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Urban comix: Subcultures, infrastructures and “the right to the city” in Delhi

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This article argues that comics production in India should be configured as a collaborative artistic endeavour that visualizes Delhi’s segregationist infrastructure, claiming a right to the city through the representation and facilitation of more socially inclusive urban spaces. Through a discussion of the work of three of the Pao Collective’s founding members – Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh – it argues that the group, as for other comics collectives in cities across the world, should be understood as a networked urban social movement. Their graphic narratives and comics art counter the proliferating segregation and uneven development of neoliberal Delhi by depicting and diagnosing urban violence. Meanwhile, their collaborative production processes and socialized consumption practices, and the radical comix traditions on which these movements draw (and which are sometimes occluded by the label “Indian Graphic Novel”) create socially networked and politically active spaces that resist the divisions marking Delhi’s contemporary urban fabric.

Keywords: comix, graphic novels; urban infrastructure; the right to the city; Delhi; networked social movements

The city as circuitboard

Insert Fig.1: The central, densely packed map of urban Delhi in *Tinker. Solder. Tap* (Kumar and Prasad 2009, n.p.). Reproduced from an open source file, available online:

<http://archive.sarai.net/files/original/9913bf753536c419becc8fe8f5216a9a.pdf>.

A central page of Bhagwati Prasad and Amitabh Kumar’s (2009) short comic, *Tinker. Solder. Tap: A Graphic Novel*, presents a densely packed map of Delhi’s clustered and complex infrastructure, poorly reproduced to emphasize the city’s visual impenetrability (see Fig.1).

Over this photocopied cartographic image, the accompanying text informs readers that “the map of the city now changed” for its four protagonists, Subhash, Srikant, Anand and Deepak (2009, n.p.). Electricians trying to negotiate precarious city living, Subhash and his colleagues decide to enter the Video Compact Disc (VCD) market, and become successful trading these easily-pirated alternatives to DVDs. From there, they begin to establish their electronics business – the tinkering, soldering and tapping of the comic’s title. In the double-page spread that follows their entry into this subcultural marketplace, the impenetrable map of Delhi is replaced by the smooth, crisp lines of the circuit board. The city becomes visually comprehensible to its protagonists, who undercut copyright permissions from their stall in an underground market to make a living: “And they sell VCDs. So many VCDs that everything else pales in comparison.” Through this combination of image and narrative, the comic self-consciously underlines the connections between subcultural practices – from piracy and “DJ music” to “dance competitions” – and wider social movements which either undermine the top-down circuitries of neoliberal capital, corporate ownership and physical urban infrastructure, or navigate alternative – in this case illegal – routes through them.

Insert Fig.2: Delhi's densely packed cityscape is replaced by the smooth, legible surface of the circuit board (Kumar and Prasad 2009, n. p.).

Crucially then, as for many comics set in Delhi, these subcultural practices are both grounded in and pitted against a depiction of the city as an unevenly developed and vertically stratified urban space; with “more and more congested and contested [...] urbanization”, so “political struggle and social struggle takes on an increasingly three-dimensional character, reaching both up from and down below ground level” (Graham 2016, 4). Prasad and Kumar self-consciously align urban subcultural production with the occupation of marginalized urban

spaces, a correlative project that resists the increasingly virulent neoliberal ethos currently shaping Delhi's infrastructural segregation. In so doing, Prasad and Kumar speak back to a long tradition of "comix" collaboration and production, which, though originating in the US, has now been replicated and re-appropriated across the globe. Comix self-identify as explicitly underground subcultures, eschewing copyright and censorship laws and making use of "informal urban networks" to mobilize sociopolitical dissent more effectively (Wolk 2007, 39). *Tinker. Solder. Tap* gives the subcultural efforts of these underground social networks infrastructural shape through its depiction of city space as layered and uneven, marked by discriminatory state- and privately-funded urban planning, yet also undermined by subcultural spaces that transgress the vertically segregated urban environment.ⁱ

In a concluding acknowledgement, Prasad and Kumar thank their "colleagues from the Pao Collective [of which Kumar is himself a founding member] for being part of the excitement of creating together" (2009, n.p.). The current article sets out to demonstrate that Indian comics production, particularly that of the Pao Collective, can helpfully be understood – as it is here – as a collaborative artistic endeavour especially adept at visualizing Delhi's segregationist infrastructure. In so doing, and in their form, content and creative material practice, these comics claim a "right to the city" through the creation of more socially inclusive urban spaces. Comics speak back, I hope to demonstrate, to the 21st-century's "new urban question", one that arises out of the neoliberal city's unevenly developed and increasingly segregated infrastructural space.

Neoliberal Delhi: Spatial apartheid and social resistance

For Andy Merrifield (2014), the new urban question is posed by "the global dispossession and reconfiguration of urban space", which creates increased proximities of wealth and poverty and in turn produces ever more complex systems of division and segregation (30).

