features of *nak'śā*; Khagendranath Maiti ignores Durgacharan Ray and his work (Māiti 1995) while including plenty of other writings whose *nak'śā* status is debatable. I thank Paromita Dasgupta for pointing this text out to me.

41 Rāẏ 1880: 3.

of C.V. Joshi's *Osāḍ'vādīce dev*, "The gods of village Osadvadi" of the 1950s, the come-alive *mūrti*s of gods Ganpati and Hanuman decide to step out of their village temples for a while and to travel into town in a public bus. In order to go incognito, Ganesh has to hide his trunk under a burqa. Both quarrel about in which of the two hotels the tonga driver recommends, *Śrīgaṇeś* or *Śrīhanumān* hotel, they should stay.[42] Another middle-twentieth century Marathi humorist, Prahlad Keshav Atre, has the heavenly Rishi Narada visit a *dārukhānā*, a low profile drinking place in the suburbs of an unnamed city (Pune or, perhaps, Nasik); [43] when a drunkard starts bullying him, he flees back through a close-by door to heaven which is guarded by a Pathan.[44] In both cases, and especially in the first, the divine nature of the protagonists is actually only a device to represent a rural and original attitude, which is then made collide with certain "urban" realities like bars, traffic jams, modern government etc.

Hindi writer Amritlal Nagar, in his post-Independence story *Tathāgat naī dillī meṃ* ("The Buddha in Delhi"), calls upon none other than the Buddha to attend the festivities organised on his 2,500th birth anniversary. First he descends into a statue of his which a middle-class couple are carrying home from the market[45] in order to do justice to the latest fashion in room design in the city:

> That New Delhi which had after Independence once again become new, and where all kinds of Chinese, Burmese, Iranian, Afghan (*tūrānī*), Uzbek, Khorasani, English, Japanese, American shows are on all the time, and where folk-songs and folk-dances from Trivandrum to Shrinagar and Kucch to the Naga Hills can be heard and seen just like beedis and the dancing and singing groups of cinema-goers.[46]

While the Buddha is enjoying his bath in the excited masses, the organising committee wonders how to integrate him into the programme of the festival: they do believe it is the Buddha because "in India, everything is possible", but they doubt whether he is still as beautiful as his statues, and whether he still subscribes to his earlier teachings (p. 13–14).[47] The rushed preparations result in an overkill of hectic city life with crowds at Mahatma Gandhi's memorial at Rajghat, politicians of the capital, heavy media coverage

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42 Jośī 1983: 61–77; 69.

43 The scandalous thing being that he leaves aside all the big temples, monasteries, Vedic schools, well-constructed ghats, inns and restaurants in favour of the tavern. *Guttyāt nārad*. In: Atre 2008: 85–92; 86.

44 Atre 2008: 85–92; 91–92.

45 Nāgar 2006: 9–16; 13.

46 Nāgar 2006: 9–16; 11.

47 Nāgar 2006: 9–16; 13f.

and a tight travel schedule that irritate the Buddha so much that he dematerialises and retires to Kushinagara.

A similar set-up is found in the narrations by N.V. Sapre, a Marathi writer and translator born in Benares, who has a whole volume of such stories to his credit. He brings god Indra into Bombay and the film business and gets his wife Shachi a role as star actor. The trouble, however, is that she is not ready to display as much of her skin as required by the director of the film.[48] In another story it is heavenly sage Narada who hits upon film makers and starlets in Bombay and is celebrated as a second Yul Brynner, gets invited to an actress' birthday party at the Taj Hotel, and discusses the use of aircrafts in pauranic India with an engineer at Bangalore.[49] The stories range from harmless humorism to a harsh criticism of political corruption blended with quite penetrating didacticism, and from very simple to more sophisticated narrative set-ups.[50] In all these cases, the city is a rather arbitrary target, and it would be entirely possible to break it down to a synonym of modern life; but then again it is this relationship of large-scale synonymity in the eyes of the satirists that is significant in the present context: modernity is perceived as entirely tied up with the city and is satirized from a *locus* outside the bounds of the urban modern sphere.

