Reading a Song of the City - Images of the City in Literature and Films

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I am afraid, because of my unfitness in the analysis of Hindi popular films, I shall take a autobiographic line in my discussion. I said originally to the organisers of the seminar in which collection essays originated that I am entirely unsuited for the discussions that would form the centre of it, and that the only sensible contribution I could make was to compare the filmic representation of the city with literary ones. Secondly, even the limited filmic evidence that I can draw upon, episodically and anecdotally from my own personal experince, is limited to a few Bengali films.

My experience of viewing Hindi films - the main subject of this collection - is so utterly limited that I cannot say anything remotely interesting about them. Though why I saw so few Hindi films is itself an interesting cultural question. I might usefully begin by taking up and continuing a line of argument made in an earlier paper I wrote for Partha Chatterjee's volume on *Wages of Freedom* (Kaviraj, 1998).

In that context, the example was used rather briefly: I should like to begin by presenting that argument again – but in a fuller form. I began my lecture on the culture of democracy by analysing a song from a film about the city of Bombay. The argument I was making there was that in the fifties there was a clear, and very widespread spatial translation of the rupture between the modern and the traditional. The villages were the space of tradition – of caste oppression, of stagnant customs, of poor and undeveloping lives, of religious superstitions. The city was the space of the modern. And since democracy, or rather the democratic principle, was distinctively modern in this view of history, democracy lived in the city.

I used the example of a song taken from a film called *CID* – Criminal

Investigation Department - which I had not seen, delivered in the film, I am authoritatively told, by a very popular actor, Dev Anand, who had a typical city dweller's image for his audience. It was sung by Mohammad Rafi, the most popular playback singer of Hindi films of the Nehru era, in an enunciative style, which took great pains to communicate in its lightness of utterance a typical urban knowingness about modern life.

Till today, in spite of using it often in my social science arguments, I have not seen that particular film, not watched Dev Anand on the screen. Yet the song is one I have heard since my childhood, since my schooldays in a small religious town, Navadwip, about sixty miles north of Calcutta. Significantly, Navadwip was a major religious centre for Bengali *vaisnavas* as the place of birth of the fifteenth century *bhakti* saint Chaitanya.

Since I have chosen an autobiographic line, the circumstances in which I heard the song ought to be anysed in some detail. Navadvip in the sixties was a strange but lively mixture of the traditional and the modern. The town's main renown was from its association with Chaitanya's birth. It was a major centre of *vaisnava* pilgrimage, particularly on significant occasions of the *vaisnava* calendar – like the ceremonies of the *jhulan purnima*, the *raslila* or *janmashtami*. This made it a centre for thriving commerce, and the modern railway made it more accessible to pilgrims.

Its second cliam to fame as the traditional centre for esoteric Sanskrit learning, and a seat of a highly specialised system of ritual legality was by then completely dwarfed, almost forgotten. Few inhabitants of the city felt any pride from that. The commercialisation of its religious life fed directly into modern developments like cinemas, and a booming business in microphones/tannoys, which were used for advertisement of products by shops, of upcoming films by cinemas, of public meetings by political parties, and municipal announcements by the local authorities. The tannoys were, in a literal sense, an inescapable part of our existence – at least aurally.

This sociological structure of the city produced a very specific economy of sounds in the town – all of whose various, different, often-conflicting parts, and the tannoys played an indispensable role. That was the ubiquitous technological link between the blandishments of commercial advertisements, the enticement of the romantic films, the exertions of the police to control the vast crowds streaming through the narrow streets at times of festivals.

Navadvip was among other things also a city of unceasing music. The *vaisnava* sect around Chaitanya had developed a new communal form of worship, which took two unusual forms. On festival days, there were religious processions in which devotees sang, played a drum called the *khol*, and collectively danced on the streets – which set this sect apart from most other un-dancing Hindu worshippers. But more routinely, in the hundreds of small local temples, all round the year lower level performances, called *palakirtan*, went on. In these, a small troupe of *kathaks* (literally tellers of tales) or performers enacted segments of the stories of the love of

Krishna and Radha through a fascinating combination of simple narration, mimed enactment, singing passages about their famous trysts or verbal exchanges, and dancing.

It was an immensely powerful aesthetic economy – a combination of various narrative and interpretative media, held together tightly by a single theme, animated by a *rasa* aesthetic that that the audience knew intimately and enjoyed. The average *vaisnava* was strongly urged by his religious sensibility to use aesthetics – visual images, narrative forms, music and dance to enliven and ennoble his quotidian existence, to have a fundamental attitude towards life that was aesthetic.