The “increasing polarisation in the distribution of wealth and power” is “indelibly etched into the spatial forms of our cities” (Harvey 2012, 14), as segregationist infrastructures separating unequal zones cut not only across urban space, but now vertically overlay one another as well (Graham 2016, 5). India’s capital city, Delhi, is no exception. There urban policies have since the 1990s functioned “increasingly as facilitators and regulators of private sector participation in urban development”, leading to the kinds of “uneven urban fabric [and] preponderance of gated communities” symptomatic of neoliberal urbanism’s “spatial apartheid” (Chakravarty and Negi 2016, 2–3).

For D. Asher Ghertner (2015), the political discourse of “the World-Class City” now dominating millennial Delhi concretizes in outward-looking, image-oriented, glistening infrastructural projects that mark “an imminent break from the perceived inefficiencies and encumbrances of the more socialistic, planned city of the [Nehruvian] past” (8). Within this developmental trajectory, Henri Lefebvre’s once revolutionary notion of “the right to the city” becomes “too narrowly confined, restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires” (Harvey 2009, 329; Lefebvre 2000). Populations unable to participate in Delhi’s increasingly consumer-led urban culture must be removed, or at least hidden from view, in order for the city to continue attracting global capital investment. This occurs through globally familiar processes of gentrification, where marginal communities are priced out of the city (see Smith 2005), and segregation, which proliferates through “fortification or gating” (Waldrop 2004, 94). But for Ghertner (2014), Delhi’s “slum demolition” constitutes a much larger effort to eradicate Delhi’s few remaining public spaces (1563), those sites where basic urban rights – “the right to housing, to a livelihood, or to decent physical and mental health care”, collectively components of a democratic “right to the city” – are fundamentally contested (Mitchell 2003, 8–9).

Swapna Banerjee-Guha (2009) contends that, whilst “world class” policies may have reduced the subcontinent’s cities to “nodes of circulation of global finance”(96), a “praxis of neoliberal urbanism and the enforcement of the regulatory regime in cities” remains “intrinsically associated with [...] resistance and struggles”; “neoliberal restructuring” has produced a “radical politics of contestation [over] whom the cities and their spaces are meant for” (106; see also Banerjee-Guha 2013, 167). Merrifield too emphasizes the resistant flip side of neoliberal urbanism’s discriminatory coin: cities may increasingly function as the “engine for capital accumulation”, but urbanity’s social heterogeneity continues to make cities a strategic “site for social/class struggle” (2014, 1). The increasingly proximal juxtaposition of multiple populations in the city produces segregated enclaves of poverty and wealth, certainly, but can also build affinities between these divided spaces. These affinities can grow to constitute “urban social movements” (Hasson 1997, 236–238) that, “networked in cyberspace and urban space” (Castells 2012, 3–4), help to develop “meeting places between virtual and physical worlds” that function as public sites from which a more democratic right to the city can be contested (Merrifield 2014, 81).

Urban comix as networked social movements

This article argues that comics, the visual form and content of which has a long and complex political history in the subcontinent (see Ramaswamy 2003), become a site where these movements intersect. After all, the overlaying of urban and online spaces is itself contained within the image of the city-as-circuit board plotted out by Prasad and Kumar in *Tinker. Solder. Tap*, even as the comic then circulates as free digital content online as well as materially, as hard copy, through the city. Through a discussion of the graphic work of three of the Pao Collective’s founding members – Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, and Vishwajyoti Ghosh – this article will argue that the group, like other comics collectives, should be

understood as a networked urban social movement. For Shlomo Hasson (1997), an “urban social movement is a concerted attempt of urban groups to further or secure a common interest either in the ecological, cultural or political sphere through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions” (236); increasingly, as Manuel Castells (2012) adds, such movements are “networked in cyberspace and urban space” (2). In this sense, the sociology that is pursued here is committed, following Latour (2005) and other proponents of Actor Network Theory, “to the tracing of new associations and to the designing of their assemblages”, yet without limiting through that description “in advance the shape, size, heterogeneity, and combination of associations” (7). I therefore emphasize the networked component of the Pao Collective’s work because their comics both depict and diagnose problems of urban violence, while their production and consumption practices create socially networked and politically active spaces that cut across and resist the divisions marking Delhi’s contemporary urban fabric. On occasion, as the Collective themselves acknowledge, such physical networks, which connect through workshops, comics jams and exhibitions, as well as online via websites and blogs and through collaborations with other artistic collectives, foster the construction of more socially active urban spaces (see Pisharoty 2012).

It is therefore not only that the comics form, with its vertical depth and spatial layout, is particularly suited to representing urban space, though it certainly is (see Ahrens and Arno 2010; Dittmer 2014; Hassler-Forest 2012; Worcester 2011). The creative process itself leads to the development of alternative networks of communication, (sub)cultural exchange and social interaction, which “challenge the model of the asocial or antisocial flexible individualist” of neoliberal creative economies, as Sarah Brouillette (2014) has documented at length (4). In so doing, these comics facilitate a more socially inclusive urbanism at a time of deepening infrastructural division, even as the Pao Collective’s use of terms such as “collaboration”, “collective” and so on is accompanied, as for other networked social

movements, by a general rejection of “formal organization” and a resistance to uniformity (Castells 2012, 3). Where Orijit Sen collaborates “often and in all the areas of work that I do”, Ghosh has only collaborated “on one narrative so far”, whilst Banerjee comments, with some provocative sarcasm, that he hopes to collaborate “someday, with a biologist” (Pao Collective 2012, 12). Considering the Collective as a network thus brackets these multiple forms of collaborative and single-authored artistic production without conditional prescription, all the while emphasizing the social movement that underpins them and to which they in turn contribute.

