



Construction and Destruction—Making Delhi World-Class: A Critical Study of *Trickster City* and *A Free Man*

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ABSTRACT

In post-independence India, the city has served as a critical site for the negotiation of postcolonial citizenship. As Gyan Prakash has noted, literary and cinematic representations of urban spaces have captured both the promise and the failures of this process (199). In this study, I seek to examine the extent to which the postcolonial neoliberal city in India has delivered on its promise of citizenship for the urban poor, and how literature from the region responds to this issue. To explore these questions, I turn to Aman Sethi's *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* and *Trickster City: Writings from the Belly of the Metropolis* which features the works of multiple authors. Both texts offer first-hand accounts of individuals in Delhi who have experienced the effects of neoliberal transformation. These works depict a paradoxical situation: as the city strives to become a world-class metropolis, it simultaneously dispossesses its most vulnerable citizens, who are often the ones contributing their labour to its construction and maintenance. To make sense of this dialectic of construction and destruction, I argue that we must examine the complex interplay between the market, the state, and spatial restructuring. Drawing on the concept of 'precarity', as developed by Irene Pang, David Harvey, Kalyan Sanyal, Giorgio Agamben, Amita Baviskar, D. Asher Ghertner, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja, I analyse the mechanisms that contribute to the precariousness experienced by the urban poor in India.

Keywords: Postcolonial city, precarity, neoliberalism, metropolis, dispossession

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Introduction

My study is concerned with the lived realities of those individuals who are left out in the neoliberal economic development that triggered urban restructuring. I explore the paradoxical relationship of these individuals with this neoliberal urban economy as they are simultaneously the essential pillar of urban restructuring through their labour, as well as the “wreckage and debris” of neoliberal economy and world-class city they built (Sanyal 53). Although neoliberal globalisation impacted South Asia as a whole, but I am convinced that the urban unevenness and social polarisation resulting from it is more evident in India. This is because the Indian urban centres are overwhelmed by gigantic infrastructural plans and private real estate development. The affluence which has become the distinguishing factor of Indian cities has also produced an undesired slum economy which is equally prominent. I explore this gloomy reflection of the ubiquitous proliferation of development which stands in sharp contrast with the slums. My study carries two thematic strands which I consider are the most important consequences of neoliberal globalisation in India: the informal economy and informal housing. India’s desire to shift from being the land of slums to *shining India* is not inclusive, rather it has given rise to two extremes. If India has emerged as a cutting-edge IT industry, the informal economy has also boomed. Simultaneously, informal settlements and contracted slums stand uneasily beside the shiny airports, five-star hotels and spacious gated communities.

To understand precarity in the Indian context, I took insights from Irene Pang’s theorisation of precarity. Pang contends that understanding the mechanism of precarity in terms of informality is problematic. She argues that to understand precarity in the context of the Global South, it is necessary to consider “workers vis-à-vis triadic configuration of state, market and civil society” (4). She further believes this triadic configuration shapes a larger politico-economic structure. As irregularity of labour, fiscal, tax laws and health care instigate precarity, it is often viewed as synonymous with informality. Generally, informality is defined as a way of earning having “one central feature: it is unregulated by the institutions of society, [sic] in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes 12). However, this definition of informality highlights only one aspect of this triadic configuration that is worker-market relations, neglecting the relation of the worker with state and civil society. In this way, the role of the state, by legal and political means, in structuring and reproducing precarity remains unnoticed.

In this article, I analyse urban precarity by moving beyond the dualistic

understanding of phenomenon such as work-market relations versus economic insecurity, as Guy Standing views it, or precarity as a consequence of neoliberalism versus lack of state regulation as suggested by Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes. Neither do I view it as a tussle of informality as a mode of resistance, as is seen in many Latin American studies, because such understandings perpetuate dualistic interpretation of informality which entrench or invert stereotypes instead of breaking them. I argue that a critical understanding of precarity in the South Asian context requires consideration of the complex interplay between the market, state regulation of informality through legal mechanisms, and spatial restructuring. To achieve this, I take Pang's relational conceptualisation of precarity to understand the varying nature of precarity in the Indian context. Pang gives a "triadic relational framework" (2) of the state, market and civil society to examine the broader social, economic and political factors generating precarity. David Harvey's idea of accumulation by dispossession is relevant in my context for understanding the economic factors behind precarity such as broader neoliberal restructuring. Harvey views neoliberalism as a project of "restoration of class power" (28). Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of law and state of exception helps me to examine the role of the Indian judiciary in backing the neoliberal restructuring and beautification plan of Delhi. Edward Soja's theorisation of spatial injustices helps me to analyse the urban poor's unequal access to city resources and space. All these theoretical stances provide a lens to view postcolonial urban poverty from different dimensions and assess the complexity of the phenomenon. By integrating these diverse theoretical perspectives, this article provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of urban precarity in the South Asian context.

In India, it started with the inception of economic liberalisation in the 1990s when Manmohan Singh was president. This liberalisation process left its capital city in a twirl of destruction and reconstruction. Informal habitations and markets were evicted and demolished. Shopping malls and tall buildings emerged from the ruins. Agricultural land was taken over and private sponsors, with the help of the government, established their businesses on it. When the capital city underwent the process of industrialisation, the demand for labour increased. So rural people flocked towards the cities in search of work. The Indian agriculture market was already facing loss due to lack of advanced technology. This urban pull pushed it into further loss. The work these migrants found included cleaning, constructing, and gardening in the homes of the privileged middle class. The new cityscape was designed by those who blindly imported first world architecture to

display the grandeur of the Indian state. These neo-colonial urban elite decorated the urban interior of the city with a daunting infrastructural specimen based on a Vegas-style spectacle. They colonised the system, developed “hyper defended enclaves” in the form of “carefully manicured residential and commercial ecologies” for themselves and left many in a constant state of vulnerability (Dear and Flusty 55,63). The tall buildings, shopping malls, five-star hotels, stadiums and gated housing communities tell a story of the social polarisation embodied in the urban space.

Trickster City: Writings from the Belly of the Metropolis is an English translation of Hindi work titled as *Behrupiya Shehar*. It was written by twenty working-class young Indians who lived in the *bastis*—slums—of Delhi. Those *bastis* were under the threat of demolition for the beautification process of Delhi as it had to be ready in time to host the Commonwealth Games of 2010. The stories are based on the actual experiences of these young people trapped in the horror of poverty, forced evictions and demolition. This collection contains short stories, diary entries, monologues, confessional and short essays. The writers cleverly craft the narration so that it is difficult to disentangle fiction from actual biographic details. Moreover, the narration does not appear as a fictive account about poverty, rather it is narrated with emotive subjectivity as if empirical realities happened before the writers’ eyes. This tricky mixture makes a politicised *testimonio* while focusing on the heterogeneity and multifaceted subjectivity of these urban poor. Also, it provides a complex view of the life of the urban poor having a complex relationship with the city and its bourgeoisie class.