It does not necessarily take celestials to create such an outside position in order to effect a humorous pseudo-exoticization of the city. In Shibram Chakrabarti's (1903–80) Bengali children's classic *Kal'kātār hāl'cāl* (1962), it is two rural wood traders from Assam, Harshabardhan and Gobardhan, who come to visit Calcutta despite all the bad things they have heard about it:

> The saddest thing is that Calcutta people are reportedly not sociable. They do not care for those next door and do not recognize the people of their neighbourhoods. If you go out on the street there are so many people, but the strange thing is that nobody talks to anyone, and moreover if you touch them affectionately they are irritated. And if someone unknown does touch you, you will find that your pocket has become lighter than before.[51]

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48 *Bhag'vān indra bhārat meṃ*. Sapre 1986: 6–12.

49 *Nārad'jī bhārat meṃ*. Sapre 1986: 43–60.

50 A less simplistic version of the gods in cinema theme, for instance, though in yet another South Asian "vernacular", is there in Tamil author Putumaipittan's stories: here it is Shiva who first wanders around in the streets of Chennai as a curious chap and is then discovered by a film producer – even if in the eyes of the producer, his clothes, singing and dancing style are simply hopeless and will not do for the movies. Cf. the story *Kaṭavuḷum kantacāmip piḷḷaiyum*, in Putumaippittaṉ 2000: 559–577.

51 Cakrabartī 1962: 1.

52 The initial chapter narrating these events is appropriately called *Harṣabardhaner bās-līlā*, only awkwardly translatable as "Harshabardhan's divine play with dwelling", while *bās*, "dwelling", is of course for English "bus". Cakrabartī 1962: 1–7.

In the following, of course, many of these prejudices are dismantled in Shibram Chakrabarti's jocular fashion. As for this one, the heroes get on what they take for a particularly luxurious kind of taxi, namely a bus, and are extremely astonished about the "sociable" passengers getting on after them. They make it a point to treat them as their special guests.[52]

An astonishingly similar set-up can be found in the traditional Hindustani Sheikh Chilli stories, with Sheikh Chilli doing the job of making Delhi and Bombay look strange. The Sheikh is a kind of human trickster comparable to the German Till Eulenspiegel, with whom he shares the propensity of taking things literally and thereby creating trouble.[53] There is a marked ambivalence between his stupidity and his cunningness. Sheikh Chilli stories are unconnected episodes in the sense that the Sheikh may change his status in the course of one story by making a lot of money, becoming a minister or a field marshall, but will invariably start from zero again when a new episode begins. There are some stories in which Sheikh Chilli, functioning as a proper village bumpkim, visits big Indian cities.

In *Śekh cillī pahuṃce dillī* ("Sheikh Chilli came to Delhi", p. 25–36)[54] he goes to sell a cat (Hindi/Urdu *billī*) in "Billīmārān", characteristically misreading the name of the Old Delhi neighborhood Balimaran. Once in the city he is bewildered to hear that there are actually three Delhis (p. 27). People declare him a fool when they learn about his idea of selling the cat he has brought, but he proves them wrong by actually managing to do so. He sells the cat to a Memsaheb and saves money for an expensive hotel by following the advice of a person who turns out to be a thief (p. 30–31). Sheikh Chilli, however, pretends to be a spy and gets his money back plus the thief's savings (p. 33). Finally he takes up employment in a Saheb's house but is thrown out after executing commands too literally.

In Calcutta,[55] Sheikh Chilli is exasperated by the fact that the names of places do not match their character: there are no *bahū*s (brides) in *bahūbāzār*/ Bowbazar, whereas at home in his village the *masjidʾvālī galī* has a *masjid* (mosque) and the *lāl darʾvāzā bāzār* has a *lāl darʾvāzā* (red door) (p. 38). This, he feels, is symptomatic for a general state of disorder:

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53 As for his genesis, though, Baron von Münchhausen would be a better German equivalent: Sheikh Chilli is historically traceable to a member of the lower gentry in the Punjab of the seventeenth century.

