

Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 8: Visions of Urbanity

- 1) **Non-fiction**
(Miller/Metha)
- 2) **Bombay/Mumbai Co-Ordinates**
- 3) **Growing Up in Bombay**
(Rushdie/Nagarkar)
- 4) **Fictional Bombays, Sprawling and Concise**
(Chandra/Tyrewala)

1) Non-fiction

Sam Miller, *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* (2009)

(Sam Miller, *1992 London, BBC correspondent in Delhi in the early 1990s, returned to Delhi in 2002 to stay)

Prologue:

[...] During my latest Delhi sojourn I developed a new middle-of-the-night game: the search for the perfect geometric method for exploring the city on foot. I used Delhi – as wide as it is long, and vaguely circular – as my model. I was searching for a solution that was practical, mathematically sound, and aesthetically appealing. Circles [...] by their very nature [...] leave out the heart, and are usually suffocatingly polluted. I considered other solutions: letters of the alphabet [...] But there was no logic to these solutions.

[...]

One night, at three in the morning, I found the shape that I wanted [...] How could I visit each circle, and move between these circles? By spiralling. A closely packed spiral is, after all, hard to distinguish from a series of concentric circles [...] I had found both my device and my metaphor. A spiral through Delhi would give me a loose framework for my wanderings, always forcing me away gently from places I have already visited. Eventually, I would reach beyond the city [...] I now had a template for discovery, for chance meetings, for exploring this frightful, delightful city in flux. In the controlled randomness of a spiral embossed on the surface of Delhi, I hoped to make better sense to myself of a city I love and hate, all at once, in a way which, as I prepare myself to begin my walk, captivates and astonishes me.

At night, I make plans for a city laid down
Like the hips of a girl on the spring covered ground.
Spirals and capitals like the twist of a script;
Streets named for heroes that could almost exist.

Josh Ritter
Thin Blue Flame
from the album *The Animal Years*; V2; 2006

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Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004)

(Suketu Mehta, *1963 Kolkata, raised in Mumbai, lived in New York from 1977, returned in the late 1990s for extended research that fed into *Maximum City*)

Part I: Power

(Personal Geography – Politics – Crime – Economy)

Part II: Pleasure

(Food – Entertainment/Night Life/Celebrations – Culture)

Part III: Passages

(Meetings and Episodes)

2) Bombay Co-ordinates

There will soon be more people living in the city of Bombay than on the continent of Australia. URBS PRIMA IN INDIS reads a plaque outside the Gateway of India. It is also Urbs Prima in Mundis, at least in one area, the first test of the vitality of a city: the number of people living in it. With 14 million people, Bombay is the biggest city on the planet of a race of city dwellers. Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us.

Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004)

Greater Bombay:

19 million inhabitants (2004) (= bigger than 173 countries in the world, it would be ranked at number 54)

Population density:

India: < 120 people per square mile (Belgium 130, the Netherlands 150!)

Berlin: 1,130

Singapore: 2,535

Bombay: island city 17,550, parts of Central Bombay 1 million (two thirds of the city's residents are crowded in just 5 percent of the total area, while the richer or more rent-protected one-third monopolize the remaining 95 percent)

(Mehta, 16)

Ptolemy (150 CE):

Heptanesia ('the city of seven islands')

Sultan Kutb-ud-din, Mubarak Shah I (14th C):

demolished temples and became a demon

> Hindu name Mumba Rakshasa

> other Hindu names: Manbai, Mambai, Mambe, Mumbadevi, Bumbai, Mumbai

the Portuguese (16th C):

Bom Bahia, Buon Bahia, Bombaim ('good bay'), Boa-Vida ('good life')

Ruled by:

Hindu fisherfolk, Muslim kings, the Portuguese, the British, Parsi and Gujarati businessmen, shtets (joined by Sindhis, Marwaris, and Punjabis), Maharashtrians

(Mehta 2004, 14)

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 1672-75 | Gerald Aungier, governor East India Company, introduces freedom of religion and of movement (in marked departure from Portuguese feudal and religious policy) > free port |
| 1861-65 | Bombay replaces the American cotton supply to England, earning 81 million pounds more than the city would normally have received for its cotton |
| 1869 | opening of the Suez canal cuts travel time by half |
| 1911 | George V visits India |
| 1927 | Gateway to India build to commemorate his arrival |
| 1947 | last British troops leave through the gate |
| 1992-93 | Hindu-Muslim riots and bomb blasts in Bombay put an end to the city's detachment from India (> 2006/2008) |

3) Growing Up in Bombay

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)

Bombay! I hugged Aadam fiercely, and was unable to resist uttering an ancient cry: 'Back-to-Bom!' I cheered [...] and again, and again, and again: 'Back! Back-to-Bom!'