On the other hand, in *A Free Man*, Aman Sethi represents a miraculous transformation of Delhi from “a sleepy north Indian city into a glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower” (38). The book is an authentic account of the experiences of Muhammad Ashraf and his friends who are the rural-to-urban migrants, the lowest in working-class hierarchy and at whose expense Delhi becomes a world-class city. Sethi brings to life the nuanced aspect of Delhi through their experiences and misfortunes at the *old bazaar*, railway stations, parliament house, illegal bars amid densely populated areas, harrowing wards of public hospitals, pavements, and streets. Ashraf’s Delhi is like a selfish giant that ruthlessly munches the poor for nutrition. Its peripheries are full of violence, exploitation and dehumanisation. Awful incidents happen daily at Bara Tooti. Somebody sells his kidney to pay loans; another’s kidney is stolen by an organ mafia who hoodwink labourers in the promise of work; someone loses his mind, runs naked on the roads and is run over in a road accident and many others die

due to tuberculosis. People lose their assets, souvenirs get stolen, and they are beaten up by police.

Accumulation by Dispossession

Neoliberal expansion has exposed dispossession as the defining feature of contemporary capitalism. Harvey suggests that primitive accumulation reappeared, or always existed, as an essential characteristic of late capitalism for its survival. Neoliberal capitalism's systematic transformation towards increased financialisation which coincided with the beautification process of cities initiated a brutal dispossession in many forms.¹

A new urban turn has been detected in postcolonial literature as recent literary writings have frequently represented individuals' relationships with a city. The selected non-fiction is the representation of the urban precariat in the Indian world-class city, Delhi. Ashraf, the main character of Sethi's *A Free Man*, came to Delhi because it offers mysterious "freedom, camaraderie and possibility," so every runaway or labour-hunter would go nowhere other than Delhi (34). After neoliberal restructuring, the "city of people with hearts" turned into violent class struggle, exclusion, and inequality (Tabassum 186). After witnessing Delhi's transformation, Ashraf says that "this is a brutal city, Aman bhai. This is a city that eats you raw—*kaccha chaba jati hai*" (Sethi 114). This violent urban transformation is a result of the neoliberal wave which captured the whole world. However, in South Asia, its impacts were slightly different than the rest of the world as many South Asian neoliberal regimes uphold structural inequality which is bolstered by the state as well as the capitalist and consumerist middle class.

Kalyan Sanyal contends in *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism*, primitive accumulation in a post-colonial context occurs by dispossessing non-capitalist producers of their means of production without absorbing them into the new growth zones of the capitalist economy (xii-xiii). Consequently, this "redundant surplus population unlike, reserve army of labour, is now treated as a permanently excluded population, outside the sphere of capitalist production, for whom a distinct sub-economy had to be created and sustained" (Sanyal xiii). They create communes by forming informal economies and making use of uninhabited lands at the peripheries of a city. The selected texts show that making homes on an uninhabited land was a very difficult task for these migrants due to insufficient

¹ Greta Krippner defines financialisation as "a pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than trade and commodity production" (174). She does not imply that financialisation leads toward unproductivity but claims that increased financialisation of economy disturbs the balance between finance and productivity because it is more concerned with acquiring profit rather than efficiency.

resources and a back-breaking amount of labour. Unaware of all these struggles of the urban outcasts, the urban renewal process was handed over to private sectors in the form of public-private partnership. As a consequence, competitive bidding fuelled the process of violent dispossession. As is shown in *Trickster City* and *A Free Man*, vacant plots and unclaimed spaces along railway tracks and riversides that had previously been available for informal settlers and public use were now incorporated into the profit economy. Sanyal terms the urban poor as the “marginalised of the wasteland” (58). By using several physical, legal, and discursive mechanisms, the state helped the neoliberal agents to convert these commons into capitalist enclosures. Most of this process of dispossession started in the name of city development by rendering forceful evictions and demolitions and leaving many homeless and jobless.

In *Trickster City*, the process of accumulation by urban dispossession is quite evident. One chapter of the book is titled as “Eviction” which consists of diary entries that depict the structural violence that was enacted by the government during the developmental process of Delhi. This chapter is important because it shows the unseen and violent side of urbanisation as well as liberalisation. The authors witnessed their homes being bulldozed. In one diary entry, Jaanu Nagar and Lakhmi Chand Kohli narrate their trauma: “One such board stands in front of my neighbourhood. This land is the property of the government. It should be vacated There are orders for its demolition” (141). The land which was previously a wasteland, and no one claimed it, suddenly becomes the property of the government. A simple notice board from the state had dispossessed them of their shantytown—built by years of labour.

Interestingly, there is no single power that can be held accountable for the violence perpetrated on them. The neoliberal corporate powers behind this planned violence remain faceless: “How can we fight back? Who should we fight against? The charge to fight comes from being able to see the face of the power we must combat. But that face has never made an appearance before us” (Kohli, “What is the City?” 160). The invisibility of the enemy force hints at the deceptive ideology which presents global capitalism as a transcendent power, not under the control of humans but moderated by the unseen hands of the market. Thus, it remains faceless and irresponsible.

The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition was in the Indian Constitution since 1894, later amended in 2013. It enforces compensation to landowners and affected persons as well as ensures transparency in land acquisition processes, but when the slums dwellers of *Trickster City* were

allotted the plots for resettlement, the land was not worthy of building a home. It was many kilometres away from the city and resettlement meant economic dislocation too. Jaanu Nagar, one of the authors of *Trickster City*, says that “the place...has nothing but sand! The land hasn’t even been cleared of the stubble of the legume crops that were grown there, making it difficult to even walk on it” (“Parchee-Tent” 180). Also, the place did not have basic utilities such as water and electricity. This situation of the urban poor denotes what Sanyal views as an interlinked process of post-colonial capital development grounded on “enrichment” and “separation” (57-59). Enrichment is the process of transferring capital from the non-capitalist class to corporate elite and separation refers to the dispossession of the non-capitalist class by not incorporating them into the capital-labour process of wage-earning (Sanyal 57-59). Sethi pens down a similar kind of scenario in *A Free Man*. Ashraf describes the horrors of the demolition of the only home in Delhi he got to sleep in. The house belonged to his *masterji*—tailor master—and Ashraf spent three years in it until a bulldozer razed it: “The demolition ruined Masterji. He didn’t have a title for his land and so never got any compensation” (Sethi 40). In this way, Ashraf ends up unemployed again to roam homelessly for the rest of his life. Sethi provides statistics of the urban reforms of 2004 led by the Delhi Development Authority, “in the first drive, more than 150,000 homes were demolished. Eventually, about 350,000 houses would be levelled as part of a beautification drive launched by a cabal of government agencies” (39-40). He notices that surprisingly the demolition and displacement of 800,000 slum dwellers went unnoticed by the national press; rather, the mainstream media gave more coverage to bizarre events happening in poor neighbourhoods such as “the appearance of fantastic creatures, the rise of serial killers like West Delhi’s Hammerman, and a mysterious masked motorcyclist who was dressed in black and prowled Delhi’s streets by night” (Sethi 40). This suggests what Andrew Mahlstedt has termed as “spectacular invisibility” according to which within the recently globalised capitalism, the poor are simultaneously experiencing a “literal invisibility and deceptive visibility” (60). The poor are either invisible in the literal sense or even if they are visible, their visibility is distorted by the spectacle. This accentuates the irony that the violent struggles of the urban poor are invisible to the privileged class which is more interested in viewing the prevalent romanticised and mysterious version of the former’s life. The romanticised version of poverty either views the poor as a “resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers”, or a spectacle to look at from a safe distance for enjoyment, an exotic other which is distant and desirable

(Karnani 76). Such kind of representations sway the attention away from the legal, regulatory, and socio-economic mechanisms which are responsible for their dire situation.

