

Hydropolitics in panels: Satirizing urban crises in Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet at Vikaspuri*

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Abstract: This study attempts to investigate the role of satire in urban graphic novels with Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), a dystopian narrative that critiques the socio-political fabric of contemporary urban cities in India, at the pivot. Unsheathing on Dustin Griffin's apprehension of satire as an inquiry rather than polemic, the study posits Banerjee's novel within an extensive praxis of urban satire that examines infrastructural deterioration, ecological inequity, and bureaucratic inertia. By carefully examining the text's visual-textual convergence, this paper inspects how satire is marshalled to decipher the complexities of neoliberal urbanity, particularly the commodification and politicisation of the quintessential resource, water. By encapsulating ecocritical theories from Karen Bakker's conceptualization of "production of thirst," investigation emphasizes how Banerjee reconstructs the urban city as a site of resources under contention and systemic alienation. The novel's ironic juxtapositions, fractured structure, and grotesque imagery manufacture a critique that is both analytical and affective, coercing readers to tackle the ethical and environmental catastrophe of contemporary urban governance. This study posits that satire, in Banerjee's premise, turns into an epistemological apparatus that unveils the rifts of late capitalist urbanism, questioning its assurance of progress and prosperity.

Keywords: urban satire, Indian graphic novels, hydropolitics, neoliberal urbanity, shades of violence

Introduction

Urban graphic novels in the contemporary Indian literary sphere have emanated as potent apparatus for socio-political commentary, particularly while tussling with the complexities of neoliberalism,

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ecological precarity and metropolitan modernity. Sarnath Banerjee one of India's prominent graphic novelists, tackles the amalgam of graphic novels to dissect the crevices implanted in the Indian urban experience. His *All Quite in Vikaspuri* (2015) fails to be regarded as a mere dystopian manifestation but an incisive satire that unveils the ironies of infrastructural neglect, developmental rhetoric and ecological deterioration. The novel's visual-textual reciprocity does not operate as a mode of storytelling but is an aesthetic political critique of contemporary urbanity, wherein satire operates as a gadget of resistance and divulgence.

The convergence of urban studies, graphic narrative theory and eco precarity to a certain extent proffers a conducive crust to examine Banerjee's work. Scholars such as Cecile Sandten (2011) and Ira Sarma (2018) have investigated the intermedial and intertextual potentials of Indian graphic novels, reflecting their scope to encapsulate the complexities of postcolonial urban life. Sandten interrogates how Banerjee's visual novel interacts with global city imaginaries through a metropolitan lens, whereas Sarma's perusal highlights the "glocal" reader's elucidative role in deciphering hybridised textualities. E. Dawson Varughese further posits Indian graphic narratives within a larger realm of visual culture that contests hegemonic narratives of Indian identity and maturation, highlighting the representational strategies that derange discourses. While these studies accord remarkably to the comprehension of the formal and thematic remodelling in Indian graphic novels, the specific purpose of satire as a mode of urban inquiry- particularly within the ecological and hydro-political contexts, remains overlooked.

A connected pivotal point can be found in Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence" (2011), augmented by Anuja Madan (2020), which highlights the emblematic modes that can seize the invisible, covert, and attritional forms of environmental torment. This viewpoint is particularly pertinent to Banerjee's work, where water privatisation and urban decay are not a spectacular predicament, but the manifestation of neoliberalism, systemic inequality, and bureaucratic passivity. Furthermore, Karen Bakker's concept of the "production of thirst" (2010) solidifies the fabric of the politics of ecology of access to water and shades of violence induced upon the marginalised urban populace.

This study attempts to decipher the anatomy of satire in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* as a deliberate strategic critique of the urban hydropolitics,

environmental precarity, and lacklustre governmental policies in India. The study proposes to delve into the heart of the matter not simply as a graphic novel but as a hydropolitical satire that undermines dominant narratives of neoliberal urbanity and proffers a new fabric to interpret the city through speculative ecological fracture. In doing so, the study not only accords to the advancing edifice of literature on Graphic Novels in India but also augments the methodological prospect of urban studies, satire and arbitrarily postcolonial media analysis.