A part of this aesthetic reception of everyday life was a simple custom of singing a standard tune early in the morning. The town experienced, except in the rainy season, an acute shortage of municipal water supply; but that was offset by the divine supply of water of the Ganges. Most people, most of the year went for a bath in the river early in the morning, as later in the day, especially in summer, the sand on the wide banks of the river became unbearably hot. One interesting technique of communal worship in the *vaisnava* religion was that most of the songs sung in the morning had either identical tunes, or very similar ones, generically called *prabhati* (from *prabhat*, early morning). Early in the morning from sunrise to mid-morning the town hummed with this general melody of morning worship – gentle, pastoral, expressing a sense of restrained and elegant joyfulness.

Those were Nehruvian times, and the ability of authorities to enforce legal rules had not crumbled. Apparently, the municipality had a rule that banned the use of tannoys before eight in the morning.(I might be wrong about the exact hour; it could be half past eight or nine. But in that town eight in the morning was quite late in the working day) at that hour, all the 'mike shops' (*maiker dokan*) on the main street started their tannoys which usually carried the currently popular Bengali and Hindi popular music.

Hindi film music used to be vastly popular, despite the widespread belief among the elder family members that they were corrupting. In some ways this was rather strange. The Radha Krishna stories were often deeply erotic; compared to them, the Bengali adhunik (literally, modern) songs and the Hindi film lyrics simply expressed a vague sense of romantic longing, in most cases narratively frustrated by family obstacles.

Yet these songs were considered dangerous precisely because they were romantic. Against the iron laws of arranged marriages, these advocated, however vaguely the individualistic principle of romantic choice of partners, and described this as a state of divine emotional fulfilment. The elders in the families might be faulted for their moral principles, but acted on a very accurate perception of the sociological implications of literature. I first heard this song in that context. Ironically, just as the religious music had a compelling repetitiveness, it came back to your hearing every morning, so that it was impossible to forget that that was the proper way to start the day in a gentle and subtle attitude of thankfulness, this film

music also had its answering repetitiveness.

Since the songs were immensely popular among the young, these were played often, many times a day by the shops, often during the festivals when the individual marquees would hire an individual tannoy with a supply of gramophone records. They were also often carried by popular music channels of the Delhi-based AIR and for some curious reason, by Radio Ceylon. Thus these songs were not an episodic musical experience, they had their own structures of repetition, which made it impossible to forget them. In a sense, they also came back every mid-morning or afternoon to remind you how to face life in the city.

Long before I encountered sociological theories of modernity and tradition or heard of Max Weber, I learnt, vaguely but vividly, through this undeniable line across the musical experience of my everyday that these two types of tunes represented two immense principles of organising experience, or the life-world.

There are a few more peculiarities of this hearing, which should be analysed. The first interesting fact was that I heard these songs, and this one in particular thousands of time, without watching the film in which it figured. This indicates in my view two important things. First, the songs had a strangely dual character: they were both contextual, and freestanding. Of course, in the context of the film narrative, the song enhanced a situation, carried and amplified a mood, inserted a twist or did something of immediate narrative import: within the film it was inextricably connected to the story. Indeed, in extension of an argument I have heard Mukund Lath make in seminars and discussions, the popular Hindi film aesthetic had some distinct similarities to the aesthetic of the classical *natyashastra* and he argued that in the *natya*, i.e. a play/film, several primary modes came together to form a more complex form of aesthetic enjoyment, in which each mode enhanced the other (Lath, 1998: Chp. 1).

But apart from the contextual meaning of the song, many of the most popular ones were also capable of achieving a freestanding meaningfulness as a literary musical object, as a rhetorical comment on life. They had an ability to transcend the narrative frame in which they were conceived. There could be several reasons for this, but one simple reason could have been the fact that many of the most popular songs from better Hindi films were composed by Urdu poets of considerable standing who were slowly drawn into the capacious network of the film industry in Bombay. Composing for films probably gave them a highly remunerative but un-exhausting occupation. In their free time they could simply be poets, rather than live their lives as overworked office drudges.

In many cases, I can believe the creative urges of these writers went into the composition of even rather mundane film songs. In many cases, these songs survived after they performed their more limited, highly contextual purpose of advancing the story. Afterwards, they achieved something like cult status as free-standing cultural items. In part, this must have been helped by the loose structure of the average popular Bombay film. Although the various parts formed an interconnected whole, as

a film, some of these parts could also be enjoyed as independent artefacts, de-linked from the connectedness of the film structure.

There is a second, related point, which I hope would allow me subsequently to broaden this discussion towards somewhat larger questions. The fact that items like this song could subsist as free-standing cultural objects – like poems, or songs in superior artistic culture, as precisely because through these aesthetic processes a new aesthetic structure was being formed. This was an aesthetic structure in a narrower, technically structuralist theoretical sense – a stock of resources which were like elements for improvising acts of recombination – a cultural combinatory of the modern sensibility.