Ashraf challenges Sethi's status as a privileged cosmopolitan which has the potential to impact his perception of poverty. He says "for you, all this is research: a boy tries to sell his kidney, you write it down in your notebook. A man goes crazy somewhere between Delhi and Bombay, you store it in your recorder. But for other people, this is life" (Sethi 114). Ashraf's challenge is a reference towards the reductive simplicity of poverty which views the poor as a spectacle, something to be pitied, marvelled at or romanticised. Though Sethi's narrative cleverly evades the traps of re-orientalism, but Ashraf's remarks expose the entire privileged class of Indians who interact with these poor daily but are unaware of the realities of their life, and for whom the narratives of poverty are nothing more than a spectacle for enjoyment.

The destruction and displacement of these urban poor highlight the paradox of the so-called "neo-liberal Indian urban utopia" (Dijk 20). Tara van Dijk argues that neoliberal utopia for the rising urban middle class and cool capitalists has modern, technically advanced, highly organised, aesthetically appealing cities which are a functional hub for consumption and capitalist accumulation. For these cool capitalists, *the other India*, which is full of slums and the urban poor, is a scapegoat that threatens their *jouissance* and therefore, must be removed to build world-class cities in India. The demolition of the homes of the characters of *Trickster City* highlights the irony of this discourse of neoliberal utopia and the desire of making Indian cities slum-free. This discourse of a rising and shining India can become functional only by razing the homes of those people who are the real actors in the process of constructing world-class cities. These working poor are the backbone of the urban capital system as they provide services in the form of surplus labour for the process of capital accumulation. Though the city exploits these poor and tries to permanently eliminate them, these people have a strong emotional affiliation with the city. For instance, Shamsher Ali, one of the authors, says that "some people, like rickshaw-pullers, who think of parts of the city as their own garden, can bodily feel this change" (187). The author feels that the discourse of legality and illegality which is forcing them to leave the city is just a fictitious construct created by those "who hold power [and] look at the city from above" (Ali 187-8). Thus, in establishing a close bodily attachment with the city, these authors are claiming a unique right to the city.

In *A Free Man*, Sethi depicts a similar kind of scenario in which Delhi,

being “a giant construction site”, attracts thousands of labourers from all over India (38). Delhi’s Master Plan for making it a world-class city by 2021 mapped a model of a clean and ordered city but ignored the labourers of this construction site and did not make any arrangements for them. Ashraf and other labourers like him have to reside at Bara Tooti Chowk, in the old Sadar Bazar of Delhi. They eat and sleep at the roadsides of Bara Tooti. They use their shoes or satchel as their pillows. They have to carry everything everywhere, every *mazdoor*—labourer—is “a walking album panelled with money, papers, phone numbers, and creased photocopies of ration cards” (Sethi 18). According to Amit K. Giri and S. P. Singh’s statistical analysis, state-led economic reforms in India intended to alleviate poverty have instead expedited the growth of informal labour and increased job insecurity (35). For instance, Delhi’s reconstruction plans were meant to accelerate employment opportunities for construction workers but, due to surplus labour, it induced precarity and unemployment risk. This is because informal labour and contractual work are more profitable for capitalist producers rather than hiring formal employees who have to be ensured job security and extra provisions. Delhi’s construction industry, alongside the growing firms of manufacturing and mining, consume and commodify this near-infinite cheap labour effectively.

Ashraf describes Bara Tooti as one of the largest “labour *mandis*”—labour market (Sethi 12). These labourers gather in the morning at Bara Tooti *chowk* waiting to sell their labour. Ashraf describes the labour division at Bara Tooti based on “skill versus strength” (Sethi 12). On the basis of the work hierarchy, those who have skills are comparatively more advantageous than a *mazdoor* who has to sell his strength. The *mazdoor* exerts more physical effort than any other as he has to perform tasks like “carrying building materials like sand, water, or rubble, breaking down existing structures, digging trenches, or helping build the scaffolding”, but he earns little (Sethi 14). The *mazdoor* earns one-third of the total wage of a man who is skilled, though skilled workers are equally exploited because at the end of the day “they are all mere commodities.

Both texts highlight the negative psychological impacts engendered by the persistent precarity in neoliberal urban India. Apart from economic insecurity, vulnerability to displacement, and punishing work regimes, the urban poor are also under the constant threat of the evisceration of social links, familial bonds, and cultural connections. Anne Allison calls this phenomenon “social precarity” that is “a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one’s (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community” (349). The collected

testimonies of *Trickster City* echo the affective symptoms of unstable work and lifestyle that haunt one's very being. Most notable are the incidents of fleeting romantic relationships depicted in the stories, events illustrating severe corporal punishment and patriarchal injustice fuelled by emasculated masculinities. *A Free Man* depicts how many labourers at Bara Tooti lost connection with their families due to the uncertainty of life, a sense of despair and dire working conditions. Ashraf forgets the phone number of his mother who does not have a permanent address: "I woke up one morning—drunk—and the number had slipped from my mind while I was asleep. It dribbled out of my open mouth; it escaped while I lay snoring" (Sethi 173). He never expresses any emotions about his long-lost son and daughter. Satish and Lalloo too lost connection with their families. Satish is registered as a *lawaris*—a person without any family member—and, while fighting alone with tuberculosis without any emotional support, he "just lost his will to live" (Sethi 157). Satish's tragic death stimulated the horror of dying as a *lawaris* in Ashraf and he understood that "*lawaris* meant he would die on a footpath in Delhi, and no one would even know" (Sethi 176). The same state of anomie and emotional apathy spawned by the newly formed industrial reformation is demonstrated in J. P. Singh Pagal's random rambling. J. P. worked in Bollywood supervising daily wage labourers at film sets but is now another member of Bara Tooti. Sethi found his stories "absurd" but "almost true" and showed a great deal of "deep-seated paranoia against police and government" (42). Though J. P. Sing is not mentally stable, his madness enables him to see beyond the illusory promises offered by neoliberal ideology as demonstrated by the following exchange:

J.P.: You know of the Taj Mahal?

Mazdoor: Yes.

J.P.: Did you know Shah Jahan cut off the hands of everyone who worked on it?

M: No.