54 The edition referred to in the following names Kiran Prajapati as writer but we can submit that most of the stories are taken from oral tradition. Prajāpati (no year).

55 *Sekh cillī kalʾkattā meṃ*, in Prajāpati (no year): 37–40.

> It is an utterly worthless city. The places have been given topsy-turvy names. The people don't even have the manners [*tamīz*] to fight. Ask for a job and they will ask you strange questions, and answer them and they threaten you with thrashing or running away. Dear, I didn't like Calcutta. (p. 40)

In the "marvelous city" Bombay,[56] finally, Sheikh Chilli is speechless when he sees the splendor of the city after leaving the train station: "All high buildings, a speedy life, people do not even have a moment to look at one another, so who would even notice this gentleman [i.e. himself]." (p. 41) Eventually, a crazy Seth discovers him sitting on Chaupati Beach and then first treats him as a holy faqir, and afterwards wants him to act in a film, doing which Sheikh Chilli is horrified by the wanton actress coming to embrace him and flees from the city. The stories demonstrate that the oral genre of Sheikh Chilli stories may go back into the nineteenth century but has well been carried forth through the colonial into the postcolonial age, and they perpetuate what authors generally do not tire to emphasise, i.e. the danger of theft in big cities in general and Bombay as the film capital in particular.

To sum up, structurally speaking, all these texts are united in the perspective they construe to visualize modern urban phenomena or urbanity: invariably an outsider's perspective that evokes "tradition" as an internal looking glass. The clash between tradition and modernity is essentially what is being enacted here, and the resultant incongruities are exploited for humorous effects, which hints at a different perspective assigned to the discerning readership, namely that of a connoisseur who knows well that the contrast is basically construed. As concerns the types of texts examined in previous chapters, the parallels to *nak'śā* appear to be the strongest, and Durgacharan Ray's text can be seen as a hinge between *nak'śā* literature and these humoristic writings. However, the tone in general appears to be lighter in these texts and their urban orientation rather optional than constitutional.

6 Urbanity as exploitation[57]

While these texts have limited critical potential, we also find very powerful denunciations, for instance in Bengali theatre, of an alienated and parasitic urban middle-class consciousness as opposed to desolate rural realities. The

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56 *Śekh cillī pahuṃce bambaī*, in Prajāpati (no year): 41–47.

57 The second part of this section, on Badal Sarkar, summarizes a much larger article on the topic (Harder 2001).

starting point for this trend is Bijan Bhattacharya's epochal play *Nabānna* ("New rice") of 1944, even if the anti-urbanity discourse is not quite explicit here. Written on the great Bengal famine of 1943, and staged as the first play of the newly-founded leftist Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), *Nabānna* addresses the structures of power and property that aggravated the natural disasters of that year and ultimately brought the Bengal famine about. The play stages the farings of the family around Pradhan, Kunja, Binodoni and Radhika from Aminpur. After being forced into selling a big part of their land to a profitteur money lender and losing a child due to starvation, the family members travel to Calcutta just as "all those famine Bengalis [who] come into the city for dying".[58] What is shown of the city is a resting place of rural beggars selling their photographs to journalists (p. 74–75); a rich house in which a huge marriage celebration for more than one thousand guests is being planned while one of the protagonists, sneaking around the house and checking the garbage cans, is bitten by a dog;[59] and a hospital in which the most basic equipment to prevent the patients from dying are lacking.[60] Cynically it is a tout, luring good-looking Binodini into a rich man's house, who utters one of the decisive lines: "The city is a market now, there is no dearth of bad people – it is very difficult."[61]

There are more explicit denunciations of the city as an exploitative social organism as we move on into the latter half of the twentieth century, e. g. in Badal Sarkar's theatre which is part of the direct legacy of Bijan Bhattacharya's work. Sarkar, the famous Bengali avant-garde playwright, devised a form of theatre which was based on a Marxist sociological analysis of Indian society in terms of the urban and the rural as defining polarities in a kind of drain game. The colonial city augmented the differences between village and city into a proper antagonism (*birodh*), with the city not only continuing to draw its wealth from the countryside as before, but threatening the very existence of its rural producers.[62] By the side of urban stage theatre and rural *yātrā* performances, Badal Sarkar positioned an activist "Third Theatre" in order to bridge the gap between the city and the countryside. Inspired by Grotowski's ideas, this theatre was to be radically non-commercial, authorship was to be collective, it had to be portable (no stage design), and a new body language had to be devised.