By bus down Bellasis Road, towards the Tardeo roundabout, we travelled past Parsees with sunken eyes, past bicycle-repair shops and Irani cafés; and then Hornby Vellard was on our right [...] and we were rattling and banging past traffic-cops with sun-umbrellas, past Mahalaxmi temple – and then Warden Road! The Breach Candy Swimming Baths! And there, look, the shops ... but the names had changed: where was Reader's Paradise with its stacks of Superman comics? Where, the Band Box laundry and Bombelli's, with their One Yard of Chocolates? And, my God, look, atop a two-storey hillock where once the palaces of William Methwold stood wreathed in bougainvillea and stared proudly out to sea ... look at it, a great pink monster of a building, the roseate skyscraper of the Narlikar women, standing over and obliterating the circus-ring of childhood ... yes, it was my Bombay, but also not-mine, because we reached Kemp's Corner to find the hoardings of Air-India's little rajah and of the Kolynos Kid gone, gone for good [...] flyovers crisscrossed where, once upon a time, medicines were dispensed and a pixie in a chlorophyll cap beamed down upon the traffic. Elegiacally, I murmured under my breath: 'Keep Teeth Kleen and Keep Teeth Brite! Keep Teeth Kolynos Super White!' But despite my incantation, the past failed to reappear; we rattled on down Gibbs Road and dismounted near Chowpatty Beach. (451f.)

Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)

I [...] was raised neither as Catholic nor as Jew. I was both, and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was – what's the word these days? – *atomised*. Yessir: a real Bombay mix. (104)

Please understand that I am not claiming to have been a prodigy of any kind. I had no early genius for chess or mathematics or the sitar. Yet I have always been, if only in my uncontrollable increases, prodigious. Like the city itself, Bombay of my joys and sorrows, I mushroomed into a huge urban sprawl of a fellow, I expanded without time for proper planning, without any pauses to learn from my experiences or my mistakes or my contemporaries, without time for reflection. How then could I have turned out to be anything but a mess? (161f.)

Bombay was central; had always been. Just as the fanatical 'Catholic Kings' had besieged Granada and awaited the Alhambra's fall, so now barbarism was standing at our gates. O Bombay! *Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the West!* Like Granada [...] you were the glory of your time. But a darker time came upon you, and just as Boabdil, the last Nasrid Sultan, was too weak to defend his great treasure, so we, too, were proved wanting. For the barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full of our doom [...] these fanatics of those, our crazies or yours; but the explosions burst out of our very own bodies. We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil – no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within. [...] And now we can only weep, at the last, for what we were too enfeebled, too corrupt, too little, too contemptible to defend. (372f.)

As my aeroplane banked over the city I could see columns of smoke rising. There was nothing holding me to Bombay any more. It was no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy. Something had ended (the world?) and what remained, I didn't know. (376)

Kiran Nagarkar, *Ravan & Eddie* (1995) / *The Extras* (2012)

Chawl No. 17

Ravan Pawar, son of Parvati and Shankar-rao Pawar (Hindu)

Eddie Coutinho, son of Violet and Victor Coutinho (Catholic)

- > the micro-perspective of daily life, with occasional forays into the historical background

4) Fictional Bombays, Sprawling and Concise

Vikram Chandra,

Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995)

Love and Longing in Bombay (1997)

Sacred Games (2006) (900+ pages, 26 chapters)

A) The Sartaj Singh-Plot

(11 chapters, authorial narration, detective story with 'epic' aspirations)

B) Ganesh Gaitonde's Life-Story

(9 chapters, alternating with Sartaj Singh-Plot, first-person narration, introducing historical depth)

C) Insets

1) A House in a Distant City:

The Punjab childhood of Sartaj's mother; her sister abducted during Partition violence

2) The Great Game:

Secret agent K.D. Yadav dying in hospital, helping his protégé Anjali Mathur

3) Five Fragments:

- a) Pakistani operations in London (> 2)
- b) Ram Pari in Punjab (> 1)
- c) Smuggling arms from Pakistan to India (> 2, 3a)
- d) the doctor's perspective (> 2)
- e) Shahid Khan in London (> 1/2)

4) Two Deaths in Cities far from Home

- a) Katekar's murderer (from Bihar to Mumbai)
- b) Shahid Khan's family in Maryland (> 1)

A)
(1) Policeman's Day

A white Pomeranian named Fluffy flew out of a fifth-floor window in Panna, which was a brand-new building with the painter's scaffolding still around it. Fluffy screamed in her little lap-dog voice all the way down, like a little white kettle losing steam, bounced off the bonnet of a Cielo, and skidded to a halt near the rank of schoolgirls waiting for the St. Mary's Convent bus. There was remarkably little blood, but the sight of Fluffy's brains did send the conventeers into hysterics, and meanwhile, above, the man who had swung Fluffy around his head by one leg, who had slung Fluffy into the void, one Mr Mahesh Pandey of Mirage Textiles, that man was leaning on his windowsill and laughing. Mrs Kamala Pandey, who in talking to Fluffy always spoke of herself as 'Mummy', now staggered and ran to her kitchen and plucked from the magnetic holder a knife nine inches long and two wide. When Sartaj and Katekar broke open the door to apartment 502, Mrs Pandey was standing in front of the bedroom door, looking intensely at a dense circle of two-inch wounds in the wood, about chest-high. As Sartaj watched, she sighed, raised her hand and stabbed the door again. She had to struggle with both hands on the handle to get the knife out.

