

Homeless Solidarities: The In-Between Lives of the Occupants of Chandigarh's Streets

Dr. Ishita Sareen



Assistant Professor, Department of English, DAV College, Sector 10, Chandigarh, India.

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This paper examines the informal solidarities of Chandigarh as a way of rethinking Chandigarh's ordered spatiality. This objective is achieved by exploring the solidarities of Chandigarh's homeless and working-class migrant populations through the spatial dialectic of motion and obstruction. Drawing on Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay's theorisation of the street as an apparatus of city-making, the paper reads literary representations of Chandigarh alongside urban theories of space, informality, and marginality. By bringing together literary representations, urban theory, and situated observations of Chandigarh's streets, the paper demonstrates that the city's informal occupants are not external to its spatial order but are constitutive of it.

Keywords: Chandigarh, Postcolonial Urbanism, Urban Space, Informal Solidarities.

This paper enquires into the tectonics of spatial production of and on Chandigarh's streets by examining the informal solidarities of its homeless population and contextualising their lived experience against the immense scale and grandiosity of the city's utopian, albeit mistransplanted, postcoloniality. Invoking the street as an "apparatus of city-making" and examining the city as a site of "obstructed motion" (Bandyopadhyay 5, 24), the lived experience of those occupying the streets becomes both evidence of and a product of the precarious turn taken by a city originally envisioned within the postcolonial ambitions of Jawaharlal Nehru (Khosla).

Questions that arise from such an investigation include: who and what sets spaces in motion? How do various classes of city dwellers, especially working-class migrants living without formal housing, experience and navigate the city? What meanings and values do they attach to motion, and how do their modifications change the rhythms of the city as a whole? Keeping in mind that Chandigarh is modelled after the

twentieth-century metropolis, with its wide, clean streets a constant reminder of an imagined un-Indianness, how did the production of its spaces affect the production of political culture when viewed through the solidarities of its homeless population? And finally, how does the city evolve with this new "encroachment" upon its streets?

In this paper, I discuss but a fraction of these possibilities, introducing the formation and nature of the informal solidarities that working-class migrant populations develop while residing along the spacious, tree-lined boulevards of the main city, while also theorising the "street" that emerges in the literature of those who use it as a framing device to narrate the larger story of Chandigarh. I work at two registers: one of affective belonging as transmuted by the lack of a house, the inability to access a home, and the intersections of these two categories with the hearth, simply centred around the domestic fire, and the other of the street itself as an apparatus of city-making and a site where motion is continually produced through

obstruction (Bandyopadhyay 5, 24). In a city often hailed for the absence of the usual paraphernalia of urban congestion such as bustees or slums, reading its streets in this way allows a deeper understanding of the social production of its apparently effortless motion.

A City of Obstructed Motion

Bandyopadhyay's theorisation of the dialectical relationship between motion and obstructionism in urban space presents an interesting way to examine urban histories over the last century. What is motion? Motion is a "fetish" of the twentieth-century city planner, a "self-evident, natural and inevitable force" that dominates the metaphor of the free-flowing street; it stands for "energy, positivity, and progress" (15). Obstruction, then, is the hampering of motion through human agency. It is the democratic counterpart to the fetish of motion: the delay introduced into the free "circulation of bodies and objects" (15), providing access to "more effective narratives of human belonging" (16). Obstructions hamper motion, adding "randomness" to its course, but also allowing us to "grip" motion through their "momentary" and "unstable" nature. It is only when motion is obstructed, as in the casual negotiations of ordinary people, that it becomes a "social phenomenon" (17). Bandyopadhyay describes the city produced through this interplay as a "dialectical unity" (17).

Urban commoners such as street hawkers, refugees, pavement dwellers, and other daily-wage workers encroach upon the street, turning it into a collective space of occupation. While appearing unobtrusive,

they use shared resources in relatively egalitarian and incorporative ways to meet their economic necessities (24). Yet the desire for a free and clear pavement contradicts this lived reality of hawkers and vendors. The tension between circulation and occupation is therefore not accidental to the modern city; it is constitutive of the city itself.