The anatomy of satire in urban narratives

Urban narratives serve as a conducive platform for satire due to the inherent complexities of metropolitan existence- the contemporary society juxtaposed with deterioration, exacerbation and hegemony espoused with alienation. Satire in urban graphic narratives highlights the themes of bureaucratic inefficiency, absurdity and exaggeration, exposing the paradoxes of city life inquisitive of the beneficiaries of urban progress. Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet at Vikaspuri* typifies how satire can be wielded to critique contemporary urban life. The work blends visual and textual irony, historical intertextuality and absurdity to expose the contradictions, bureaucratic inertia, urban alienation and socio-political hypocrisy, customizing the very act of storytelling by subscribing to fragmented, anecdotal critiques rather than linear narratives.

Banerjee's work finds strong reverberance within Dustin H Griffin's *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, which postulates that "satire is inquiry and provocation, it shares a boundary not (as we usually hear) with polemical rhetoric but with philosophical (and especially ethical) writing" (Griffin 1994, 81). He argues that satire works as an interrogation of authority, rather than a direct attack, situating the satirist as an investigator who infuses parody and irony to coerce readers to give into introspection. His statement, "Satire is in my view rather an "open" than a "closed" form, both in its formal features (particularly in its reluctance to conclude) and in its more general rhetorical and moral features, in its frequent preference for inquiry, provocation, or playfulness rather than assertion and conclusiveness," (Ibid, 200) is evident through Banerjee's portrayal of urban system, wherein, infrastructural derelictions are contrasted with the lofty ideals of development. Much like Banerjee's ironic portrayal of urban development projects - that supersede the marginalised and underprivileged contemporary Indian cities that exhibit a paradox

where the beautification endeavour often expunges the marginalised communities rather than empower them. The Smart City Mission and the pre-G20 slum evictions in Delhi ostensibly serve as a real-life parallel where the state's vision creates disproportionate ramifications for the urban poor. Banerjee encapsulates this discrepancy with mordant irony as illustrated in the sequence where privatization is mounted as a remedy to economic turmoil rather than an ethical concern. In this particular panel, a bureaucrat, after witnessing the turmoil and protests by trade union leaders holding banners that read "Mazdoor Jaago and Inqilab Zindabad," merely raises his hands and says "I have had enough of this" and simply proclaims, "PRIVATISE." (Banerjee 2015, 7) This hasty shift from worker resistance to corporate takeover reflects how economic decisions are promulgated by elite convenience. The visual contrast remains conspicuous when the workers are shown in chaotic and expressive gestures, while the bureaucrats are unfazed with detached calm expressions, alienating themselves from the ground realities.

Banerjee satirizes the politics of water scarcity in his work, metamorphosing a rudimentary setting of survival into a dystopian combat zone where power is insistent on access to water. This exaggeration evinces a larger reality- the state's impotence to provide quintessential services whilst perpetuating to hold on to grandiose promises of urban development. Partha Chatterjee's "Political Society" gains relevance in this context; where the urban poor, deprived of formal citizenship rights, must engage in unwarranted negotiations to gain access to essentialities. The narrative establishes the contrast and the stark reality of urbanity wherein, the privileged have uninterrupted access to necessitous water resources and the urban poor rely on tanker mafias and informal supply chains to get access to water. He captures the hydro-political disparity by depicting water not as a shared resource but as a site of socio-economic tussle. Banerjee situates the worsening of water infrastructure: the water filtration plant in Tambapur is left deserted, its once operating structure now endowed with cracks, encrusted in sledge and water culminating into virulence.

The satirical portrayal is redolent of postcolonial anxieties, wherein public governance is delineated not as an apparatus of public welfare but as an entanglement of contradictions- operating through systematic neglect rather than active resolution. The concept of bureaucratic dysfunction remains a defining trait of urban graphic novels. The multinational firm Platypus strides in to profit from this predicament,

bolstering neocolonial economic dominance. Indeed, the salient depiction of the company head, J. W. Anderson or Sir John, a character whose very name indicates the ambivalence of neocolonial excess, corporate avarice, and a deliberate attempt to depict the interchangeable nature of corporate leaders and the entanglement of power with identity boasts a red bow tie standing out from the otherwise monochromatic setting becoming a symbol of capitalist flamboyance and profit-driven insensitivity. The work also extends to the neoliberal yearning of the urban elite, who despite their intellectual sophistication, prevails to be entrapped in the paradox of Western consumerist fantasies and postcolonial anxieties. His characters - like Varun Bhalla, the financial wizard representing the homegrown elite who sides with Western Capitalism - are trapped in a cycle of existential angst.