J.P.: Do you know if it still happens around here?

M: No...

J.P.: Trust me, it happens. (Sethi 37-38)

This reference towards a historical myth—that of Emperor Shah Jahan chopping off the hands of the artisans of the Taj Mehal so that they would not build anything as wonderful—symbolically hints at the work alienation faced by the working-class in present-day capitalist economies.

Legalising Lawlessness

In this section, I analyse how the Indian judiciary and formal legal frameworks play a crucial role in the dispossession of the urban poor by legalising potentially unlawful means, such as forced evictions, dispossession and unfair compensation, which underscore the ongoing “historical role of law as a discursive practice of ideological power” in public life (Hodkinson and Essen 3). Agamben contends that the contemporary political system works through a state of exception. He traces the origin of the state of exception in Roman Law. The phenomenon of *iustitium*—the suspension of law—is a prototype of the modern state of exception. In Roman Law, whenever the republic was under threat, the senate could declare *iustitium* which allowed for any kind of extra-legal measures. Carl Schmitt contends that *iustitium* marks the same paradoxical void which is the defining characteristic of a state of exception. The paradox lies in the indeterminacy of the exceptional measures taken under this situation. The crimes committed in *iustitium* can neither be justified nor defined in the sphere of justice due to the *suspension* of law. These crimes become mere facts without any kind of moral or judicial liability. Though exceptionality is often understood in the context of wars such as Nazi concentration camps, but those were considered as “limited states of exception” which could only be authorised in war (Agamben 14). However nowadays, Agamben contends, a state of exception is actually a normal technique of governmentality displaying the potential to radically alter legal and political structures. For instance, in Keynesian welfare, precarity is considered as an exception to the normal course of capitalist system. In the neoliberal era, it has become a norm rather than an exception.

I argue that neoliberal governmentality works in post-colonial urban planning via a state of exception, that is, precarity as the new normal. Apart from the economic liberalisation initiated in the 1990s, the Commonwealth Games of 2010 held in Delhi left a devastating impact on the working class of Delhi. India won a bid to hold the Commonwealth Games in 2003 by beating Hamilton, Canada, which was the other contestant. Also, the Indian government promised to provide 7.2 million US dollars to each member state for the expenditure of the visit of players and officials. Charles Piot views such events as “state spectacle” in which a state showcases its power and invites its subjects to validate its existence as an imagined community (91). But in India, this display of state wealth and the desire to prove India as a rising Asian superpower came at a heavy cost. A state of emergency was declared for the preparation of the mega-event which suspended the normative urban development. Richard Gruneau contends that narratives

proposed by the media and local politicians were closely aligned with organisers, business dealers and “middle-class consumers”, and their personal and financial benefits were propagated as being “synonymous with the well-being of the city” (ix–x). State violence enacted in form of forced evictions and dispossession was justified through the doctrine of necessity, temporal and financial pressures and claimed to serve the public good.

Amita Baviskar quotes David Gilmartin that major events- ranging from natural disasters and ethnic violence to international sports contests- come to be “encapsulated in a ‘special time’, a sacred period set apart within the temporality of secular politics” (“Dreaming Big: Spectacular Events and the ‘World-Class’ City” 131). Critical events are significant not just because they continue, but because they disrupt the usual state of affairs. These events bring about new actions and understanding, allowing political actors to take on different forms and meanings. The Commonwealth Games of 2010 and the resultant forced evictions show how the everyday life of a city intersects with transformative moments. The exceptional measures taken by the state reduced the existence of the urban poor to the status of bare life or as Willem Schinkel and Marguerite van den Berg term as *urban homines sacri* (1925).² *Urban homines sacri* are those subpopulations who are thrown in zones of exception, they are not considered as *bios*—citizens with political life—they are liable to legal exceptionalism and thus vulnerable to state violence. So political life is dependent on “the exception, on bare life that is included only through exclusion and on the simultaneous invocation of the state of exception” (Schinkel and Berg 1925). Lakhmi Chand Kohli aptly describes this inclusive-exclusive relationship of these urban homines sacri to the law in the following terms: “When someone is executed, they are asked what their last wish is. We were not asked even that. ‘We will inform you of the date, we will keep you informed’. And look how they have dragged us out today” (“Has He Left? Are You Leaving...?” 153). The fundamental rights of these poor are never endorsed by law but ironically, penalising measures are enacted strictly against these urban *homines sacri* under the rubric of the same law.

Along with the displacement of millions of slum dwellers, the homeless *lawaris*, that is, people without family or kin like Ashraf and Lalloo, also suffered. For instance, during the preparation of the Commonwealth Games, a campaign titled ‘Beggar-free Delhi’ was launched. There is no specific act in the Indian Constitution that directly addresses begging as an offence. Though certain states

² According to Agamben, bare life represents a form of life stripped of any legal or political rights and reduced to mere biological existence. It is a life that is excluded from legal protection and social privileges and certain lives are rendered disposable or marginalised. For instance in exile, concentration camps and state of emergency.

in India have implemented laws or acts to regulate or prohibit begging within their respective jurisdictions, this is a contradiction with the human rights section of the Constitution of India. For instance, considering the Indian Constitution's Article 19, which ensures freedom of expression, and Article 21, which provides the right to life and livelihood, anti-begging laws are a grave violation of such human rights. Additionally, the Beggar-free Delhi campaign unjustly harmed homeless labourers due to a lack of proper training and technical limitations of anti-begging squads. The squads were supposed to raid places like railway stations, bus terminals and religious places and arrest people who appeared to be poor or homeless. They even had the authority to arrest without a warrant. This campaign ended up in the arrests of many people who were not beggars but were only poor or homeless. In *A Free Man*, Sethi hints at the absurdity of this campaign and its technique of catching beggars. For instance, the officer of the Beggar court, Sharmajee, differentiates between beggars from these homeless labourers on the basis of the latter's having calluses and ends up arresting innocent people who are not beggars but are actually poor people whose way of livelihood is not physical labour and therefore, they do not have any calluses. For instance, Sethi bumps into an alleged beggar at Beggar Court and interviews:

I catch up with one of them on my way out. "Are you a beggar?"

"Of course not, I'm a snake charmer."

"So where's your snake?"

"Sharmaji asked me the same question. The Wildlife Department took it away." (123)

Such wrongful detentions and punishments to the lowest strata of society represent the state's naked tyranny against its weak citizens. The Begging Laws imposed by many Indian states are highly inhumane and unjust. The Indian Begging Law itself is highly inhumane and unjust. According to the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, the penalty for begging is three years imprisonment and, on a second offence, it exceeds up to ten.³ Further, the Act states that if a beggar is blind, a cripple or otherwise incurably helpless, the Chief Commissioner has the authority to detain him/her for a lifetime. The irony is that the same punishment criteria is implemented for extortion which suggests that in the law's eye, there is no difference between robbery and begging. This act represents the epitome of the criminalisation of poverty which has been the norm of the neoliberal regime.