Thus the song could be said to have two entirely different contexts of meaningfulness. It emerged, of course, from a more immediate, closed context of the film narrative which imparted to it its meaning, and in which the song in turn contributed to the total structure of meaningfulness of the film's signifying success as a complex structural form. But it was a part of a second structure of meaningfulness – probably more relevant for our present discussion about the aesthetic of the city in films. This song formed a part of a repertoire of popular songs, most taken from the films, in which each song and its idiosyncratic sequencing of words, the internal economy of images, the sense of mood became supporting neighbours to others of a similar kind. These songs and poetry were not out of the same films, or remotely from an identical narrative. But taken together, each of them advanced by slow and peculiar steps an aesthetic description and elaboration of the experience of modernity, and in its centre, of the life of the city. They were linked – not because they were part of a single narrative, but of a single aesthetic.

I shall now turn to the song in greater detail to substantiate my point, and then go on to argue that this aesthetic interpretation of the city has important points of distinctiveness, and its collective 'sense' of the city is vastly different from the more self-consciously artistic aesthetic of modern poetry. It is through these songs, forming an aesthetic series or combinatory, the inhabitant of the modern city formed an expressive language of his emotions and moods, and his ultimate reception of this life-world. Most significantly of all, as I shall argue later on, these made it possible to view the modern city as a place of joy – limited, contradictory, yet in an ultimate sense pleasurable.

The text of the lyric runs as follows:

Ay dil hai mushkil jina yehan
Zara hatke zara bachke yeh Bombay meri jan

Kahin building kahin tramen kahin motor kahin mill
Milta hai yehan sab kuch ik milta nahi dil

Insanka nahi kahin nam o nishan
Ay dil mishkil hai jina yahan
Zara hatke zara bachke yeh Bombay meri jan

Kahin satta kahin patta kahin chori kahin race
Kahin daka kahin phanka kahin thokar kahin thes
Bekaronka hai kayi nam yahan
Ay dil hai mushkil jina yehan
Zara hatke zara bachke yeh Bombay meri jan

Begharko awara yahan kahte hans hans
Khud kate gale sabko kahe isko bisnas (business)
Ik chiz ke hai kayi nam yahan
Ay dil hai mushkil jina yehan
Zara hatke zara bachke yeh Bombay meri jan

In the feminine voice
(Bura duniya yeh kahta is bhola sunaban
Yoh karta woh bharta yeh yahanka yakinan
Tagdir nahi chalneke yahan
Ay dil hai asan jina yahan
Suno mister suno bandhu yeh hai Bombay meri jan)

Ay dil hai mushkil jina yahan
Zara hatke zara bachke yeh Bombay meri jan

A rough translation would read:

My heart, it is difficult to live in this place
Move aside, give way/beware, this is Bombay, my love.

There are buildings , trams, cars, and mills
You can find every thing here
The single thing that cannot be found is a human heart
Here there is no sign of the human
My heart, it is difficult to live in this place
Move aside, give way/beware, this is Bombay, my love.

Here gambling, there , thefts and racing
There are burglaries, cheatings, disappointments and insults
Here the unemployed have many different names
My heart, it is difficult to live in this place

Move aside, give way/beware, this is Bombay, my love.

People here laugh at the homeless as at madmen
They themselves cut others' throats, but that is called 'business'
Here there are several names to a single thing
My heart, it is difficult to live in this place
Move aside, give way/beware, this is Bombay, my love.

The woman's voice:
(My simple man/soul, this is a bad world
The only rule/truth/certainty here is that he who works gets returns
Here fate does not decree lives
My heart, it is easy to live in this place
Look, my mister, my friend, this is Bombay, my love).

My heart, it is difficult to live in this place
Move aside, give way/beware, this is Bombay my love.

The two most striking aspects of the song are its lyric and its tune. Since I am not qualified to comment on it musically, my analysis would remain restricted mainly to its poetic elements. As I had pointed out in the earlier essay referred to (Kaviraj, 1998), there is considerable poetic artifice in the lyric. Even for a song, it starts with a pleasing abruptness, and its first sense of the city is almost a tactile feeling of its crowdedness, and its dynamism. It instantly communicates the bodily rhythms of a person walking through a crowded Indian city – full of unruly, inconsiderate traffic, jostling crowds on the pavements.

Yet its crowdedness is unthreatening: it creates an atmosphere of anonymity within which the romantic couple can enjoy the strange seclusion for a romantic exchange. The enunciator of the song says you have to twist, turn, stop, give way – because is is no ordinary town – *yeh Bombay meri jaan* (it is Bombay, my love), creating a sense instantly of the incomparability of Bombay, the paradigmatic metropolis. And Bombay's incomparability is constantly followed by the refrain stating: my heart, it is hard/difficult to live here (*hai dil, mushkil hai jeena yehan*).