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58 Deprecating remark by Rajib, a rich capitalist/landlord who urges the rice merchant working for him to stockpile rice in order to raise the price further (Bhaṭṭācārya 1990: 73).

59 Bhaṭṭācārya 1990: 81ff. (2nd act, 3rd scene). Actually the stage is divided so as to directly juxtapose these two events.

60 Bhaṭṭācārya 1990: 102ff. (3rd act, 2nd scene).

61 Bhaṭṭācārya 1990: 79.

62 Harder 2001: 664; from Sar'kār 1994: 12.

A paradigmatic production of Badal Sarkar's Third Theatre is the play *Bhomā* (1980). It does not have a proper plot and consists mainly of the juxtaposition of two very disparate living worlds. One is that of Bhomā, a villager living in the Sundarbans, and the other that of a collective of middle-class citizens in Calcutta. Bhomā's life is characterised by extreme hardship and starving, whereas the middle-class group does not tire to praise India's greatness, culminating in the Indian atom bomb. Extremely remarkable is the very dramatic collision of Bhomā's rural life story with interspersed economist statements on inflation and investment opportunities: Bhomā's story very literally struggles for being heard and is after each sentence shouted down by the market economists. There also is a sort of middle-class touristic vision of India and celebration of Calcutta.

> See India, see India, see India! / Indiaaaaa! / Bhaaaaarat! / Mohenjo Daro Ayodhya Pataliputra / Town city metropolis! / Harappa Indraprastha Benares and? / Calcutta! / Delhi Bombay Madras and? / Calcutta! / Megamegamegametropolis? / Calcutta![63]

In sum, the postcolonial Indian city is portrayed in Marxist terms as an entirely parasitic superstructure. Badal Sarkar, in particular, develops a programmatic approach to the exploitative relationship between city and village. Middle-class urban ethos is dismissed as a dangerously false ideology that silences the realities of the contemporary country. The radical nature of the denunciation is unparalleled in the types of text production examined before. The anti-urban position might suggest an association with the literary discourse initiated by Harishchandra and with Gandhian anti-urbanism, but politically as well as aesthetically this appears to be a rather unlikely alliance.

7 Modern city novels in South Asian vernaculars

But let us move back to narrative literature and the novel in this last instance of the present argument. There is no dearth of city literature in modern South Asian novels, as some name-dropping of modern classics throughout the twentieth century in Urdu, Hindi and Bengali easily shows: Ruswa's famous *Umrāo Jān Adā* (1899) and its representation of Lakhnawi post-Nawabi culture; Calcutta in Tagore's *Gorā* (1910), Premchand's *Godān* (1936) and the attempt to narrate city and countryside in one novel; Abdul Bismillah's Hindi novel *Jhīnī jhīnī bīnī cad'riyā* (1986) on Benares, Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Se samaẏ* (1982) on nineteenth century Kolkata etc.

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63 Harder 2001: 670; from Sar'kār 1980: 9.

An overview compiled by Shashikant for SARAI at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi features a three-digit list of Hindi sources (novels, stories etc.) dealing with cities.[64] The degree to which a novel engages with urbanity is naturally at great variance. Without going into the debate about the criteria for becoming a "proper" city novel,[65] the present argument will highlight strong engagements with urbanity and attempts to narrate (parts of) cities in South Asia and, in order to scale this huge topic down to the present format, deal with altogether four South Asian novels on the city of Calcutta.