Although the urban *homines sacri* are excluded from political life, they are constantly surveilled, disciplined and scrutinised because inhabitants of "zones of exceptions" are prone to "uncivil" and "criminal" behaviour (Schinkel and

³The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act of 1959 acts as a standard begging law which different states adopted.

Berg 1925). Sethi encapsulates life at Bara Tooti in three elements: “the perils of construction work, the horrors wreaked by the police and the sorrow of exile” (8). The arrival of the police at Bara Tooti is always for violent purposes. They are there either to harass these labourers or to arrest them. Sethi narrates an incident in which the Delhi police abuses and beats Lalloo publicly for drinking alcohol on the roadside: “‘Police saab, we made a mistake, forgive us, forgive us, forgive us.’ Lalloo stretched out on the pavement, his hands alternately touching the constable’s shoes and covering his own head to ward off further blows” (59). Beating a defenceless civilian publicly is a serious crime under Indian law but Indian police often violates this law without being questioned. Viewing from an Agambenian sense, the torture inflicted on Lalloo and other homeless people is the very act of turning them into bare life. These homeless people occupy the zone of indistinction in which they can be even killed with impunity. They do not enjoy the protection of life which is granted by law for normal citizens. That is why Nagar berates the slogan written on the police van that conveys a false hope when it accompanies a bulldozer to demolish their homes:

‘With you, to help you’: This was written behind a car that had stopped by the Ring Road. A voice emerges from the vehicle and announces, “Empty the settlement. It will be demolished today.” The terrifying news spread into the settlement. What now! People emerged from every house to find out. It was learnt, the police and the bulldozers were lying in wait outside Pragati Maidan’s Gate no. 1. (“With You, to Help You” 148)

The police, as a representative of law, is considered to be protecting the rights of people but sometimes it becomes the epitome of violence and lawlessness.

The lawlessness enacted by government representatives brings us to Walter Benjamin’s theorisation of bio-power as he argues that bio-power often validates itself through law. He sees a strong historical connection between law and violence. He argues that modern law is not as revolutionary as the law of the past had been, but it does uphold its supremacy by crushing the resisting forces by legitimising its action. So, every legal action can be classified as either law-making violence or law-preserving violence. Shamsher Ali, one of the most significant authors of *Trickster City*, views the law as “a shape-shifting thing” (Ali 187). Every now and then “new laws are bringing about different kinds of change” (Ali 187). When the settlement dwellers appealed in the court against their eviction orders, their appeals were dismissed with the words: “You are illegal occupants. To give you the land you are living on is like returning money to a pickpocket” (187). The judicially authorised fundamental right to adequate housing was completely

neglected. The ones who claimed this right were told: “when you are occupying illegal land, you have no legal right, what to talk of fundamental right, to stay there a minute longer” (Mahmud 698). The courts claimed that allowing the poor to settle on public land will trigger anarchy. In one court hearing it was claimed: “Nobody forced you to come to Delhi. If encroachments on public land are to be allowed, there will be anarchy” (Ramanathan 3197). The court contended that their numbers were increasing day by day, so decisive action must be taken to tackle the problem. The eventual remedy which was suggested was ironically simple: “If they cannot afford to live in [the city], let them not come to [the city]” (Ramanathan 3197). Instead of viewing slums dwellers as nuisance-causing factors, slums were equated with nuisance. They were viewed as a source of pollution, disease, and littering. Such kinds of justifications by the Indian High Court for unjustifiable violence shifted the discursive focus away from a rational analysis to an abstract terrain of aesthetic, environmentalism, and morality. This new discourse of slum dwellers as “pickpockets” instead of victims was so powerful that it delineated the city’s one-quarter population as “illegal, filthy and nuisance causing” (Ghertner 61). Though the Indian Constitution declares the right to necessities for every citizen, but when these poor demanded this right, they were labelled as illegal. Ironically, the standards of legality and illegality are also shape-shifting like the law itself.

Indian law and judiciary played a significant role in the overall reconfiguration of the city landscape and its environment. Also, it showed neoliberal bias and started a new anti-poor juridical orientation in 2004 following the preparation for the Commonwealth Games.⁴ In legal terms, nuisance was defined as “any act, omission, injury, damage, annoyance or offence to the sense of sight, smell, hearing or, which is, or maybe, dangerous to life or injurious to health or property” (Jain 97). In Section 133 of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, nuisance law was extended. It included “obstructions to a public place or way, trades, or activities hazardous to the surrounding community, flammable substances, objects that could fall and cause injury, unfenced excavations or wells, or unconfined and dangerous animals. Nuisances are thus limited to two categories: (i) objects or possessions, and (ii) actions” (Ghertner 3). Until the mid-1990s, the nuisance law had nothing to do with the existence of slums, rather cases and judgments revolved around the nuisance-causing acts of slum dwellers. Besides,

⁴This refers to those court decisions which justified and triggered the slum demolition in India. Critics like Prashanta Bhushan, Ghertner and Ananya Roy viewed these decisions as having an anti-poor agenda. These court orders were based on the ideology that tax-paying citizens are somehow more entitled to citizenship rights than slum dwellers. It created a huge outcry because previously slum dwellers attained relaxations from courts due to their marginalised socio-economic status.

this nuisance law helped slum-dwellers to attain municipal services because the inefficiency of the municipal committee was deemed as the reason behind the nuisance-causing activities of slum dwellers. However, this trend changed after the case of *Dr. B. L. Wadehra vs. Union of India* in 1996 which addressed the issue of poor waste management of Municipal Corporation of Delhi—MCD. In the decision, the Court stated that “when a large number of inhabitants live in slums with no care for hygiene, the problem becomes more complex” (qtd. in Ghertner 5). This judgement equated slums with nuisance by viewing them as places where health and the environment are not the least of concern. It also paved the way for further judgments that favoured the slum demolition process by blurring the line between slum-derived pollution and slums. In *Trickster City*, slum dwellers had made a great effort to sanitise their homes as well as their surroundings. Some of them had built double-storey concrete homes by investing their life savings.

Taking into consideration the theoretical insight provided by Agamben, Baviskar, and Ghertner, I contend that the Indian judiciary’s ecological concerns, the new discourse of nuisance, and the reinterpretation of nuisance law are not objective. Rather the discourse of nuisance is purely aesthetic and based on the bourgeoisie’s perception of acceptable conduct and visual appearance. For instance, in the court hearing of the Pitampura case, property owners were considered as normal citizens and slums were equated with nuisance. Hence, the slum dwellers’ right to life under Article 21, 1950 was considered inapplicable as they were creating nuisance for *normal* propertied citizens. The reinterpretation of nuisance law remodelled the whole phenomenon of public interest. It cleverly added private interests of the propertied bourgeoisie into public interest because a nuisance and slum-free city along with a clean environment were the main concerns of the propertied bourgeoisie. One of the authors of the *Trickster City* appropriately pens down this scenario: “law draws new lines and makes new boundaries every moment in the name of the city, in the name of those who live in the city. Those who live in cities live in these maps that are drawn every day; the lines of these maps clash with the lines of their lives, their courtyards” (Kohli, “Here and Elsewhere” 188).