'Mrs Pandey,' Sartaj said.

[...]

Sartaj got off the bike. He put his shoes upon the pedal, one by one, and buffed them with a spare handkerchief until they shone. Then he ran a finger round his waistline, along the belt. He patted his cheeks, and ran a forefinger and thumb along his moustache. He was sure it was magnificent. He was ready. He went in and began another day.

B)
(3) Ganesh Gaitonde Sells His Gold

So, Sardar-ji, are you listening still? Are you somewhere in this world with me? I can feel you. What happened next, and what happened next, you want to know. I was walking under the whirling sky riven by clouds, with the unceasing tug of gold on my bag and the city ahead. I was nineteen and I had gold on my back. Here I was, Ganesh Gaitonde [...]

Altaf Tyrewala, *No God In Sight* (2006)

- a (short) novel in 45 segments
- first-person narrative, present tense, moving episodically from one character to the next in a relay race of laconic testimonies
- authorial narration, past tense (9x)
 - *An Omniscient Villager (#10)
 - *Meanwhile, on the Floor Above/Below (#18)
 - *A Digression with a Purpose (#21)
 - *A Prelude to the Death of Sohail Tankawala (#28)
 - *On That Very Same Afternoon (#31)
 - *What Happened Next (#32)
 - *What Really Happened Next (#33)
 - *The Rest of the Enjoyable Evening (#41)
 - *Much Later That Night (#42)
- second-person narration
 - *When You Are a Beggar (#43)
- I – you – he: Rahul Adhikari, Siddharta in Denial (# 44)

Mrs. Khwaja (1)

I used to be a poetess and would dwell on minute metaphors for days.

Now all day I cook for Ubaid and Minaz, spend the thousands their father spends every month, and contemplate television absentmindedly.

I have nothing more to say.

The hum of air-conditioned rooms and twenty-four-hour TV has silenced me.

Mr. Khwaja (2)

Twenty-six years ago I married a mediocre poetess. She gave me two kids – a son who spends every waking hour online, and a daughter who is never home.

We live together and are still married, the woman and I.

The poetry has escaped our lives. I don't know her any more.

Ubaid (3)

Home is where mom chases me with a plateful of food and frozen poems in her eyes. Where dad is vocal with his disapproval and where my sister Minaz, on witnessing the scenes, runs out the door like an anxious squirrel.

My heart isn't at home.

All day long I roam desolate cyber landscapes and chat with disembodied strangers – in search of a home, a heart.

Minaz (4)

I won't be pregnant for long now [...]

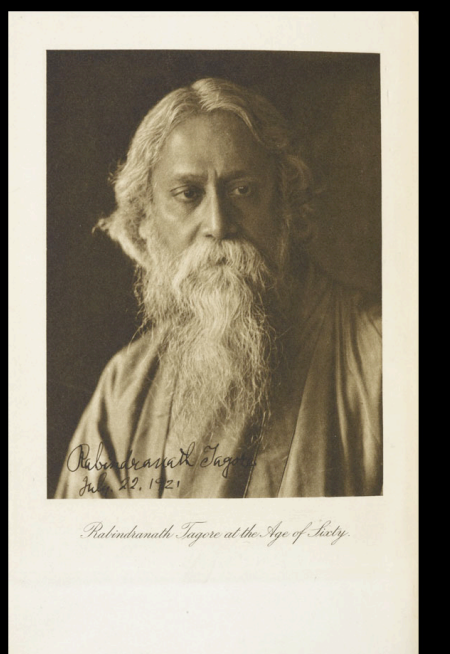
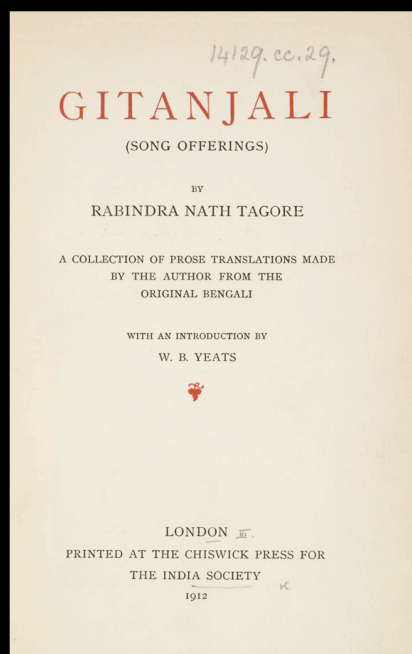
- **The Doctor**
- **Kaka [the doctor's father]**
- **Amin-bhai [owner of shoe-shop]**
[...] Let them have their Hindustan for Hindus

THE VERY BEGINNING

- **Babua**
- **Zail Singh, the Scapegoat**
- **An Omniscient Villager**

[...]

Special Lecture: “Rabindranath Tagores *Gitanjali* / *Song Offerings* und der Nobelpreis für Literatur”



Ring-VL “Euro-
päische Literatur
aus interdisipli-
närem Blickwin-
kel: Transkultura-
lität”

Mi 16-18
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Date:
9th July

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