The first of these is by Rajkamal Chaudhuri (1929–67), a Bihari author of Maithili and Hindi works. Chaudhuri, while in Calcutta, was in close touch with the mostly Bengali poets of the "hungry generation" and like them took up many tabooed topics in his Hindi prose. His novel *Mach'lī marī huī* ("dead fish") is supposed to be the first account of lesbian love in Hindi. Other writings include a critical study of the film world in Bombay and a proper Calcutta novel called *Nadī bah'tī thī* ("The river flowed", c. 1960). The author professes in a foreword that after coming to Calcutta in 1957, he was witness to an ongoing process of urbanisation: literally, of how the city made inroads into the surrounding landscape, producing ambivalent spaces that are not quite urban yet, but no longer rural either, and that he felt quite alienated particularly by the mercantile nature of the city that also governed the relations between the genders:

> This largest city of Asia[66] seemed very unfamiliar to me: very broad streets, and inside the lanes even narrower lanes. Men wearing fantastic clothes and hidden inside them old animals; women clad in low-cuts and shirts and hidden inside them hungry deer. Men, women, and between them a contract, a jolly [*hasīn*] compromise-maker: money. [...] Life was running according to a fixed rhythm like a machine. [...] Calcutta is a very big city, and it is quickly entering the little towns and villages in its vicinity. To this must be added that the refugees

64 Cf. Śaśikāṃt (comp.) 2005.

65 The city novel is often treated as a subgenre of the novel. In German literature, for instance, the classical city novels come down to Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), Musils *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930–32) and Fallada's *Kleiner Mann, was nun?* (1932). But this classical corpus hardly offers detailed criteria for "proper" city novels. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, for instance, is not an attempt to comprehensively narrate Berlin but, if at all, only certain parts of it (mostly Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg). And while the novel does evoke the urban machinery in its frequent quotes from municipal announcements, regulations, statistics, advertisements, street sounds, and the atmosphere through its consistent use of local language, its guiding principle remains its focus on the central character (Franz Biberkopf). Taking this as a lead, the criterion for a novel to become a city novel would seem to be nothing more or less than a consistent focus on aspects of urban life.

66 For the 1960s this was true at least for South Asia where Bombay and Delhi had still not caught up with Calcutta in size, but there is reason to be unsure regarding the Chinese competitors.

> from East Pakistan have settled on all sides of Calcutta. And it is also true that up to Burdwan on this side and up to Berhampur on the other people are daily commuting to Calcutta, and are daily taking away with them some thing, some situation, some habit from Calcutta. (Caudhʾrī 1985: p. (5)–(6) [own pagination])

In the novel the well-known central locations in Calcutta (New Market, Chowringhee, Victoria Memorial etc.) feature as working habitats and as leisure destinations only, while the focus is a fictitious neighbourhood called Machhlibagan: a village in the process of becoming a suburban settlement. Rajkamal Chaudhuri introduces a set of about ten main characters from different social walks. There is an out-of-work East Bengali refugee youth, an entrepreneur in the film industry in neighbouring Tollygunge, a Bengali intellectual editing a newspaper, two refugee orphan girls working as prostitutes, an educated lady with a grown-up daughter in search of a husband, etc.

Chaudhuri presents the locality as the interlacing stories of all these characters and time and again wonders about the elusive nature of the city. Machhlibagan is neither village nor city; for some, only Barabazar is Calcutta, whereas the narrator's voice concedes that Calcutta lives on Barabazar and Clive Street but refuses to locate it either there or in the city's nightlife (p. 36–37). Another underlying theme running through the narration is the quest for the reasons of this rapid urbanization and the dystopian vision of the city as a machine making people forfeit their vital energy, agricultural work and families for the sake of money (p. 118 ff.). The overarching metaphor for this condition, narrativized in the characters of the novel, is the flowing river of the title, for example when protagonist Sonali proclaims: *maiṃ machʾlī hũ̃, ... aur nadī bahʾtī hai* ("I am a fish ... and the river flows"). In one instance, this river of love, hate and life has been replaced by a huge machine with men in it in the shape of little screws (p. 128); in another, it is society as such which is identified as a machine (p. 134); in yet another, the stream moves on and on through various transformations (p. 141: *ek nadī bahʾtī thī. dūsʾrī nadī bahʾne lagegī.*); and finally, there is the realization that it is all about a huge net of interdependencies: "Calcutta is so big, but without Delhi, New York, London and Moscow it will lose its breath." (p. 142)

A somewhat similar plot structure is to be found in Shankar's Bengali bestseller *Caurangī* (1962). The main difference is that here the unity of presentation is not organized around a suburban settlement, but a grand hotel, the Shahjahan, in central Calcutta. Correspondingly the narration does not view the city from the margins but from its centre, even if somewhat paradoxically it is this center which becomes a sign of translocality.