The bourgeoisie with their access to court, media and press can express their ecological concerns for the urban environment. They have the right to file a petition against poor neighbourhoods under nuisance law while rendering them a source of *public nuisance* and *health hazard*. Devious interpretations of nuisance have been used to mark informal settlements as polluting and thus illegal. For instance, a settlement beside Yumna Pushta River was seen as polluting the river

and its surroundings.⁵ One author of the *Trickster City* says “When people passed by the road they would say, ‘It’s so smelly here. People sit naked on the road, and shit on the footpath’. They would file complaints” (Kohli, “What is the City?” 159). These lines emphasise the way difference is often demonised and criminalised. Difference is viewed as a threat. Likewise, homeless, street-dwelling labourers in *A Free Man* also face similar problems. These homeless people who live on the pavements of Bara Tooti are viewed by the public as unclean and a source of littering. So, cleansing a city means getting rid of social detritus that must be expelled from the society which, in the case of Indian cities, are the slum and street dwellers. The hidden motive of this discourse is to facilitate the transaction of neoliberal capitalist flow and to boost a consumerist ethos among the urban middle class by generating a so-called healthy urban environment.

The phenomenon of bourgeois environmentalism validates the Agambenian state of exception which was approved through law for hygienic purposes and the general good. Bourgeoisie environmentalism refers to the concerns of Delhi’s elite and middle-class to maintain an aesthetically clean and green spatial order of the city without any consideration for their complicity in environmental degradation in the first place. It ignored the real issues of socio-economic polarisation and consumerism and deemed slum-dwellers as the problem. However, slum-dwelling is a symptom not the cause of environmental degradation and spatial unevenness. The larger policy, which consisted of exclusionary ideals of the bourgeois class and land requirements for capitalist growth, was efficiently painted with a judicial brush. In February 2000, Almitra Patel, an environmentalist and retired engineer, along with B.L. Wadhwa, a Supreme Court advocate, filed Public Interest Litigations (PILs) addressing the problem of solid waste disposal in the city. They did not advocate for the demolition of slums. However, the court, using its authority within the PIL domain, independently took up the decision of slum demolition.

There are two aspects which came up for consideration at this stage. One is dealing with the solid waste and the second is clearance of slums. The two are inter-related in as much as, as has been pointed by the Additional Solicitor General at an earlier point of time, and that is also borne out from the report of the Central Pollution Control Board, the slums are generating a lot of untreated solid waste and adding to the pollution. (“Almitra H. Patel and ORS. vs. Union of India and ORS” 20)

⁵This settlement was demolished as it was seen producing a large amount of waste and increasing water pollution. In 2004, following the orders of the court, 200,000 slums were demolished. Ironically, the river continues to be polluted as the main source of pollution was not the slums but the domestic sewage of the city’s privileged urban middle-class residential area (Baviskar 81).

Later, these accusations were proven false through the empirical research on waste production which says that “low-income communities in Delhi, like in other Indian cities, produce less waste as compared to high-income communities” (Dhamija 30).⁶

The elitist narrative of a world-class city is intensely exclusive as it legalises the existence of a few while disposing of many into the garbage of continuous poverty. As Baviskar notices, the whole discourse of a world-class city resides on “bourgeoisie environmentalism” and the idea of legality versus illegality (“Cows, Cars and Cycle-Rickshaws” 391). The idea of bourgeoisie environmentalism refers to the standards set by the upper-class and privileged middle-class who, in one way or another, think to be the sole representatives of all city dwellers. Their hegemony ignores the heterogeneity of a historical city like Delhi which was seen as a cauldron of racial and ethnic multiplicity. Neelofar, another author of *Trickster City*, terms this process of making Delhi world-class as a “showpiece which will be picked up and put away carefully somewhere” (“Showpiece” 184). She views Delhi as distancing itself from the whistle of a pressure cooker and cool water of an earthen pot. Only “praise-filled exclamation” of propertied bourgeoisie will touch this “expensive” and “fragile” showcase (Neelofar, “Showpiece” 184). The working-class poor, like her, “will have to think twice before approaching it and touching it bodily” (Neelofar, “Showpiece” 184). This operational discourse turned “multiple heterogeneous city centre spaces into a single homogeneous and commodified privately-owned retail site” (Layard 412). Authors of the *Trickster City* view their relationship to the city as a mixture of “milk and water, which are not only difficult, but almost impossible, to separate” (Neelofar, “Space and Land” 190). On the other hand, the government and the elite class view them as “a fly fallen into milk” which must be removed (Neelofar, “Space and Land” 191).

This discourse of environmentalism seems alluring but the state’s monopoly over urban land and its inability to provide low budget housing schemes, which were promised by the Delhi Master Plan, leaves the urban poor with the only choice of residing in vulnerable and insalubrious places such as riverbeds which are predisposed to flooding and industrial wastage, beside railway tracks and under high tension lines. The oppression of the urban poor is multi-layered and reduces them to the status of bare life. They are dispossessed without proletarianisation and lack legal recognition and rights protection. Their

⁶ Research on waste management was conducted by an NGO called Srishti and Tata Environment Research Institute and reached the conclusion that “in slum and resettlement colony clusters where over 40 per cent of Delhi’s population lives, the waste generation was 200 grams per day [per capita] in respect of household having monthly income of Rs 2,000 while it was 800 grams per day in more affluent localities containing households having a monthly income of Rs 8,000 and above” (Agarwal 14-15).

dilemma is that they are excluded from socio-spatial and economic narratives of the city as well as deemed the villains of the so-called utopian aspiration of *green and clean* Delhi. As explained above, the urban poor had lent their services in the form of physical and skilled labour while the city underwent neoliberal and industrial transformation, but they were considered an anathema to the same system which they had created with their blood and sweat.

Spatial Injustice and Infrastructural Exclusion

Since literature is interdisciplinary, space has reasserted itself in literature and can be seen as a recurring theme in literary texts. Literary works very often represent a distinct glocal context in which space shapes or is reshaped by social, political, and economic realities of the time or vice versa. Bertrand Westphal criticises the formalist reading of literature as it detaches literary landscape from material reality. He contends that “the fictional place takes part in a variable relationship”, and later he states, “fiction does not mimic reality but ... actualizes new virtualities hitherto unexpressed, which then interact with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces” (103). He further claims that a text with a genuine “spatial relationship between referent and representation” does not produce a pirated and second-rate representation of space (108); rather a textual representation of space transforms the further production of space in the real world because, as Alison Byerly argues that art shapes our way of perceiving landscapes. The referentiality of fiction enables it to represent an imaginary as well as a real place and it transforms the place while incorporating it in the fictional world. For instance, Philip Darby analysed a range of colonial and post-colonial fiction to understand the relationship between landscape and imperialism. He demonstrates how the colonial literary narrative underpinned the logic of coloniality. He also analyses a number of postcolonial fictions that aimed to deconstruct colonial hegemony by representing colonised space from the perspective of the natives alongside its distinct and diverse history and culture.