The life world of modernity turns into a struggle of just un-adjectived living which should be the simplest thing of all, not to live well, but just to live. The song goes on immediately to set up what must have been a deliberate contrast between the modern and the natural. In the city there are buildings, trams, cars and mills, and it could be hardly an accident that these are all referred to by their English names – *kahin building, kahin tramen, kahin motor, kahin mill.* Evidently, these are things not available outside the magic world of Bombay – large buildings, trams, cars and mills are absent in the countryside.

This is followed instantly by a sharp comment on its heartlessness – *milta hai*

yenhan sab kucch, sirf milta nahi dil. Everything is available here except the human heart. And this heartlessness is matched by its general deceptiveness – *sab chiz ke hai kayi nam yehan* – every single thing here has several names. The city's defining characteristic is the distinction, in paradigmatically Marxist terms, between appearance and reality, and its deep deceptiveness. Here people deceive each other smiling all the time, merchants cut throats and call that business, and in heartless city a person without shelter, without an address is called insane/mad.

But, there is also a subtle exchange between the two figures in the song, though in the dialogical structure, the presence of the feminine voice is asymmetric. She says very little; but brevity is compensated by the enormous power of her interjections. She cuts into the dolorous recitation of the city's lack of faith only twice. The first occasion is a triumph of composing technique: when we expect her to simply reapeat the refrain it is difficult to live, even to live in this place, she says with wonderful, sparkling irony - *yeh dil, hai asan jine yehan.* When we expect her to confirm that it is hard to live here, she says with a luminously optimistic surprise it is easy to live here. The sharp and brief interluded sentence is not amplified: it is not explained how, suddenly, it becomes easy to live here. We are left to surmise: is it precisely because of the thousand excuses and occasions for deception? Does the city allow people to hide - to fall in love in its vast and comforting anonymity? Does it make it possible to find a living using its many opportunities? The second time, the same voice cuts into the song, but taking the element of levity even further. I am sure the intended meaning here is to convey a certain streetwise intimacy: the woman calls her man *suno mister,suno bandhu,* yeh Bombay meri jan. To my sense of literary propriety this line jars a bit.

I do not know if Majrooh Sultanpuri who wrote the song came out of the group of Urdu leftist writers who gravitated in the fifties to the world of the Bombay films.[1] Some individual poets certainly did. But even if he was not directly from that tradition of socialist politics, he must have shared in the general ambience of reformist intellectual culture of Nehruvian India after independence.

What is remarkable in the lyric is a kind of critical sensibility of the city which sympathises with the downtrodden, the fallen, the destitute – though one suspects that this is no common poor man, but the highly educated lower middle class protagonist of modern Indian literature – the central, dominating figure of its poetry and novels. He is a strange and potent mixture of achievement and misfortune – educated, cultured, highly sophisticated in his social and artistic sensibility, yet always short of money, and acutely sensistive to the indignity that his need constantly threatens him with. He does not face the city with dumbness, despair and deceit of the ordinary poor. He faces the city with indignation and a highly refined sense of cultural violation. Therefore, he uses very strange weapons of the weak – not foot-dragging, stealth, shortchanging; his weapons are high principle, irony,

[1] Majrooh Sultanpuri was a major Urdu poet who had a great reputation outside the film world. Hindi films of the 50s-60s benefited immensely from the association of some major poetic figures in the writing of lyrics.

poetry. He has the great rare gift of turning his experinece of insult into poetry. He has the unanswerable weapon, as long as the conflict is carried on in the arena of culture, of the middle class's eloquence.

Purely textually too we find an interesting structure of consciousness. Remarkably, the lyric does not counterpose the city, the space of deprivation, deceit and defilement with an idealised space of the pastoral idyll of the village unspoilt by history. The subtler current of thought running through the song is closer to a kind of humanist Marxism. Its imagic economy is very similar to Marx's analyses in the *Economic Philosophical Manuscripts*, in the famous sections on alienated labour and the power of money in bourgeois society. The badness of the city is contrasted not to the goodness of the village, which Marxists would have found reactionarily nostalgic, but with a natural condition of man. Interestingly, from this natural condition of fullness and un-alienation both the poor and the rich are estranged: the poor are ground into degradation, the rich are mired in deceit.

Accordingly, the song demonstrates a suitably popular version of what Marxists would have called a Feuerbachian general humanism. It misses in the city – not a rural, traditional ethic, but a general humanistic sympathy: there is no sign of the general sign of 'man' (*insanki nahi kayi nam o nishan*); and man in this naturalist sense is marked by the heart, which is the only thing that Bombay cannot offer (*milta hai yehan sabkuch, ik milta nahi dil*). The reason I associate this critical sensibility with the wide genealogy of Marxist thought is precisely its absence of a nostalgic relation with a rural past - it spurns that route as sentimentality, and firmly contrasts the degrading present of rising capitalism against a natural condition of humanity.