With their distinctive collaborative potential in mind, I argue here that these comics have the capacity to emphasize the centrality of urban space in the contest for what Edward Soja (2010) calls “spatial justice” (1). As Soja observes, seeing “justice spatially” – that is, acknowledging the way in which spatial environments shape, and are shaped by, social interactions – allows for “more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism” (2010, 6). Comics’ enduring historical connections with and formal capacity to represent city space means that, when oriented towards themes of justice, political protest and social activism (or even when not explicitly mobilized in this way), they are well-placed to imagine alternative and more democratic ways of inhabiting the splintered neoliberal city (see Graham and Marvin 2001).

It is because of these subversive, historically urban elements that I deploy the term “comix” throughout this discussion. Recent comics in India have been repeatedly labelled, by practitioners and critics alike, as “graphic novels”, and a slow canonization of “the Indian graphic novel” is now underway (Mehta 2010, 173–188; Sandten 2011, 510–522; Sinha 2016, 181–197). For some comics critics, this institutional and market-oriented rebranding has sanitized comics’ coarser elements and emphasized their “literary” ones, re-embedding rather than dismantling “the distinction between high and low” cultural forms and reinforcing

the “ghettoisation of works deemed unworthy of critical attention” (Labio 2011, 126). The term “graphic novel” might actually reflect “a sad narrowing of the field to a very small and unrepresentative canon”, limiting the “scope of what the comics form can represent or incorporate”, and implying that they originated “without precedent or tradition” (Postema 2013, xi). In fact, the graphic novel “owe[s] its very life” to “the burgeoning alternative scene” of underground comix movements in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, which from the outset aligned themselves with other radical social movements of that era, from the Anti-War to Civil Rights campaigns (Hatfield 2005, 25–26; Sanders 1975, 839). The use of the term “graphic novel” risks cutting contemporary comics movements such as the Pao Collective away from these radical legacies. Moreover, situating them solely “in the post-millennial Indian publishing scene as a cultural and literary ‘product’” (Varughese 2016, 496), one that is specifically geared toward elite consumption, might detract from – if not entirely smother – their subversive content. Even if, as for Sarnath Banerjee, this market-oriented stance is exploited strategically by the artists themselves, I argue that reframing these works as “comix” emphasizes the form’s global and local histories to better reignite their resistant urban politics.

Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*: Establishing infrastructures of resistance

Though visual-narrative artist Orijit Sen’s (1994) long-form comic, *The River of Stories*, is widely credited as India’s first “graphic novel”, Jeremy Stoll (2013a) points out that as “graphic novels go” it is “relatively short at only 61 pages [...] current reproductions are distributed in a basic format: photocopied pages, spiral binding, and a clear plastic cover” (378). In recent years it has, like Bhagwati and Kumar’s comic, also been distributed online and is now available to download for free. Sen’s publication and distribution practices follow US comix movements that employed similar “‘underground’ distribution” methods, but also

demonstrated “a diversification in graphic style; a budding internationalism, as cartoonists learned from other cultures and traditions; and, especially, the exploration of searchingly personal and at times boldly political themes” (Hatfield 2005, x). E. Dawson Varughese (2018) observes that Hatfield's genealogy of the form “might easily be applied to the Indian context and its ‘graphic narrative’ production”, while demonstrating at length how the introduction of the specific term “graphic novel” has been absolutely “instrumental in forging a new identity of text-image production within the Indian (literary) market” (18–19). Though acknowledging the importance of the term “graphic novel”, I want here to contend that it remains productive to consider simultaneously this work as alternative comics, or even “comix”. I hope to demonstrate here that such a reconsideration throws up some revealing (if uneven) similarities between underground comix and Indian graphic narratives in both production and consumption practices, as well as the inter-visual references included in both their form and content. For example, Sen’s comics undercut mainstream publishing industries, seek out “underground” readerships, embody a “do-it-yourself” or DIY ethos and, as for urban social movements and networks more generally, use the internet to increase and democratize their circulation.