The work orients itself with global dystopian traditions, wherein bureaucratic failure remains a defining trait of urban graphic novels. The notion, “satire is a rhetorical contest: as display, and as play”. For Griffin satire makes use of ‘ornamental rhetoric,’ much like the characters who intellectually engage with Marxism, philosophy, and existentialism, yet remain restrained to capitalist consumerist inclinations, concocting a satirical paradox wherein the ideological orientations are undermined by their materialist ambition.

Hydropolitics within the panels

Hydropolitics is defined as “the systematic study of conflict and cooperation between states over water resource that transcend international borders” in Arun P. Elhance’s *Hydropolitics in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation*. It refers to the political and power dynamics that encompass water resources, specifically in zones where water is contested and scarce. Water scarcity is a manufactured crisis, aggravated by corruption, poor governance and unequal access rather than mere environmental consequences. In Banerjee’s depiction of dystopian Delhi water has turned into a source of conflict, with factions contending for its dwindling supply. Here, state inefficiencies enable the privatized section to capitalize on the downtrodden for profit. The novel’s portrayal of water mafias, the underground network that controls and allocates water to the highest bidder can be seen in.

The poor are systematically deprived of water while the elite maintain sustained access. The hydrological crises in Tambapur as envisaged by Banerjee do not emanate from climate catastrophe solely,

but from the weaponization of water; thereby, aligning with Karen Bakker's argument that claims that urban water scarcity is a manufactured condition. Here, water is not merely a contested resource but an exclusive commodity, accessible only to the higher elites.

Furthermore, water privatization and the failure of the governance elucidated Karen Bakker proffers a significant framework for deciphering this phenomenon. Bakker states that it is the failure of the governance, rather than natural cause that produces water scarcity in urban contexts, wherein, she typifies governance failure as "a mismatch in decision making between citizenship and associated political rights, on the one hand, and institutional and cultural practices on the other." (Bakker 2010, 45) In the text, the poor are deprived of access to water while the elite manage to maintain sustained proximity to water. One of the most explicit portrayals of elite entitlement in the consumption of water is embodied in the character of Ms Carrey Jones, the wife of a foreign ambassador who remains oblivious to the city's water problem. Ms Jones enjoys unrestricted access to water and lavishes water at measures that mock the very concept of scarcity: "Ms Carrey Jones was weary of dirt and germs of India and tried to protect herself at all cost." (Banerjee 2015, 38) Every time the child peed in the pool, she had it drained and refilled with fresh water (Ibid, 38).

Ms Carrey Jones identifies herself with the global elite and neocolonial excess, reflecting how the elite not only remain insulated from adversity but actively exacerbate it through excess consumption. Ms Jones' portrayal exaggerates her aloofness from reality, positing her bubble of affluence and surroundings as a utopian oasis, whilst the rest of Tambapur deteriorates under systematic neglect.

Banerjee's portrayal of short-termism and hydro-political mismanagement is visualised through ludicrous urban landscapes, inclusive of buildings precariously heaped upon each other, held together by "optimism" (Ibid, 55), a critique on Tambapur's lack of sustainable vision. The short-term fixes pervade economic and social structures: armies of young workers employed in industries with no skill development (Banerjee 53), broken consumer goods deemed irreplaceable, and socio-political grandstanding unfazed from governance. These fractured depictions convey that the hydropolitical predicament is not just a failure of governance but an emanation of a larger culture of disposability and shortsighted policies.

Banerjee's dystopian Delhi is not merely enduring a hydrological crisis but a deliberate economic and political stratification of access to

water. Bakker's cardinal concept of the "production of thirst" challenges the assumption that water shortages are simply natural. She says that our current approach to urban water governance "produces thirst." (Bakker 2010, 218) Her works explicate the situation in Jakarta's splintered urban water networks wherein, water access is disproportionate as a result of elite capture and privatisation.