This contradiction became particularly visible in Chandigarh's treatment of street vendors. In December 2017, the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation designated high-profile commercial and tourist-driven areas with large vendor populations as no-vending zones. The Chandigarh Vendor Plan required the city's free-floating population to register and pay a monthly fee for a fixed market spot. In November 2019, the High Court expedited the eviction process from these zones. On December 6, the CMC and police carried out what was described as the city's "biggest eviction drive," relocating vendors and demolishing longstanding markets and structures. Such measures excluded migrants and daily-wagers not only from organised housing but also from what Nikita Dhawan calls "organised struggle" (154).

The apparently simple question of keeping the pavement "free," therefore, contains a larger political question: free for whom? A street emptied of vendors, workers, pavement dwellers, and informal occupants may appear to embody efficient urban motion, but this efficiency is produced through the obstruction of other people's movements, livelihoods, and claims to the city. The clean pavement is thus not the absence of politics; it is the spatial result of a particular politics.

Maxwell Fry, on visiting Chandigarh after twenty years, remarked upon the absence of the innate Indian-ness of the streets and the busy hustle of daily vendors so crucial to the Indian fabric, including cobblers, shoe-shiners, trinket sellers, repairmen, and others. In Sector 22 he was struck by the “stark brutality” of the “gargantuan” scale, “devoid of intimate street-level activity” (361).

Sakoon Singh’s novel *In the Land of the Lovers: A Punjab Qissa* brings forth the movement contained within such perceived obstruction. She writes of a peculiar rurban urbanity in which the protagonist’s grandmother’s frugality is relayed through a retinue—pun intended—of street vendors ready to repair, fix, dye, and sew anything, such that nothing would be thrown away (14). The protagonist’s grandmother, Beeji, exemplifies frugality by relying on kaarigars who repair and repurpose items, reflecting a time when goods were made to last: “there was a fix for everything” (15). There is the cobbler who sits under the “amaltas tree,” the rehri-market fellow who fixes broken cookers, the kaliwallah in “the old bazaar of Manimajra,” and the quiltmaker whose “wooden tools” function also as “musical instruments” (15). These figures complicate the idea of the vendor as obstruction. They are, instead, participants in a dense network of exchange, repair, memory, and use.

This contrasts sharply with the obstructive claims laid down by the proponents of kaka culture today, driving around performing geris on the geri route and flaunting their privileges. Here, the street becomes a space in which different forms of

mobility compete with one another: the movement of cars is celebrated as youthful freedom, while the movements of those who repair, sell, cook, work, and sleep on the street are rendered as obstruction.

The Triangularity of House, Home, and Hearth

In addition to the obstructed notion of motion, it is also the journeys between house and home, and their intersections with the separate but related category of the hearth, that belie degrees of affective belonging in the city. The house is a space of residence, implying “shelter,” “edges, walls, doors and roofs”—the bare bones of living. The home is more abstract: it is a place in the mind, full of a psychological ease that is often absent despite the comfort and amenities that may surround us. The house is where we live; the home is where we belong, but it also encapsulates the spaces that belong to us.

The kernel of this juxtaposition between house and home is contained in the question many new adoptees of Chandigarh ask one another: “Where are you from, originally?” The question points to the deep divide between the space in which we live and inhabit and the space which we call home.

Aarish Chhabra, in *The Big Small Town: How Life Looks from Chandigarh*, captures the peregrinations many migrants make between house and home, arguing that home does not necessarily require a built environment; it is the place “one starts from” (Chhabra 11). The questions remain: when does a house become a home? When does a

city where you came to work, or to improve your lifestyle, become a city where you live?

As a person who has spent the last decade of her life in various big and small cities, I still flounder when asked where I am originally from, or where my “home” is. But like Chhabra, I visit my “home” for Diwali, travelling to wherever my family happens to reside. Similar is the situation of the insider-outsider: the migrant who still feels like an outsider even on the “inside” of the city and perhaps the self, whose “journey is from Punjab to Punjab,” with its “epicentre” at Chandigarh. This yearly pilgrimage from “house” to “home” is driven by the celebration of one’s primary festival, underlining “where your house is, and where your home remains” (Chhabra 18).