There is also a startling presence of the voice, which if not directly radical, has a suspicion of subalternity. And it is all the more surprising because it is a feminine voice, which turns the usual expectation of roles upside down. Literary studies have shown conclusively that in the artistic literary reflection of the colonial world, the voice of rational control, or of rational understanding of the external, particularly city world is a male voice. Rationalistic figures are primarily male figures. Women are generally associated with sentimentality and sustenance, occasionally, with an invincible instinct for survival or protection of their children.

But women are usually not the carriers of a sly knowledge of the city and its vast world of power and opportunities. Yet the feminine voice in the film song is refreshingly different – not merely from the standard enunciations of the literary values of femininity, but also from the disllusion expressed by the primary male voice about Bombay itself. Her four lines therefore deserve more careful analysis. The city produces a new, soiled kind of intelligence: and in some strikingly exceptional instances, at least in literature, this slyness, streetwiseness is carried by women characters.

In this stanza, however, there are fairly complex judgements expressed: unfortunately, the world we are thrown into is a bad world. Its ways, at least in the fallen city of Bombay lays down that those who work get the benefit, and fate does

not decree people's lives. Again, however, in the characteristic startling turn, the woman declares a great and paradoxical truth about the city – *hai asan jine yehan* – it makes it easy to live here. And the two words of mister and *bandhu* (friend) are also characteristic urban words of address.

So the woman's lines in a sense agrees with what the main voice of the song says about Bombay - but it also asks the man to get reconciled to its other side – learning to live in this city, not by compromising his principles. As I said before, to my sensibility, shaped no doubt by the tastes of Bengali *bhadralok* high literature, the two words of address appears a bit jarring; but their meaning is unmistakable.

I now wish to take this reading in a more general direction. My reading of the lines has been frankly excessively literary, in fact, literary in two senses. First, I read it outside the narrative frame of the film which I never saw. Secondly, I also read merely the words, in effect, analysing what I converted from a song into a poem. But even as a lay person, I find some features of its musical composition interesting. First, the tune contains a subtle parodic element. If we listen carefully, we would begin to hear the familiar tune of the familiar European (or strictly speaking, Californian gold-digger's) song, "O my darling Clementine".

The composer has employed a technique that is not altogether rare in Hindi film music. He has quickened the tempo, changed the tune ever so slightly, to yield a very different *rasa* structure: structure of feeling: the mood of the song is quick, witty, there is a sense of joyous enjoyment of the city's crowd and the rapid rhythms of its street life. By the change of pace, he has miraculously changed the meaning and the predominant colour of feeling. I call this relation parodic in the sense that it takes a very wellknown cultural object, takes it out of its settled, familiar context, and by making it do something unusual, changes its meaning completely. Yet the second meaning is not an unsuccessful pretence: it is a successful creation of a new meaning which is grasped, as the vast popularity of the tune showed, by the ordinary filmgoer across the entire country.

In fact, there is an equally impish and daring example of similar parodic appropriation of a famour Europen tune in Salil Choudhuri's composition of another film song: *itna na mujhse tu pyar badha* which is taken from Mozart's fortieth symphony and altered in tempo. Anyone familiar with the original tune cannot escape a sense of wondrous enjoyment of the displacement of meaning.[2]

However, I am not an ideal listener for the song; and let us bring the appreciation of the song closer to a more standard understanding of its ideal audience, made of people who are habitual Hindi filmgoers, who know the actors, and the playback singers. What would they make of this song? How would they receive its various aspects? The reception of the song is in fact a fairly complex affair. The narrative characters in the films performed their task of artistic enchantment by a deft combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Narrative

[2] Salil Choudhuri's song occurs in a film called Chhaya and was sung by a very popular singer, Talat Mehmood.

characters are evidently recognized as belonging to types. Their power of aesthetic signification is at least in part drawn from this fact.

Yet every story, however conventionalised and falling into narrative formulae, in the modern literary context, must have a quality of unrepeated-ness, of being told for the first time, and contain a sense of surprise. We may have seen many films of revenge, but this particular story is different in particulars. Though we can, from the structure of the plot, from the way the actions are arranged in its narrative composition, deduce fairly accurately what the resolution at the end is likely to be.

The enjoyment of narratives is a strange combination of the reassurance of such iterative patterns and surprise of the particular. Additionally, on top of these literary narrative features of re-assurance, or what can be called aspects of recognition, in films, there are other techniques of recognition as well. The specific characters of the story are new to the audience, but they fall into recognition by the casting of an actor. Acclaimed heroes and heroines of the Hindi popular films perform this function very strongly in my view.