A text acts as a representational space for history, culture, politics, and all other phenomena of life. It can delineate spatial politics and generate new debates about the spatial division of the actual world. In his *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*, Robert T. Tally Jr. examines the significance of spatiality and narrative mapping throughout literary history, ranging from medieval romance to contemporary fiction. He notices that “all writing partakes in a form of cartography, since even the most realistic map does not truly depict the space, but, like literature, figures it forth in a complex skein of imaginary relations” (134).

He emphasises the spatial dimension of the phenomena of literary cartography to understand the contemporary drift towards considering “narrative as spatially symbolic” and a cartographic act (139). It allows writers and readers to steer the relationship between literature and life in a new direction. It provides a symbolic representation of social space and enables writers, readers, and critics to position themselves vis-à-vis the milieu in which individuals exist.

As Henri Lefebvre suggests in his *Everyday Life in the Modern World* that capitalism not only colonised everyday life but also its location that is, social space. According to him, the pre-capitalist times saw a scarcity of bread and butter but there never was a shortage of space, but now it is vice-versa. In the era of capitalism, there is an abundance of bread (at least in the first world, although not equally distributed) but space is scarce, “the overcrowding of highly industrialised countries is especially pronounced in the larger towns and cities” (Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 52). Acquisition of social space is directly relevant to one’s class or social status. Soja in “The Socio-Spatial Dialectic” terms this relation as socio-spatial dialectic which is “inter-reactive, inter-dependent; that social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent” (211). So, the politics of space is about fighting the scarcity of space. No doubt, “today more than ever, the class is inscribed in space” (Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 55). Based on this insight, Lefebvre, Harvey, and many others called for the right to the city. The idea of the right to the city suggests that segregating and marginalising measures in urban policy should not force people to move from the city. Also, every citizen should have equal access to the resources, opportunities, infrastructure, and space of the city.

Keeping in view the theoretical importance given to politics of space, I argue that the reason behind the persistent survival of capitalism and its foster child neoliberalism, specifically in the face of dynamic and rigorous forms of resistance, is its flexibility in maintaining a monopoly over space and its relation to the global space economy in establishing the world market.⁷ This spatial monopoly and inequality is evident in neoliberal India and its urban restructuring. The selected texts unfold the spatial inequality manifested in the urban landscape. Contemporary urban crises in India are the result of the wide socio-economic gap marked by the unjust cityscape which consisted of either bourgeoisie enclaves or slums. Firstly, these poor are excluded from the formal housing markets as the prices of houses and plots in modest housing areas are unaffordable for them.

⁷ The post-war era of socialist democracy is an example of resistance to capitalism which ended up failing to achieve what it aimed for. Occupy movements, the Indignados in Spain and Greece, the Arab revolts and Zapatista are examples of resistance against neoliberalism. These movements also could not produce the desired effect.

Trickster City narrates different incidents where these poor people claimed the unclaimed spaces which were marked as wilderness in city maps at the peripheries of the city. Different authors hint towards this process. Jaanu Nagar says:

‘What was this land like when we came here?’

‘It was ashen.’ ‘It was infertile.’

‘There was nothing but ash all around.’

‘There was nothing here at all.’

‘When we ate, ash would go into our mouths.’

‘We gave everything we earned in the last twenty to twenty-five years to make a dwelling out of it.’

‘Not just our earnings, we have put in the labour of our bodies to make this place.’ (“It was Heard...” 146)

Similarly, Dilip Kumar reflects on what Nangla had been before their arrival: “Where Nangla is today, was once a dense forest. Snakes, monkeys, and lions ruled the forest. Some people cut down the forest and made their homes here with the wood. And today it has taken the form of a dwelling” (145). Excluded from the urban, social, and economic policies of the government and narratives of justice, the urban poor made their survival possible by claiming these uninhabited spaces. Their homes were demolished by the state by using its atrocious legal claims, although ironically this law does not mind rich people encroaching upon public lands and illegal constructions.⁸

Urban space is a historical and political construction shaped through political processes and long historical trajectories. The cityscape of Delhi, along with many other significant factors, was produced through a long legacy of colonialism, deprivation, racial tensions, and cultural destruction via colonial hegemony. Though Delhi has witnessed a series of conquerors and the city was razed and rebuilt many times over centuries but, as Rana Dasgupta in his book *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi* explains how British colonialism and violence of the Partition marked “the birth of what can be recognised as contemporary Delhi culture” (3). This violent history marks Delhi’s transformation from a city of hearts to a selfish giant. He argues that “post-traumatic ties ... are so prominent in the city’s behaviour” and that is the reason why the “city seems so emotionally broken—so threatening—to those who arrive from other Indian cities” (118). So, contemporary Delhi’s obsession with power, wealth and display is the “diametric opposite” of the pre-colonial and pre-partition spiritual and communal outlook of the city (Dasgupta 118). Delhi’s aspiration to become world-class,

⁸ For instance, Danish Khan and Anirban Karak elaborate how the owner of Bahria Towns of Karachi and Islamabad, Pakistan has illegally occupied indigenous lands. Similarly, Liza Weinstein argues how many shopping malls owned by mafias in Mumbai and Delhi are built on government land.

which is depicted in both texts, denotes a periphery's attempt to catch-up with the colonial centre. This desire is perpetuated through the metaphors of the metropolis and thus reiterates colonial hegemony. The contemporary violent restructuring which is furthering the socio-economic polarisation is mobilised by the bourgeoisie class of Delhi who are inspired by first-world metropolises. This privileged class imposes their idea of the city by claiming exclusive rights to the city. This process of building world-class cities disenfranchises all those who are somehow misfits in the imported Vegas-style spectacle because they do not adapt to the aesthetic sensibility and economic realities of a world-class city. So being world-class is rendered as a planning agenda that implies the justification of state violence against the weak.

The selected texts move around the spaces of marginalisation, containment, and segregation and, thus, emphasise the spatial hierarchy of the Indian capital. These narratives repeatedly hint at the divided cityscape in which the poor, mostly itinerant labourers, and slum dwellers, have to reside in filthy and risky places. It evokes the complex spatial hierarchies in Indian urbanity which is structured around class divides. Dispossession and space scarcity creates a deep sense of "loss of a locale that marginalised urban populations identify with and feel secure in" (Wacquant 121). Ashraf voices the angst of a displaced poor who come to Delhi in the hope of making a better life, but this hope weakens "as time goes by" and "you start wondering what you are doing. One year, two years, three years, and you are still on the footpath...But slowly you realise, nothing will happen, and you can live the next five years just like the last three years" (Sethi 113). Both narratives not only challenge the failure of neoliberal globalisation's promise of success for everyone but also take on a truly dystopian meaning of exclusion and separation.