Published on the cusp of India’s economic liberalization in the mid-1990s, *River of Stories* documents the story of a rural community dispossessed of its land by the development of “highly visible infrastructure works” (in this case, a dam) – projects that, over the next two decades, became increasingly symptomatic of the “speculative land development and rentiership” of neoliberal India (Ghertner 2015, 10–11). The comic maps the cyclical violence of neoliberalism’s “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2009, 326), as rural communities dispossessed of their land are forced to the edge of India’s cities to live precariously in informal housing as a reserve labour pool (Banerjee-Guha 2013, 166). Visually contextualizing these processes, Sen’s comic challenges the sociopolitical discourse

that since the early 2000s has framed these peripheral populations as transgressors of “the boundary separating human and animal”, “the urban from the rural, educated from uneducated, and Indian from foreign” (Ghertner 2015, 90). Such divisions justify what Nikhil Anand (2017) has called the uneven “infrastructures of citizenship”, where infrastructure services and citizenship rights are seized by urban elites at the expense of the rural subaltern (10). *River of Stories*’ account of Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement consisting of adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists who protested a number of discriminatory infrastructural developments, circulates online for free as both an artistic work and educational tool. In this way, Sen's comic endures as an ongoing commentary on the intensifying discriminatory processes of India’s neoliberalization, especially as it plays out through the uneven infrastructural development of urban space.

Sen’s wider oeuvre addresses similar concerns, returning repeatedly to visual depictions of state- and private-led infrastructure projects in Delhi and other Indian cities to document and critique their often violent ramifications for marginalized urban populations. His 2002 collaboration with Cita Wolf and Anushkar Ravishankar, *Trash: On Ragpicker Children and Recycling*, which arose “from a series of workshops” the authors “conducted with rag-picker children”, set out to raise “greater awareness [...] of child labour and children’s rights” (Ravishankar, Sen and Wolf 2002, 4–5). Through its combination of accessible, educational text, short fictionalized segments and Sen’s explicatory images, *Trash* informs readers of the class and caste inequalities embedded in and perpetuated by the uneven development of urban space, in an effort to build solidarities between India’s stratified urban inhabitants. Furthermore, as *Trash* suggests, Sen often works collaboratively, a tendency that again aligns his artistic practice with that of comix and other subcultural movements. A similar collaborative project to which Sen also contributed, the comics anthology *When Kulbhusan Met Stöckli: A Comics Collaboration Between India and*

Switzerland (Roy 2009), forged cross-national artistic connections, even as its constituent strips addressed the various inequalities that pervade local urban spaces, most notably Delhi (v). Meanwhile, these projects themselves create physical sites of both local and transnational social engagement within an otherwise divided city through the hosting of workshops and other comics jams.

In 2009, Sen established the Pao Collective with fellow artists Amitabh Kumar, Sarnath Banerjee, Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Parismita Singh. As Stoll's account suggests, this collaborative dynamic has been crucial to the subsequent success enjoyed by the collective's constituent authors:

Separately, each of these five creators has contributed an individual voice and style to Delhi's comics community; united as the Pao Collective, though, they are able to do much more, from organising gallery shows and book releases, to organising and producing anthologies of creators' work, popularising comics narratives, and changing public perceptions of their medium along the way. (2013a, 383)

The activities of the Pao Collective, which has been centred in Delhi but also has connections in Calcutta and Mumbai, thus resemble the construction of social networks that cut through and occupy multiple sites in divided urban spaces. These collective and collaborative components, especially, have facilitated the development of an autonomous subculture strategically positioned to advance subversive sociopolitical commentaries on neoliberal India. As the next two sections of this article will show, this networked occupation and usage of urban space is accompanied by a representational focus on the city within the comics produced by the collective's individual members. These representations explicitly and

implicitly advance a radically democratic notion of the right to the city that contributes to the construction of more socially inclusive – as opposed to vertically stratified – urban space.

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* and *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*: Surveying the city

Sarnath Banerjee's (2004) book-length comic *Corridor* is the first Indian comic to self-identify, in its subtitle, as *A Graphic Novel*. For Banerjee and fellow Pao Collective founder Amitabh Kumar, the label “graphic novel” was adopted to emphasize “a focus on an auteur model of creativity” that resists the “industrial model’s general abuse of creators” (Stoll 2013a, 378) – a model most notably practised by corporate US comics giants Marvel and DC. Banerjee’s adoption of the term “graphic novel” is therefore strategic, allowing him to retain artistic rights to his work and securing him the credit, financial or otherwise, that he deserves – both crucial factors in creating an environment conducive to continued subcultural production. Indeed, the Pao Collective, or “Bread” Collective, is so-named because, as Sen remarks, the founding members hoped “to earn our daily bread from our art” (quoted in Stoll 2013a, 383). My argument in this article for the resonance of the term “comix” as a descriptive term for the Pao Collective's work is clearly not designed to disavow Banerjee's own preference for the term “graphic novel” (though interestingly he has now dropped such explicit labelling; see Banerjee 2011, 2016). Rather, it is to refocus attention on the Pao Collective as a networked social movement, the collaborative elements of which have amplified their comics’ ability to mobilize a subversive urban politics through an expanded readership and the securing of appropriate remuneration for practitioners.