Even before the spectators have come into the film theatre, the simple association of an actress with a particular role creates a sense of expectation, a structure of fore-meanings and narrative expectations, which the actual unfolding of the film plot hermeneutically changes and confirms at the same time. The actress's association with a certain standard type of role is created by long and repetitive association with roles whose characteristic attributes she is acknowledged to bring out particularly well. Thus the complex narrative experience of the film-goer is not the sensation of being open to an unfamiliar, entirely unpredictable run of events, convolution of plots, forming of characters. It is a more complex sensation of enjoyment in which along with these elements of unpredictability, unknown-ness and surprise, there are equally strong elements of what I have called recognition – seeing the same face, meeting one's favourite actor or actress, and above all a confirmation in the coloured, charged, heightened universe of imagination of the moral structure of the social world.

A second element of recognition occurs in film songs. The lyrics and their narrative frame of course is new – which offers the element of what I have called surprise. But the fact that a well-known playback singer like Mohammed Rafi or Mukesh sings it balances it with what I have called recognition – producing the peculiar work of aesthetic enchantment in the song itself.

Finally, I would make a large and speculative suggestion about this entire series of elements of recognition in the cultural universe of Nehruvian India. The films in their generally recognised and well understood interconnection with supporting structures like the narrative economy of the world of novels, the poetic universe of lyrics, the imagic economy from assorted visual sources produced a whole structure that acts as a complex but single aesthetic unity. I shall call it loosely as aesthetic of the city – the general sense of what 'the city' is.

This aesthetic sense if produced in various ways: first, it is produced by this

combination of the single narrative, specific songs, individual actors etc inside the single film. The single films sends a message to the audience about what life in the city is as a possibility. Yet, I am concerned to make a larger structuralist point. It is not merely the signifying relations between its dissimilar elements the story, the acting, the songs, the stream of images inside the film which constitutes a unity. Each song forms a link, a part of a syntagmatic chain with other songs which speak about the joys and frustrations of urban love, forming a musical aesthetic of the city. Equally, this is done by the lyrics and the images. Eventually, since the spectator or the recipient is e repetitive consumer of these separate universes of aesthetic discourse, their collective, iterative, total impact creates a general, over-arching aesthetic common sense. This produces a sense of what the city is.

I wish now to compare this aesthetic of the city in the popular Hindi films with the aesthetic in high literature. My comparison has obvious difficulties. The Hindi film has a particular cultural habitus – a combination of the cultural styles from North Indian poetry and theatre combined with an experiential perception of the city drawn primarily from the bustling commercial metropolis of Bombay. The other poetic aesthetic I am comparing with it is from Bengali literature, produced by poets of the generation of after Tagore, a poetry of a deep moral scepticism and disillusionment. But I suppose the high literary aesthetic of urban life is similar across different cultural areas, and the comparison would bring out something interesting. The high literary aesthetic of the city in Bengali is of course an entire field for analysis and reflection. I shall simply make my point generally, and using a few illustrations.

Bengali high literature developed a contradictory relationship with the city from very early on. In some ways, of course, the modern life of the mind required the environment of the city as its condition of production. Most of the great literary writers – Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay – were city dwellers. It was clearly the new kind of social and intellectual life of the city – Calcutta – which gave them the sustenance from which their literary work emerged.

Yet dwelling in the city did not always convince them that the colonial form of modernity that the city offered was above all criticism. Bankimchandra did not write disparagingly of Calcutta in his novelistic writings, but in one of his long and influential humorous pieces, *Muciram Guder Jivancarit*, the satirical life of a scoundrel who rose irresistibly to eminence in colonial society, Calcutta and other cities figure prominently. The satire is primarily about the inversion of values in colonial public life and institutions, but as these institutions – the courts and government offices are mainly located in cities, these get an indirect treatment of the lashing sarcasm of Bankim's humorous writing.

And although indirect, and secondary, the narrative establishes a central theme of Bengali writing about the city. The city is a space of travesty. It is the space in which modern principles, values, institutions, modes of life unfold, but always in a

travestied form. They are never true to their abstract principles, or even the institutional or practical form these values acquire in Europe's modernity. The form these principles, values and the characters embodying them, have in Calcutta is in some ways a caricature of the original – just as Bengali modernity is a caricature of the modernity of the West.

In doing this, Bankim was in one sense continuing an earlier satirical tradition in Bengali writing, and other ways transforming it. From the rise of the modern city of Calcutta, the social and moral conduct of the modern elites and middle classes who resided in the city, referred to by the collective appellation babu – was a target of traditional farcical forms. In early Bengali literature, some highly talented authors like Kaliprasanna Sinha extended this tradition of satirical sketches and comments and turned it into a literary tradition of acrbic comment on the imitative excesses of the new parasitic elite.