> In this cursed city of history, so many extraordinary men have left the dust of their feet. How many came into life bereft of all [*niḥsva*] but became the masters of inexhaustible fortunes! Their blood, languages and dresses were different, but their goal was one. And Mahākāl, like the head sweeper of the world corporation, takes his broom from time to time to clean away all the well-known and unknown, rich and poor, natives and foreigners into the dustbin of oblivion. Just a few have managed to deceive this broom and stay alive. (p. 38)[67]

Like *Nadī bah'tī hai*, the novel consists of a large set of characters and numerous episodes that are intertwined with each other mainly by their connection with the hotel. One the one hand, this semi-autobiographical narration provides peeps into an unexpected side of Calcutta's high class and translocal community and visitors in early post-Independence times, while on the other, the narrator's own humble local background as well as repeated incursions into the city's less well-to-do living habitats prevent this account from aloofness. The set of characters includes Marcopolo, an expatriate Italian, world traveler, and manager of the Shahjahan; Byron Sahab, a struggling private detective; Mrs Pakrashi, a high-class lady meeting her affairs in the hotel; P.C. Gomez, bandleader; Sutherland Sahib, altruistic doctor who works for the WHO; ladies, barmaids, dancers from England;[68] and of course also the narrator himself (also named Śaṃkar) whose span of employment at the hotel, starting by the happy intervention of detective Byron and ending with Marcopolo's replacement as manager, marks the temporal frame of the narration.

The novel's great success – 22 editions between 1962 and 1970 – testifies to the freshness and fluency of the narration but may partly also be due to a certain social voyeurism that Shankar exploits skillfully in his depictions of liminal characters. Calcutta as the direct context of the hotel is often referred to in tropes that cater to notions of intimacy with one's city on the part of Calcutta-based readers. This is how one can read a narratorial observation on the sensual, or more aptly olfactory, aspects of the city like the following: "I can tell the difference between Chātāoẏālā gali and Decker Street even if my eyes are veiled" (Śaṃkar 1987: 46). The fugitive nature of happiness, life and settings lends itself to a hotel novel; it arguably acts as a keynote to the novel as a whole and is time and again also attributed to the city of Calcutta (also in an intertextual fashion as the author was well-acquainted with the "city of dreadful nights" and includes references to Rudyard Kipling and others in his novel).

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67 Śaṃkar 1987: 38.

68 Who have been coming since the opening of the Suez Canal (cf. Śaṃkar 1987: 105ff., 112–113); cf. the love story of Jane (one of these) and Robby until the latter loses his job and dies (p. 126).

So we find Shankar's elderly colleagues and mentors at the hotel utter verdicts on the city: "Nothing at all is ever stable in this peculiar city [*ājab nagare*]"; and

> Fame? Also fame is as stable here as a drop on a lotus leaf. He who was a king yesterday and used to spend his nights in the most expensive room of the hotel, is now a pauper who has taken refuge in the city's streets. Life, youth and everything else of this city is very momentary (*kṣaṇasthāẏī*).[69]

And it is the hotel, with its transitory nature and as an apt embodiment of urbanity, that is the relatively most stable location. The novel *Caurańgī*, in short, gazes at the city through the ambivalent prism of the hotel – a prism both microcosmic in that it metonymically stands for the city, and macrocosmic in that it brings together a far larger geographical and cultural horizon into the transitory Calcutta frame.