The protagonists of Banerjee’s *Corridor* and his slightly later comic, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (Banerjee 2007), are both *flâneur*-like figures modelled on earlier European city wanderers such as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, adapted to and combined with an array of other global explorers and local urban travellers (see Banerjee

2007, 79–83). Both comics draw on the form’s spatiality to convey and communicate the experience of inhabiting the heterogeneous, multilayered terrains of 21st-century neoliberal cityscapes – predominantly Delhi in the former, and London, Paris, Delhi and Calcutta in the latter. As Cecile Sandten (2011) observes, their “palimpsest-like organization” reveals “the poly-semantic urban realities and hidden undercurrents [of] the ‘new’ metropolis” (511). *Corridor*’s protagonist Brighu, in particular, is invested with the superhero’s almost omnipotent access to the city, navigating its various spaces so that a range of readers – both resident and international – can view and explore Delhi vicariously through its visual narrative. Both comics contain numerous local and global intertextual and inter-visual references; it is beyond the scope of this article to mention them all here. As Banerjee has himself commented: “Through this medium of comics [I] open up the city for the [reader]. I’m your pimp, I’m your fixer, and I’m your Walter Benjamin all at the same time” (quoted in “Seven Artists in Delhi”, 2011). Benjamin himself appears in *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers* (2007, 79), and the comic concludes with a psychogeographical mapping of Calcutta’s underdeveloped urban spaces (210–217).

Banerjee’s work self-reflexively conflates the act of reading comics and the act of urban exploration, implying that the experience of reading comics can itself transgress Delhi’s infrastructural segregations and increasingly privatized spaces. *Corridor*’s multiple story sequences are organized around a bookstore located in Delhi’s Connaught Place, a central location to which it repeatedly returns, and one that allows the reader to orient him/herself within both the city and the narrative: the “cyrus of second-hand books” is considered “the centre of the universe” (Banerjee 2004, 14). The main narrative arc of *Barn Owl*, meanwhile, details the protagonist’s quest through numerous urban spaces to find a mythical book, the titular *Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*. The first glimpse the comic offers of this book in its early pages positions it on a window frame – self-consciously referencing

the comic's formal architecture of frames and gutters – with a view of Paris beyond, the cityscape opened up by the material object of the book. From the outset, both comics appear to make a claim on the right to the city, inviting readers to engage with urban space through the act of reading.

Banerjee thus uses the form's multiple gutters and grids to represent and then subvert Delhi's vertical "constellation of 'underworlds' and 'overworlds'" (Sandten 2011, 512). Banerjee might be accused of translating these urban spaces into commodities to be consumed and appropriated by an emerging neoliberal elite, a social group described by Leela Fernandes as India's "English-speaking urban white-collar" middle classes (2006, xvii). Indeed, in *Barn Owl*'s concluding flâneurial scene, the protagonist obtains a "psychic map [that] will serve as my rite of initiation into these secret neighbourhoods of the erstwhile black town" (Banerjee 2007, 210). The comic suggests itself as a way for readers to vicariously explore and make knowable the city's alternative spaces, without their having to physically walk those spaces, and possibly confront the urban violence and spatially embedded class conflict they contain. Just as urban gentrification re-infuses city spaces with a "middle-class sensibility" (Smith 2005, 12), Banerjee's psychogeographical tours risk diminishing the violent tensions exacerbated by neoliberal Delhi's urban infrastructural landscape.

However, by positioning Banerjee's comics within a global and historical context of sequential art, *Corridor* and *Barn Owl* can be seen in fact to satirize an elite flâneurism, mobilizing instead a politically subversive and more socially inclusive "right to the city" narrative. The figure of the *flâneur* and its reproduction in US superhero comics is crucial here: as Dan Hassler-Forest (2012) points out, the urban explorations of Batman, Ironman and other superheroes reproduce a conservative narrative trajectory that tends "to fight the

symptoms of crime and injustice while ignoring the causes” – namely, neoliberal urban development (40). Though superheroes

seem to embody the opposite of the *flâneur*, always moving through the city with a clear sense of purpose without any interest in the idle pursuit of commodities or social forms of exchange, [their] crime-stopping ideological agenda [remains] a pure distillation of basic capitalist assumptions. (2012, 138).

Insert Fig.3: Banerjee’s narrator perches atop a tall building surveying the city in *Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers* (2007, 191). Reproduced with the permission of the publisher and artist.

Directly satirizing the presumed omnipotence of superhero comics, which frequently conclude with Superman or Batman gazing out across a neoliberal skyline, in *Barn Owl’s* climactic scene Banerjee’s narrator perches atop a tall building surveying the city (See Figure 3). But Banerjee’s protagonist is not a caped crusader, nor is the city portrayed a “skyscraper landscape of urban modernity” (Hassler-Forest 2012, 114). Rather, Banerjee’s gangly, long-haired hippie, who is visually reminiscent of the characters of Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton that populated earlier underground comix (both were contributors to *Zap*, a serial publication that popularized the term “comix” in the late 1960s), sits awkwardly on a photographic reproduction of a water pipe. He gazes out in a lefthand panel at a new, glistening highway surrounded by green space, before turning to his right to view dilapidated buildings and precarious housing infrastructures. The way the photographic image of a water pipeline, a particularly contentious urban “right” in Delhi (see Roy 2013; Anand 2017) jars with the preceding drawings implicates private-led infrastructural development in uneven resource distribution. Meanwhile, the movement from left to right panels emphasizes the

physical realities and spatial proximities produced by this uneven development. The gutter separating these two frames symbolizes the segregation between these spaces, before readers – through the very process of reading – are asked to transgress this dividing line. Banerjee certainly flirts with elite and gentrifying tropes, but when considered within the context of global comics genres and traditions, both *Corridor* and *Barn Owl* draw on a subcultural visual vocabulary that rejects a privatized vision of urban space, reclaiming instead a more democratic notion of the right to the city.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010): Comix as urban social protest