When contextualised within a young city where questions of “origin” carry within them the seeds of judgement concerning class, caste, and position, further questions emerge. What makes the house a home? Can the house be perceived as a home? Chhabra suggests that a house becomes a home through “neighbourly presence” (57): through the presence of a supportive and welcoming community. In the context of this inquiry, such presence can be understood as a form of informal solidarity developed by migrants themselves.

Where, then, are these solidarities forged?

They are forged around the hearth: the portable home, with the presence of the fire centring the humans around it. Sans structure, it subsists on thought and minimalist presence. The hearth becomes a signifier for the lives of the “others” in Chandigarh, those who are

regularly excluded because of their profession or caste: daily-wage workers, blue-collar job holders, other unskilled manual labourers, and Dalits, especially Dalit women. They become “intruders” upon city space, encroaching on its streets, while their suffering remains inaudible and easily ignored.

Sanamacha Sharma, in her poetic perspectives on the city, offers glimpses of the lives of these lesser classes, the unnoticed and invisible groups who sleep on the pavements at night, “all hop[ing] to make a change” (34). Their days begin with hope, but in the evening, when “the parking lot outside the / Disco welcomes all vehicles,” the moon is “scared” to illuminate “the faces of those sleeping shadows” (34). The dichotomy of privilege is again expounded in “Orchid Life,” where the confidence of those with the “exposed midriff,” “flashy cars,” “youthful arms,” and “gym-toned muscle” overshadows “the sleeping workers on the long footpath” (112).

Residing in areas that the upper middle class takes the long route to avoid at night, sleeping on footpaths in the central hub of Sector 17, or laying their mats adjacent to the sprawling bungalows of bureaucrats and civil servants in Sectors 15 and 16, homeless residents cook fragrant meals on small gas stoves. The flames of their hearth often seem like headlights viewed through the cold fog on winter nights.

Some might also take pride in securing proper shelter in the slums of Sector 25, “where invisible people live” (Chhabra 11), or, farther away, sleep along the neon-lit pathways of Panchkula and Mohali, in gardens during the summers and on cold concrete in the winter.

The city possesses a population of these “othered” daily-wagers whose lives are part of the narrative of the City Beautiful but seem lost in the gutter space that binds the city and the centre.

A lucky few, possessing blue-collar jobs or working as household workers, reside within the low-income housing that encircles most residential sectors, a spatial strategy associated with Jane Drew’s work on Chandigarh’s housing. The periphery is similarly inhabited by a multitude of other unskilled labourers, mostly occupying shantytowns that border the clean compounds of high-rise residential developments. Thus, without the possibility of a “house,” their “hearth” connotes their lived space quite literally.

However, the same questions of belonging, origin, and beginning come alive on their annual pilgrimages to their “homes” in other states, usually dependent on which festival they communally celebrate. The presence of a supportive community becomes the indubitable marker of the transition from hearth to home.

Belonging, Precarity, and the In-Between

Singh also juxtaposes the privilege of the brown sahibs with the precarity of the city’s peripheral occupants. In making Pali, an underprivileged and lower-caste, literally marginalised character, a drug addict, Singh highlights the victims of Punjab’s drug culture as well as the lack of resources they face in addition to being shunned by society (132). Singh writes of this resource gap: “good families” also had addicts, but they possessed

the “resources and power to deal with it” and “to hush it up” (133). When the other Jatts would not talk to Karmo, Pali’s mother, because of her son’s problem, it is the “bhaiyas, the migrant labourers” who live alongside her who offer her comfort and a warm meal (133).

Karmo’s story also embodies the story of every-m(igrant)an, coming in from the hinterland with belief in the Protestant work ethic, aspiring to succeed while living, as Karmo does, in a “one-room tenement in the heart of Manimajra” (172). The tenement is technically a house, but the community around it produces something closer to home.

Madhur Kapila, in her novel *Saamne ka Aasman*, similarly writes of the precarious predicament of the shunned and the outcasts living in slums, in the form of the kumhar basti in Sector 25. They become another extension of India’s homeless, “virtually everywhere,” often “stigmatiz[ed] as criminals” (Gottdiener and Budd 51). The postmetropolis, as Edward Soja conceptualises it, features a “floating population of urban nomads,” often criminalised as “carriers of poverty, decay, disease, drugs, crime and violence,” and rendered invisible by their supposedly non-utilitarian role in city space (Soja 151).