In great contrast to such a procedure, the next work to be discussed focuses on a particular locality within the city, one that is not in the least characterized by any degree of cosmopolitanism but precisely by its strong localization. Nabarun Bhattacharya's Bengali novel *Herbert* (1993) narrates the life of Herbert Sarkar, a neglected youth who grows up in lower middle class circumstances in central Calcutta. He uses ideas from the very few books he has ever read to set up a business as a medium and opens up an office called "Conversations with the dead". Herbert actually succeeds for a while and gathers a circle of hard-drinking admirers around him. But eventually the Rationalist Society of Bengal singles him out as a quack to be exposed, and this ultimately leads to his suicide.[70] This extremely witty and somewhat hard-boiled study of a cultural milieu that might best be described as an urban sediment keeps aesthetically above the mud of dirty rooms and even dirtier language it depicts by a very thorough satirical bend of mind – which makes it an exceptional novel indeed.

The last text in this survey is another example for a Hindi novel dealing with Calcutta, and one of a very different kind: Alka Saraogi's well-known and widely translated *Kali-kathā: vāyā bāipās* (1998).[71] The title is a multiple pun linking the name of the city Calcutta (Kalikata in formal *sādhu bhāṣā* Bengali)) to what literally reads as "a *kali yuga* narration" (*kali-kathā*) and the microcosmic heart surgery of the protagonist to various macrocosmic bypasses in the city-scape and narrative set-up. *Kali-kathā* is very consciously conceived as a novel of

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69 Śaṃkar 1987: 84.

70 Cf. Bhaṭṭācārya 1993.

71 For a detailed study of Alka Saraogi and other female Hindi (Marwari) writers on Calcutta, see Parson 2012.

memories, narrated in the main with Kishor Babu, a Marwari merchant born in the 1920s, and his great-grandfather Ramvilas as focalisers, from a present in the late twentieth century after the Ayodhya incidents of 1992. Simultaneously, as will be argued, it is a very conscious city novel as well. The trigger for the narration is Kishor's bypass surgery and subsequent character alteration through a sudden hit on his head, making him into a flaneur-like errant stroller through the city and a collector of memories. This results in a saga spanning two centuries of this Marwari family, the Calcutta Marwaris in general and the city as a whole.

The narration falls basically into three roughly chronological sections, though thoroughly interspersed with time leaps. One is the early migration story of Ramvilas who first commuted between Calcutta and Marwar and then came to settle in the city in the nineteenth century; the second Kishor's early life in the first half of the twentieth century; and the third Kishor's present in the 1990s. The narration is ridden by a double agenda. In one sense, *Kali-kathā* is a plea for a differentiated assessment of the Marwari community in Calcutta, partly set against prevailing prejudices in Bengali middle class circles.[72] Incidentally, Kishor's credentials as a Bengalified Marwari are established.[73] Simultaneously, in a larger sense, the novel aspires to narrate the city. This is especially conspicuous in the way the city's history is "covered" even in those aspects that do not have any direct relation to the plot. Job Charnock, the Black Hole of Calcutta, the black and the white city, the 1943 famine and 1947 riots, *kabiẏāl*s and *bāul*s – all are somehow brought into the story, at times, one might critically remark, by using characters as informants in a somewhat artificial fashion.[74]

These novels, and hundreds of others, look at urban living conditions and target the urban experience very directly. They explore aspects of urbanity that are beyond or below common perception ("Milieustudie"), or make sense of urbanity as a mode of living. As expected from the genre of the novel, which has historically evolved as a meta-genre integrating within itself all kinds of other

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72 Thus may be read the part on Ramvilas' and especially Kishor's allegiance to personal friends among the British as opposed to the virulent anti-British nationalism of Kishor's Bengali friend Shantanu, an account that serves as an assertion of Kishor's moral credibility. Cf. Sarāv'gī 1998: 94–97.

73 Cf. the use of the *ek'tārā*, a one-stringed instrument famously connected with the Bauls of Bengal, in a phrase such as the following: *kiśor ke hṛday meṃ jaise koī ek'tārā baj rahā hai* ("It is as if there were an ektara resounding in Kishor's heart"; p. 136). The Chapter "Nineteenth fourty-two: A Love Story?" is almost entirely devoted to Kishor's Bengalification (pp. 114–136).