Although this kind of comment always implies a kind of social criticism, the early writing on the city is mainly marked by its sense of fun at the expense of the *babus* and its general tone of light-heartedness. In Bankim's hand, the lightheartedness is continued, and the *babu* is made a butt of pure fun; but underlying that surface sparkle of gaity, a new highly serious historical judgement is subtly introduced. This judgement indicates that it is wrong to repose great faith in the future achievements of Bengali modernity, because the relation between its European exemplars and their Bengali re-enactment is one of travesty. Evidently, this already forms a sufficiently dark background out of which more deep-lying and melancholic critiques of the modern city could emerge.

But the actual emergence of literary genres and aesthetic sensibilities required two parallel developments – development of social groups through rapid social changes who would become predominant bearers of certain types of sensibility, and the evolution of literary styles which produced compelling performances which would deliver 'classic' forms and types. By the time of the second world war, these two parallel processes had advanced sufficiently to produce a distinctive literary image of the city carried primarily through post-Tagore Bengali poetry.

Tagore's own relation with the city was one of aesthetic rejection. In his mature works there are many occasions where, writing about the city in his poetry, he tries to show that the city cannot find a poetry of its own, because the city in its slovenliness does not deserve poetry. His poems are therefore written by their back turned on the city they talking about: their dominant urge is one of escape into nature, into the countryside, less frequently into a highly coloured romantic past. He is capable of writing wonderful poetry about the hazy cities of the past in which Kalidasa's heroines lived their lives, of a wonderfully mythical Ujjayini; but Calcutta was undeserving and incapable of lyrical celebration of itself.

In poetry after Tagore, a large bunch of highly talented poets continued this tone of negative reflection on the city, but with one highly significant difference. In Tagore, there were escapes from this city – primarily of three types – in imagination

and dreams, into the unspoilt nature of the countryside, and into nostalgia. The new poets of the forties cut off all these routes of escape. They consequently forced the reading public to face the dirt and meaninglessness of the city quite squarely – not as a passing phase, not as a small part of a larger green, beautiful world, but as the undeniable, inescapable present, as the only world that was.

This sense of a claustrophobic space – a space that is vast, unending, meaningless, degrading gradually finds two types of poetic enunciation. The more aesthetically sophisticated presentation of this new aesthetic of the city came in the wonderfully colourful imagery of despair in Jivananda Das whose visual sense constantly searches the city, specially at night when it is deserted and exhausted, when the crowd have disappeared, when the city gives up in a sense its vast dark despairing truth. Das's poetry is an aesthetic wonder, because his weaving of words makes this despairing nightmare as beautiful as dreams. But despite everything – despite the immensely exciting craft, the amazing surprise of his imagery, the subtle tired cadence of the understated metre, the city remains a space of despair.

To take a single typical example, but which raises a complicating question about love and fulfilment, one of Das's poems is about a woman who was met in the past and lost. In painting her face, Das wrote the unforgettable lines: *cule tar kabekar andhakar vidisar nisa/mukhe avantir karukarya* - in her hair was the long-lost darkness of the night in the city of Vidisa, on her face was the scupture of the past city of Avanti. She is eventually lost, and constantly returns in memory – not like a similar figure in Tagore (Ksanika) to comfort but to hurt by memory.

But the present, the immediate is entirely enclosed in the claustrophic space of Calcutta which bears its subtle and ineradicable curse, where everything that is transiently beautiful waits for decomposition and death. Death, decomposition, the corpse being eaten by birds of prey is a constant theme in Jivanananda alongside the two other famous images of his poetry – deer playing in a forest clearing in the light improbably brightened stars. But even these deer are destined for slaughter, and what eventually ends the idyll is the sharp, final, closing snap of a rifle shot ringing through the night.

In Das's poetry love is constantly present, constantly stalked by a stealthy, confident, unavoidable death. In a play on the themes we found in Tagore, the images of love are always linked in a great tenderness of words to the past, to memory, to nature which lives beauteously outside the city, and to dreams. But clearly, all these things are transient, threatened, ultimately brought to submission by the city.

A second strand of poetic reflection on the city developed alongside this strand, animated by a powerful induction of communist ideology. But the communist poets' sense of the city is not very different from the gloomy unpolitical despair of Jivanananda. Again, to take a characteristic example, Samar Sen, an acclaimed young leftist poet saw the city very similarly – as a space of inevitable, ineradicable unfulfilment. And since love is such a shining emblem of fulfilment in earlier poetry,

this poetry, especially Samar Sen shows a strangely perverse delight in soiling themes and images and lines taken straight out of Tagore, continuing the tradition of parody, but in a further twist, the parody does not remain a vehicle of laughter as in Bankim, but turns vicious.