If Banerjee's work self-identifies as a "graphic novel", Vishwajyoti Ghosh has never laid claim to the term, despite the fact his now semi-canonical book-length comic, *Delhi Calm* (2010), has been treated as such by critics (Narayan 2011; Nayar 2015). The comic's prefatory epigraph cites Harold Pinter's 2005 Nobel Lecture, "Art, Truth and Politics", describing an Orwellian blurring of truth and falsehood by political and media censorship. Meanwhile, a disembodied megaphone similarly raises the issue of censorship, evoking tensions between narrative, history and fiction: "Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. This is a work of fiction. Self-censored" (Ghosh 2010, viii). Set during the Indian Emergency of 1975–77, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties and enforced invasive state censorship, *Delhi Calm*'s opening page immediately draws visual and thematic connections between this historical period and the comix movements that in part have influenced Ghosh's artistic practice – in the US, the "Comics Code Authority" was formed in 1954 to impose "strict restrictions" that made it "impossible to depict in mainstream comics" a number of "controversial issues" (Creekmur 2015, 19). The "comix" tradition prided itself on violating this code as frequently and outrageously as possible (135).ⁱⁱ

Pramod Nayar's (2015) excellent chapter-length reading of *Delhi Calm* concludes that the "graphic novel as a medium [...] is apposite for capturing the horrors of political oppression and the decay of democracy", especially through its "visual representing [of] the city as palimpsest" (131). However, connecting Ghosh's comic both to global comix traditions and local Indian comics histories reveals a further dimension to its subversive politics. Nayar points out that the masks worn by government agents throughout *Delhi Calm* are "reminiscent" of those in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's 1988 comic, *V for Vendetta* (Nayar 2015, 134), but there is deeper significance contained in this reference. The invocation of the iconic Guy Fawkes mask, now a symbol for global anti-capitalist protests and hacker groups such as Anonymous, foregrounds the subcultural or "underground" production processes and their relationship with sociopolitical dissent. If in recent years *V for Vendetta* has "been collected in glossy and expensive prestige formats marketed as graphic novels", Maggie Gray (2010) reminds us that:

it was the idiosyncratic publishing practices of *Warrior* [a British comics anthology that ran serially between March 1982 and January 1985] that gave Moore and his collaborators space to experiment with entrenched genre conventions of mainstream comics, subverting the reactionary ideological role of the superhero to articulate a critique of a futuristically estranged Thatcherism and allegorise a dynamic contrast between fascism and anarchism. (31–32)

Possible connections between Britain's "Iron Lady", a vilified figure in much of Moore's work, and "Mother India", re-coded as "Mother Moon" throughout *Delhi Calm* (Ghosh 2010, 46–54), foreground Ghosh's self-alignment with subcultural practices resistant to the divisive ramifications of contemporary neoliberalism – alongside Reagan, Thatcher was of course a

leading proponent of this first Western and then global market restructuring (Merrifield 2014, 119). This alignment should also be read through the collaborative and subcultural processes of *V for Vendetta*'s original publication: free of corporate obligation or state censorship, *Warrior* allowed Moore to mobilize his subcultural anti-Thatcherite resistance more effectively. Closer attention to these practices therefore allows the "Indian graphic novel" to be situated within a much wider globally activist and socially dissenting comics tradition.

Moreover, whilst *Delhi Calm* engages with global comix movements, Ghosh also invokes a local – though this time notably conservative – comics tradition, one that nevertheless reiterates his subversive politics. Twentieth-century Indian comics mostly functioned as a vehicle for state-controlled education and, on occasion, outright propaganda. As Stoll observes, "comics as a medium has long been associated with education" in India, "largely due to the importance of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series which was the earliest indigenous comics series" (2013a, 366). The *Amar Chitra Katha* (*ACK*), which ran serially during the 1970s and 1980s, "set a strong precedent, one which [...] dictated [Indian] comics content and style for decades" and, along with *Bahadur*, another popular comic published by Indrajal Comics that details the adventures of a heroic detective protagonist, "generally shows a nationalist bias" (367–368). Historically, then, comics in India functioned not as a politically dissenting subculture, but as propagandist vehicles encouraging nationalist conformity, and the extent of *ACK*'s influence should not be underestimated. As Deepa Sreenivas (2010) observes, the "generations of middle-class children that grew up on it during the 1970s and the 1980s, have their ideas of citizenship and selfhood formed by it" (5–6). Meanwhile, E. Dawson Varughese (2016) has shown at length how the "Indian graphic novel interfaces with a legacy of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comics (despite the clear differences in content, style and form)" (495; see also Varughese 2013, 2018; Varughese and Lau 2015).