The basti contradicts the epithets advertising the city through CITCO billboards hailing Chandigarh as “The Green City,” challenging its association with unpolluted living. Pigs and human beings coexist amidst heaps of garbage in the basti, producing a picture of intense urban squalor (Kapila 10). But this “squalor” is not merely a condition of the basti; it is also a condition produced by the

city's unequal distribution of resources, recognition, and visibility.

The basti is an in-between space. To borrow from Ananya Roy's discussion of AbdouMalik Simone, the periphery can be understood as a "space in-between" that has not been brought fully under the logic and developmental trajectories that characterise the centre (qtd. in Roy 232). Oren Yiftachel similarly describes "gray spaces" as positioned between the "whiteness" of approval and legality and the "blackness" of eviction, destruction, and death, marked by their greyness and existing against the "desired 'order of things'" (88–89).

The irony deepens with the realisation that the slums of Sector 25 lie adjacent to Panjab University, a stone's throw from its main campus in Sector 14, and thus become a potent political reminder of the clusters of poor that dot core-city locations. Their location troubles the neat division between centre and periphery. The "periphery" is not necessarily elsewhere; it can exist in the very heart of the planned city.

The networked intersections and interstices of such dwellings are most visible when the nukkad natak prepared by an NGO, starring children from the slum, is denied financial aid by the Delhi Cultural Centre. These children—clean, educated, well-fed, civilised—do not conform to the visuality thrust upon slums by the elite. Khan, the director, explains, "...Ham zaleel kyun nahi dikhaye de rahe the?" ("...Why weren't we looking humiliated?") (Kapila 106). His countervisual efforts to demolish established realities count for little at the national centre.

Here, the problem is not simply that the children are poor. It is that they fail to look poor. The slum must conform to a particular visual grammar in order to be recognised as a slum; otherwise, its residents become illegible to the institutions that claim to represent them. The informal space is therefore not merely spatially marginal. It is also visually and politically regulated.

This returns us to the question of solidarity. If the formal city determines who belongs through legality, property, planning, and visibility, the informal city produces belonging through other means: shared food, repair, neighbourly presence, the hearth, migrant networks, and the everyday occupation of streets. These solidarities do not erase precarity, but they make life possible within it.

Conclusion

The examination of Chandigarh's streetscapes and the lives of its homeless inhabitants reveal a complex relationship between spatial order, social inequality, and informal solidarity. Through the dialectic of motion and obstruction, the street emerges not as an empty channel through which bodies and vehicles move but as a space continually produced through occupation, negotiation, exclusion, and belonging. The very people who appear to obstruct the planned city are also those who sustain its everyday life through labour, repair, care, and community.

The concepts of house, home, and hearth further complicate the distinction between formal and informal space. While a house may provide physical shelter, home is

produced through memory, belonging, and “neighbourly presence,” while the hearth allows such belonging to emerge even in the absence of a permanent structure. The journeys of migrants between house and home, and the solidarities forged around the hearth, reveal forms of spatial belonging that the planned city cannot fully contain.

Chandigarh’s apparently ordered landscape therefore conceals an urban geography of interruption. Its wide boulevards and regulated sectors depend upon forms of labour and occupation that they simultaneously attempt to make invisible. The street vendor, pavement dweller, migrant worker, slum resident, and homeless occupant are not external to Chandigarh’s spatial order; they are produced by it and, at the same time, continually reshape it. The city’s utopian promise thus exists in tension with the lives that its formal structures render peripheral.

My encounters with the hearth-fires and winter shelters of Chandigarh reinforced this contradiction: what appeared from the outside as precarious habitation was also a space of warmth, hospitality, conversation, and mutual care. The hearth becomes, therefore, more than a substitute for the house. It becomes a small but powerful spatial claim—a way of saying we are here. If Chandigarh is to fulfil its postcolonial promise, its future cannot depend upon eliminating such interruptions. It must recognise that the solidarities forged within them are already part of the city.

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