The Water Knife by Paolo Bacigalupi, in a similar vein encapsulates the brutality of water as a tool of power when in a pivotal moment, Angel Velasquez enforces a water shutoff in Carver City. The lines - "Law of the River says senior rights gets it all. Junior rights?" Angel shrugged. "Not so much." (Bacigalupi 2015, 17), is a reflection of how the character operates within a ruthless system of water rights and corporate control; wherein, access to water is dictated by senior legal claims rather than categorizing it under the essential human needs. Water, in the context of the American Southwest, is a highly scarce and commodified resource as a result of prolonged drought, an unforeseen adversity within the formidable cities of Phoenix and Los Angeles aggressively protecting their water supplies. Angel, in this context, is not merely exercising authority but upholding a legal structure that gives priority to the corporations and the state. The system is designed such that the marginalised population suffers grievously while the rich and powerful are benefitted.

All Quite in Vikaspuri exhibits water not merely as a cardinal resource but as a militarised tool, where the dearth is engineered through neoliberalism, state negligence and elite capture. The crisis reflects a broader malfunction of governance, where short-term stratagems exacerbate long-term vulnerabilities. This crisis prevails beyond water- the very framework of urban life is in decay, with the victims grappling against an environment that is hostile, fractured and deteriorating.

Urban environment and characters in crisis

Urban environments mould human behaviour in significant ways, dominating individual agency, social relationships and power structures. Banerjee's characters are not mere occupants of Tambapur; they are deeply ensnared in the urban ecosystem, wrestling against its shackles. Robert A Francis and Michael A Chadwick's *Urban Ecosystems: Understanding the Human Environment* dispenses a crucial framework for mapping the relationship between Banerjee's characters and their urban surrounding Francis and Chadwick state that

urban geography should be deciphered as “complex adaptive systems” (Levin 1998, 61) that vitalise multiple interacting components to respond to stress and maintain structures, functions and processes. Banerjee’s characters are not mere recipients of the system but are dynamically shaped by them. The plaintive exemplification in the ambit characterisation of Girish, once a skilled industrial plumber, whose dismissal from the Platypus-run firm is actuated through an uninhibited corporate culling: It took months of painful deliberation for the workers to draw up a small list of demands, it took half a day for the management to sack 1200 workers” (Banerjee 2015, 12). His trajectory from highly skilled employment to precariousness marks the ecological repercussion of the city- desertion, renunciation, disrepair and fragmentation. Girish, now unemployed joins the “the doomed procession of displaced thousands,” whose identities have been outstripped by the urban entropy.

Francis and Chadwick opine that urban environments generate non-equilibrium states maintained by anthropogenic energy subsidies, inducing self-organised patterns of buildings and infrastructure which require constant adaptation. Banerjee’s protagonist, traversing Delhi’s dilapidated infrastructure in pursuit of water confronts a group of fragmented urban population, each of them revamping themselves to exist. They embody “the dynamic responses of urban dwellers to ecosystem stressors, contriving strategies in response to the predicament. Girish, in the story, finds himself tweaking to underground labour, drilling for water for the Pataal Jal project. His diligent priming in order to take up this expedition- employing “the most advanced drilling machine that man has ever built”- gestures a grotesque inversion of adaptation: the characters subscribe deeper into dystopia instead of gravitating toward ecological sustainability. His subterranean mirrors an existential delving into the periphery of agency and visibility, rendering him corporeally and symbolically disconnected from society.

The concept of climate apartheid delineated by Ashley Dawson in his *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*, states that ecological disasters and infrastructural deterioration augment class divisions rather than obliterate them. It leads to the hardening of borders and restrictions on the movements of those affected by environmental and social disruptions. Here water serves as an instrument of social exclusion, hegemonised by the bureaucratic elites. Moreover, the pre-existing social divisions through

environmental means insulate a select few from the vulnerability of the crisis, while the urban poor grapple within an ecologically belligerent cityscape - a pattern discerned in actuality during air pollution, waste management and water scarcity. This is accentuated through the satirical bureaucracy of the Delhi Jal Board and the absurd stance of Jagat Ram, delineated by elongated ears and bureaucratic enervation, who despite being demoted regularly for “failing to adequately fix the leaking supply lines,” is eventually victimised for the vanishing of water. His Kafkaesque exacerbation ends at the doors of Paatalpuri, endowed with finding the mythical river Saraswati- derision on governmental aberration and mystification of accountability.

The brawl for water in this context is not just about survival but a reflection of deeper political failures. The commodification and clandestine system of production of water operate outside state regulation often espoused with covert bureaucratic complicity, depicted in the novel when Girish, wanting to survive, is subsumed into Rastogi's enterprise of peregrination to extract water- a parodic parallel of privatized despair.