Women, still carriers of a remembered beauty in Jivanananda, become only objects of lust; and in Sen's poetry the space of Calcutta is surprisingly teeming with prostitutes. Some of Sen's lines show the working of the social sensisibility behind this aesthetic with exceptional clarity: the figure of the *ganika*, the woman who can be bought, returns for ever – endlessly to haunt the poetic imagination , carrying with her the final travesty of love – she loves him for the precise minutes for which the price has been paid. Samar Sen's poetry is also admirably explicit about the subject of this poetic enunciation and this sense of the city – this is the *madhyabitta*, the highly educated lower middle class male who is equipped with a cultural sensibility which can never find fulfilment in Calcutta's economic and social world.

By the forties, this educated lower middle class had grown to a considerable size; and they were in any case the primary audience, the aesthetic consumers of this poetic discourse. By the fifties both the sociological and cultural developments had taken place to provide this sense of the city utter dominance in Bengali literature. However, this connection between the sociological structure of the city and the enjoyment of its poetic aesthetics also restricted the frontiers of this sensibility. The city was culturally dominated by the lower middle class, but its experience was obviously more diverse. Ironically, the poor in the city did not necessarily share this gloomy sense of the city and its place in history. In economic terms, the income of different classes is a dominant consideration; but in the sociology of economic life it is the direction of movement of economic fortunes that is more important in creating a certain kind of sensibility.

Other classes in the city, even in a relatively stagnant and declining city like Calcutta did not necessarily share the historical melancholy of the educated lower middle class. The city for most people was far more mixed and complex arena of experience. It certainly produced hopelessness and despair, but it was also a space in which anonymity gave a sense of freedom from restrictive village customs, it was enjoyed by most characters in the films as a context in which genuine love could be experienced against the obstacles of deprivation, parental objection and vicious neighbours.

It is interesting to contrast these two sharply different rhetorical pictures of the city, and reflect about their different social and aesthetic associations. Descriptively, some of the associations are obvious. There is first, the contrast between a self-consciously high artistic language and comportment of the literary poetic writing. Writers like Jivanananda were engaging in a highly reflexive artistic enterprise in which the attention to form, the crafting of language and rasa was paramount; whether the poetry was generally intelligible was a far lesser consideration. Some of the poets, engaging in self-interpretation, pointed out, quite

rightly, that the intelligibility of poetry was a matter of conventional familiarity. Complaints of unintelligibility against modern, post-Tagore poetry often stemmed from the fact that the new poetic form or diction was unfamiliar rather than inherently obscure. Once used to the new diction (in Bengali often they used the term *uccaran*), the audience would begin to enjoy the new poetry and its unconventional linguistic surprises.

The rhetoric of the Hindi films, precisely because they were a constituent parts of a popular form, entirely dependent on commercial success, could not take such high risks in terms of its formal characteristics. That does not mean that there was not considerable craft in the making of the different aspects of these films, especially the literary elements of the films, though less visible and subordinated to a dominant commercial-popular , retained an aspiration of relative autonomy. Poets contributing to them wrote serious poetry independent of the films, and sedulously cultivated their literary reputations. It is not surprising that their general poetic reflection on subjects close to their hearts often found expression in these compositions as well.

But the second contrast between the two images of the city is of probably greater significance. Both poetry and popular films gave rise to specific aesthetic structures with very different readings of the meanings of city life. For the high artistic poetic discourse the image of the city is a dark one where lives are unfulfilled and people go through the subtle defilement of their everyday existence. This is reflected in the strange delight that some poets have in defilement of earlier objects of high art. Samar Sen, for instance, constantly brings up celebrated lines and images from Tagore to mock at them, parody them, and defile them. This sense of the city could not be a general, universal rhetoric precisely because of its narrow, partial focus on the city's deprivations. It could only be a poetic sense which was appreciated by a relatively highly educated, middle class minority – who had the cultural skills to understand its subtleties and the personal closeness to the experience of despair it spoke of.

By contrast, the cinematic image of the city is more complex, it contains the dark image, but this is constantly relieved by an opposite image of hope and optimism – in the counterpointing of the feminine statement that it is easy to live in the city, against the darker vision, in the lift of the pleasurable, optimistic tune of the song, in the general narrative structures of urban love. The filmic representation might be less self-consciously artistic, prone to melodramatic simplification of emotions, but, from a different point of view, its image of the city was of a space of contradictions – where different types of things took place. It was not just a scene of constant, unremitting despair. The Bombay of the films was in this respect in subtle and important ways, unlike the high artistic depiction of Calcutta, a city of joy.