By setting his comic during the period of the Emergency, when pro-government propaganda circulated widely and media dissent was violently suppressed, Ghosh invokes the complicity of Indian comics with state hegemony in the 1970s – the first issue of *Bahadur* appeared in 1976, coinciding with the Emergency’s most intensive period – before then reclaiming the form as a potentially radical medium. The geographical movement of *Bahadur*’s detective protagonist, who comes from the city but makes forays into rural India to re-establish order, suppress a criminalized political dissent and remind villagers of their obligations to the nation, is replicated in, but also subverted by, *Delhi Calm*’s urban-rural geography. Ghosh’s activist characters retreat to and organize from India’s rural areas, spaces of liberation that reside beyond the oppressive censorship infrastructure of the capital, before re-entering Delhi in the comic’s later pages to reclaim their right to the city. Whilst the detective Bahadur infiltrates India’s rural spaces, Ghosh’s characters invert this geographical movement, thereby advancing a subcultural counter-narrative only fully understood when *Delhi Calm* is situated within the global and local histories of the comics form.

These contexts also foreground the extent to which *Delhi Calm* can be understood as a critical allegorical commentary on the urban discriminations of millennial Delhi. When Ghosh’s subversive agents retreat to the countryside, beyond the reach of the state, several visual and verbal indicators point to their reconstruction of these spaces as both public and politicized, reproducing a well-trodden spatial narrative of politics and capital in India (see, for example, Pathasarathy 2013). Here, smaller, fragmented panels create a staccato reading experience of multiple inputs and interactions, as characters discuss a range of issues “like socialism and Santoshi Mata, like Mehdi Hasan’s ghazals and butter chicken, like Marx and Mohd Rafi” (Ghosh 2010, 74). Public space, as we have seen, is not only a crucial component in a more democratic right to the city but is, as Merrifield argues, fundamental to the creation of “active spaces” that “encourage active encounters of people”, and which

challenge resigned “passive spaces” that remain socially and spatially divided (2014, 83). These words “active” and “passive” recur throughout the panels constituting the rural sections of *Delhi Calm*’s narrative, especially in self-reflexive discussions about notions of subcultural protest: as one character explains, “all we plan to do is to tap this energy and harness it as power for the people. Through our music, our songs, our words, our voice...” (Ghosh 2010, 37).

Crucially, the comic then pivots these spaces of alternative public encounter, created through heterogeneous and politicized interaction in rural spaces, back towards Delhi where they provide new sites of resistance to oppressive state and urban infrastructures (Ghosh 2010, 71, 96). Ghosh’s graphics dramatize how the physical infrastructures that cut through and divide Delhi are complicit with methods of state control – they do so metaphorically, certainly, but Ghosh also shows that contrasting areas of state censorship and freedom of expression can be mapped onto the (lack of the) right to the city experienced by his protagonists. In an early one page spread, which interrupts the regular temporality of the comic’s preceding pages, a series of parking barriers are overlaid onto the urban landscape and marked with directive text (9). Whilst one of these – “do not enter” – might conventionally be found on a parking barrier, the others – “do not guess”, “do not think” – function symbolically to emphasize the connections between urban infrastructure and state censorship. Furthermore, these barriers resemble the space of the gutter, a component of comics architecture in which, critics have claimed, the imaginative work of the reader takes place. As Scott McCloud (1993) writes in his field-shaping work, *Understanding Comics*, it is “in the limbo of the gutter [that] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66). Here, however, Ghosh exploits this critical reading of the comics page to dramatize the invasive effects (and affects) of state censorship into free thought and speech.

Insert Fig.4: A one-page spread from *Delhi Calm* in which urban infrastructures are conflated with the demands of state censorship (Ghosh 2010, 9). Reproduced with the permission of the publisher and artist.

Meanwhile, the accompanying text comments on the state's increasingly invasive surveillance measures, conflating the narrator's movement through urban space and his capacity for subversive political thought:

This city I have almost adopted is now staring at me suspiciously. As suspicious as a new neighbour, not sure whether to smile but constantly gauging. I am surrounded by invisible eyes, watching only me. Trailing me, step by step. When did Delhi get this way? (Ghosh 2010, 9)

Ghosh invokes the Emergency's "grotesque violation of fundamental rights, ethics, and principles of law, democracy, and media coverage" (Nayar 2015, 134) to launch at least in part, I argue, a sustained critique of the city's contemporary discriminatory reshaping. The parking barriers and other segregationist infrastructures that cut through urban Delhi during the Emergency metaphorically restrict political and cultural freedoms, certainly. But I want to contend that within this historical account there is also an invocation of, and commentary on, the city's 21st-century exclusionary spatial layout. Whilst metaphorically indicating the state oppression of the Emergency, these infrastructures can also be read as an allusion to millennial Delhi's narrowing of the right to the city, where "affluent citizens can rid themselves of certain dangers and displeasures through segregated living and the functioning of infrastructure" (Rao 2016, 81). This implicit commentary on Delhi's 21st-century

urbanism resonates in a later conversation between two characters about the city's development:

“So when did you come to Delhi? How do you find this big bad city? [...] Where are you staying?”