Although the spatial diffusion of the global economy gave a shared sense of community and a borderless world but, simultaneously, it generated a severe polarity inside national borders. Both texts depict slightly different but broadly similar kinds of "infrastructural exclusion" of urban outcasts (Deener 1287). Infrastructural exclusion refers to the city's unequal provision of resources and access to urban infrastructure such as proper healthcare, access to water and electricity, a hygienic working environment and sanitary accommodation along different class and race divides. Soja in his *Seeking Spatial Justice* terms this "separate but unequal provision of vital public services" as "spatial injustice" (viii). Delhi's transition from national capital to a globalised megacity and the concomitant migration of people forced the urban poor to dwell in segregated places full of

“poisonous mushrooms” and “poisonous insects” and sometimes on city fringes where they cannot access the requirements of sustainable living and have to face dire conditions of living (Anand 295). Basic facilities such as water and electricity are not provided properly. In some settlements, “water is terribly scarce” and in others, water-pipe lines are bursting, or the monsoon is causing an “abundance of water” in streets (Khairalia 90, 98). Electricity lines are often dysfunctional and in summers, electricity voltages are too low. There are multiple incidents in *Trickster City* where young children and elderly die or catch severe diseases due to improper and sometimes unaffordable medical facilities or lack of personal and domestic hygiene.

Similarly, the homeless labourers living in Bara Tooti, as represented in *A Free Man*, are always at the risk of getting infectious and viral diseases due to lack of personal hygiene and unsanitary living conditions. Government hospitals lacking proper facilities and uncooperative environment are viewed as an “uncomfortable place”, “a place to which people go to spend the last few moments before they die” (Sethi 134, Neelofar, “My Mother’s Dread” 228). It is a place where people avoid close contact with each other because there is an equal chance that “the man with a raw open wound covered with a somewhat clean cloth discovers he is sitting next to the lady with a fungal skin infection, and the boy burning with fever leans against the man who might have leprosy” (Sethi 134-5). Government hospitals for tuberculosis show a post apocalyptic scenario where only the “lucky ones are put onto stretchers and bundled off into one of the hospital’s many wards; the rest are asked to return when their condition worsens” (Sethi 144). Due to scarcity of resources and government funding, doctors prefer “younger, ‘softer’ cases” who have “good chance of recovery” while leaving the elderly patients to die (Sethi 144). Death is a recurrent motif in Sethi’s narrative. There are many references towards the short life span of homeless labourers. Satish, a “quiet painter”, dies due to tuberculosis (Sethi 111). Rehaan, an apparently muscular and ambitious boy who works as load bearer, “dropped off a tall ladder”, spends a week in coma and dies (Sethi 144). J. P. Singh “died of *pagalpan*—madness” (Sethi 184). Naushad, another young labourer, falls from “six storeys to his death” while painting a factory’s terrace (Sethi 192). Ashraf did not die while the book was being written, but he too died afterwards during the process of its publication. This motif of death reiterates the phenomenological border in a borderless world between those who own and those who are dispossessed.

The urban poor have a complex relationship with their surroundings in terms of mobility through the city space and access to public resources. In his

book *Postmetropolis*, Soja notices that human “actions shape the space around us” (6). On the other hand, the larger places and spaces which are produced through our collective and social actions also shape our thought process and influence our actions. Therefore, “human spatiality is the product of both human agency and environment and contextual structuring” (Soja, *Postmetropolis* 6). Urban segregation and unequal division of resources and opportunities is termed as “soft apartheid” by Eric Hazan which is operational through the restriction of mobility. The concept of unfree mobility refers to the idea of how the distance between different urban populations such as urban poor, migrants and propertied bourgeoisie or white-collar legal citizens is maintained by limiting the mobility of the former. Both types of populations move through the city space but usually at different timings or without encountering each other.

The fact that homeless labourers and slum dwellers reside on the city fringes in both texts shows how the symbolic and physical distance between these two kinds of populations is maintained. Sethi accentuates this idea through the experience of labourers who cannot roam around the city on their own to find work. Rather, contractors come to Bara Tooti to take them to their place of work. These pavement dwellers are not allowed to stay in the areas which are the hub of economic and tourist activities as their presence affects Delhi’s image of an emerging world-class city. Rather, they reside in places like Bara Tooti which are a part of Old Delhi. This segregation and policing expose the fake perception of Delhi as home to poor migrants who are escaping the crisis-ridden agrarian section only to become the victims of surplus labour.

Conclusion

In this article, while taking theoretical insight from Pang, I have argued that Indian precarity cannot be understood through a Western theoretical and empirical understanding of precarity. Rather, South Indian precarity is a complex web produced through a complex nexus of labour-market relations, state regulation of informality and spatial restructuring prompted by hegemonic aspirations of the affluent middle class. The selected texts’ portrayal of the eviction of slum dwellers and the demolition process is analysed to suggest that neoliberalism is nothing more than a “restoration of class power” (Harvey 10). “The redundant surplus population”—the slum dwellers and homeless labourers of Delhi represented in the texts—is produced through their dispossession of their non-capitalist modes of livelihoods and their non-integration into the capitalist circuit of wage labour, thus rendering them as “permanently excluded” (Sanyal xiii). The

selected texts depict that the lingering threat of eviction, economic instability and extreme working conditions annihilate the chances of any unifying platform against their dire condition. Sometimes, they even end up losing the least social ties they maintain with others. Also, it is found that in the South Asian context, the state plays an important role in producing precarity.

Taking insight from Agamben and Ghertner, I have argued that the Indian judiciary and law are complicit in maintaining the hegemony of the world-class aspirations of the capitalist and middle classes. It has been noted that Indian law has justified anti-poor regulation through the doctrine of *necessity* and discourses of environmentalism. These discourses are purely aesthetic and have been propagated through the so-called beautification and development and mediate the neoliberal aspirations of the upper echelons of Indian society. In this process, a distinct faction of the society is completely shunned to a state of exception where they lack any kind of legal recognition and provision of basic rights. Also, they are considered as illegal citizens, causing nuisance, and being a political threat to the community and therefore continuously subjected to state violence in the name of law and legality.

The horrific realities of eviction, demolition and homelessness as portrayed in the texts suggest that neoliberalism colonises space as well. The slum clearing operations undertaken by the Indian state were meant to regain valuable real-estate for profiteering ventures such as building gated housing communities, making hyper-commodified public spaces and the development process. Urban space thus is no more inclusive of multiplicities and differences, rather it is shaped by material-ideological imaginaries of neoliberal urbanisation. This kind of urban landscape had informal dwellings for the poor where they faced limited or no basic facilities of life. Slum-dwellers and urban homeless lack access to a hygienic lifestyle as they cannot make a liveable wage. Due to the unequal distribution of city resources and lack of welfare facilities, these poor are denied access to state resources and infrastructure. Spatial injustice and the infrastructural exclusion of the lower strata of the urban population is mapped out along the lines of “expertise/criminality, technocracy/backwardness and merit/moral laxity” (Mallick 1113). This discourse validates the spatial purification and authorises the deprivation of urban poor from their right to urban space and resources.

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