74 See Sarāv'gī 1998: 101–102 about Job Charnock, the peepal tree under which he used to sit, and his going native as narrated by Shantanu; and again p. 123 where Shantanu is made to inform the readers about Kabials (*kabiẏāl*s, traditional contest singers) and Bauls.

literary genres, the range of these engagements is very wide and encompasses very different interpretations of urban experiences. And even more than the other sections of this article, this one deals with the literal tip of the iceberg and calls for much more detailed research. Given the size of this corpus, however, it becomes abundantly clear that these novels could be read as part of a larger aesthetic and ideological response to urban experiences. By all means one should expect that current concerns with megacities care to look at them as a significant corpus of representations.

8 Summary

It is time to bring to a close this attempt to delineate engagements with urbanity in regional-language literatures of South Asia and to summarize whatever results it has yielded. The aim being a call for attention to overarching discourses on urbanity in these literatures, an in-depth analysis of single texts has not been attempted. And, necessarily, the urge to point out involvements with the urban in a relatively *longue durée* and over a few languages has made this article simultaneously longish and still highly sketchy. Large areas of text production have remained excluded, for instance postcolonial poetry with its highly expressive evocations of urbanity.[75] And jumping languages and literatures in the way it has been done here also risks amalgamating discourses that either ought to be kept apart or compared in much greater detail.

But as stated at the outset, such are the disadvantages when one attempts to gain a macro perspective and draw a larger picture. Moreover, the choice of such a variegated basis is of course not just for the fun of it but in answer to another presence – rather tacit in this article but not at all otherwise – that sets the terms of trade by its subcontinental aspirations at present, namely English writing in South Asia. In order to posit the vernacular vis-à-vis the English, it seems imperative to rely not just on one language but to set the vernacular in a plural, collective mode. Whatever the perils of such a bird's eye procedure, there are some reasonable gains.

First, the line-up of chosen texts, most again standing for a multitude of other, comparable ones, make it amply clear that regional literatures of South Asia provide an immensely rich archive of urbanity narratives, and can by no means be dismissed as irrelevant to the topic when juxtaposed to English-language literary production. This needs emphasis, for in many present-day urban environments in

75 I hope to take up urbanity in modern Bengali poetry and, more specifically, poetical dealings with the city of Kolkata in a separate article.

South Asia it seems to have become counter-intentional to assume that vernaculars have anything important to say on such matters.

Second, while I have tried to cautiously suggest a ramified trajectory of attitudes vis-à-vis the urban across discrete traditions of writing, the sequence of sections in this article is in itself sufficient proof that there is anything but a linear development of narrative dealings with the city. If one were to arrive at a more conclusive line of development, far more material would have to be viewed, leading again in all likelihood to very different trajectories. This is a negative result, but one that can positively counteract current tacit prejudices regarding vernacular production being pro-rural and anti-urban, which is clearly not the case.

Lastly, and in continuation to the second point, the quest for an urban ethos that was announced at the outset is of course doomed if understood as a unified position on urbanity. But some tendencies can be identified. Exotic depictions of the city usually, in accordance with their readers' horizon of expectation, exploit the differential rural versus urban rather than (as happens in some Indian city writing in English) Indian versus international urbanity. Also, there seems to be a pronounced tendency to portray the urban in terms of human relationships. There are rather few detailed descriptions of buildings, streets, or cityscapes, and little involvement with the spatial, infrastructural and architectonic aspects of urbanity in the examples discussed. An urban ethos is detectable in the depictions of social, ethnic and linguistic diverseness among city dwellers. In the case of Calcutta, on which the last section was focused, just as probably in others, literary representations clearly mirror general perceptions and coincide with a pronounced self-reflexive city discourse.

In conclusion of this tour de force, I hope, certain lines have become apparent along which one could move on with these questions. One is the study of particular vernacular discourses on urbanity, literary representations of single cities, or city imagery and discourses within single languages. All of these are wide fields that have not yet been sufficiently explored, it seems. Another line of investigation is of course a comparison of the English and "vernacular" realms of representation in South Asia, whose dividing lines – as this article has also tangentially tried to assert – are far more subtle and complicated than usually assumed.

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