The disadvantaged populace in Tambapur is coerced into precarious urban spaces precisely due to the corporate and political interests that displace the marginalized communities. Dawson fortifies this claim through the concept of Mike Davis's ‘slum ecologies’ wherein, the inequality pushes the urban squatter communities to live in the most marginal and often dangerous portions of the city. (Dawson 2017, 102) The residents of Tambapur, after the deterioration of the township, delves through instability through disintegrated housing structures, school closures, halved salaries, and hospitals turning into cesspools. The once systematic and organised work settlements dwindle into fractured spaces. The water filtration plant is stranded with its toxic remnants oozing out into the land speeding up diseases with industrial accidents becoming a regimen. The workers, left without basic services or security stage a hopeless protest- met with silence, not solidarity as “no trade unionists came from the city, neither did angels from the sky.” The water scarcity amplifies ecological vulnerability propelling communities into precarious urban margins which makes survival extremely tenuous. The community is left with nothing but hollow edifices and memories, solidifying a direct representation of slum ecologies: degraded, exaggerated and invisible.

The dystopian city depicted by Banerjee where once functional city spaces have metamorphosized into zones of desperation and

vulnerability, arbitrarily reflecting the 2019 Chennai Water Crisis with an emergence of black market water dealers and alternative networks of provisions. On the other hand, the infrastructural foundering of post-Hurricane Sandy New York as specified by Dawson in comparison with Banerjee's vision of Delhi is prominent as he writes "Hurricane Sandy unmasked the contradictions and injustices of these narratives of security and resilience. Urban elites and officials had assured the public that they were strengthening the resilience of 'critical infrastructures' after 9/11, yet when Sandy struck the city, infrastructural collapse cascaded through the urban system." Comparably, Delhi's pipelines and water monopolization unmask the city's deep-rooted inequalities connoting that urban resilience is often a privilege reserved for the elite. It exposes the gap between rhetoric and reality highlighting the illusion of urban preparedness.

Ultimately, the urban ecosystems are acutely influenced by feedback loops between behaviour, environment and governance, exemplifying the negotiation of characters in the novel whose struggles are inseparable from the social landscape. The work's illustration of an exacerbating, crumbling Delhi depicts the tussle- where the adaptation and fortitude are dictated not by need, but by power and access.

Conclusion

Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* operates as a penetrating satire that perforates through the shimmering tinsel of neoliberal urbanity to unravel the deteriorating, exclusionary, and unjust edifices sustaining it. Through its portrayal of the fractured visual-textual elements, the novel does not merely lay out a dystopian city; rather, it manifests the present through suppositional alienation, enabling shades of covert and embedded violence of water deprivation and bureaucratic insouciance to be the spotlight. The novel's satirical amplification, far from being a spectacular deflection, is rooted in socio-political realism, unveiling the hidden frameworks of exclusion and the moral bankruptcy of the state-led progress. Banerjee's espousal of the concept of hydro-politics- dissected through the lenses of Bakker's "production of thirst" - coerces the readers to reimagine water as a deeply politicised essentiality, militarised through systemic inequality and elite seizure. Characters like Girish the Plumber are not just passive victims but incorporeal testimony to a system that triumphs on expendability. His depiction of lackadaisical bureaucrats and technocratic elites finds reverberance with the shades of violence,

where harm accumulates over time, evincing angst covert and discreet. This reading confronts the conventional binaries of heroes and villains, displacing them with a complex portrait of survival, despair and connivance. As Sarma emphasises, the interconnected aesthetics of graphic novels in India stipulates a “glocal” reader, attuned to local specificities and global strides. While the novel propounds a blistering ecological and political imputation, it also covertly signals towards alignment and resistance, notwithstanding the shattered cohesion that combats grand narratives of vindication. As Griffin accentuates, the satirical medium subscribes not to seek closure but to provoke inquiry and in this, Banerjee’s rendering resists resolution in commendation of reflection.

Future research could widen this investigation into the fabric that the current study only touches upon, such as fractured identities, affective ecologies, or hydro-political narratives across global traditions. Equivalently, an in-depth dive into the visual semiotics within neoliberal urbanity could highlight the structured politics of representation. *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, consequently, materialises not only as an exegesis of urban failure but as a physiography of catastrophe, prompting us to track ourselves, give in to introspection within the fractured structures we inhabit uncritically.

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