“Near Daryaganj, through a cousin, small room. What about you? Some posh place...?”

“Struggling poet in posh place? In Lajpat Nagar, in the south...”

“Isn't south the more upcoming part of this city? That's what I heard.” [...]

“In my Delhi, all that they are doing all the time is opening shops. Enterprise!”

(Ghosh 2010, 97)

Ghosh alludes here to what Ghertner describes as the “primarily aesthetic” project to make Delhi a “world-class city” through infrastructure projects such as “the Delhi metro or a new shopping mall”, and the cultivation of a “general sense of a clean, comfortable, and nuisance-free [read slum-free] public life” (2015, 87–88). These characters discuss the “posh places” of south Delhi – world-class city policies have been most vocally supported by inhabitants of the “wealthier south Delhi colonies” in recent years (88) – and emphasize the gradual saturation of a neoliberal urban ethos (“Enterprise!”). Nevertheless, such urban beautification rhetoric is mocked throughout *Delhi Calm* by Ghosh's scrappy, dirty-looking graphics, which function to repulse readers rather than invite global admiration of state infrastructure projects.

This implicit commentary comes to the fore in a later scene in which the government authorities demolish an area of informal housing, justifying the act through “the decades-old promise of making Delhi look like Paris” through “a deepening round of urban beautification and demolition” (Ghertner 2015, 143, 184; see also Srinivastava 2015, 62).

You will be delighted to learn that the government and the commissioner have decided to make this city sparkle! To make Delhi better than Paris! [...] Despite repeated warnings, you have refused to budge from your illegal dwellings, thinking that you will be saved by your “minority status”. [...] [M]ake way for some development please! [...] This area has been declared a slum area under Section 3 of the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1956. (Ghosh 2010, 191–193)

While residents protest the demolitions – “we were not given any notice!”; “We have even paid our House Tax!”; “Most of these are legal, private houses” (192–193) – the ominous depictions of bulldozers, descending on slums from above, drown out these objections. The subsequent page then depicts splatters of ink over crumbling infrastructure, as a figure fleeing the falling building blocks screams: “Welcome to the city of Paris” (194). Meanwhile, the inclusion of excerpts from censored 1970s newspaper articles, which offer sanitized accounts of the demolitions (shown to be false by the accompanying images), launches a powerful political critique of *ongoing* state complicity with the violent accumulation by dispossession tearing through millennial Delhi.

Equally fundamental to Ghosh’s mapping of the oppressive period of the Emergency are those parts of the city that remain beyond the control of the state. Throughout, the comic equates the inhabitation of informal or decrepit urban spaces with the capacity for individuals to think and act autonomously, and to continue their social and political agitation against state persecution. As with Banerjee, this plays out through a subversive form of flâneurism, or perhaps even as a reworking of the revolutionary project of the Situationist International, whose “experiments of the *dérive* [sought] to discover lost intimations of real life behind the perfectly composed face of modern society“, and through that discovery initiate “a general

contestation of that society” (Marcus 2002, 7). Throughout *Delhi Calm*, characters involved in the anti-Emergency resistance are able to learn Delhi’s “short cuts” and meet up with one another in the city’s unsurveilled back alleys – all of which are accessed, Ghosh’s images reveal, on foot. In line with the ideas of Michel de Certeau, these activists walk the city in order to reinterpret and perhaps even reconstruct it:

[If] a spatial order organises an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualises some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon social elements. (de Certeau 1988, 97–98)

In *Delhi Calm*, the development of a subversive political consciousness and social autonomy is aligned with movement through Delhi’s interstitial spaces, dilapidated side streets and underdeveloped alleyways, which in turn undercut the state’s planned infrastructural edifices. Ghosh establishes a metaphorical imagery of urban infrastructure as state hegemony, before extending that metaphor to further inscribe the gaps and crevices of the city with a capacity for anti-hegemonic resistance. In so doing, he reclaims and re-expands the limited narrowing of the “right to the city” paradigm, making it once again a platform for radical and democratic urban politics.

Conclusion: Seeing justice spatially in comix

Through three differing though related examples, this article has shown that the comics form is well placed to navigate and undercut Delhi’s increasing infrastructural complexity, especially its physically segregationist developments. Aligning the work of Sen, Banerjee and

Ghosh with earlier “comix” movements allows for a fuller understanding of their subversive politics, which frequently manifests through their engagement with – and subversive rerouting of – discriminatory urban landscapes. Though retrospectively “the 1960s counterculture often remains idealised” (Creekmur 2015, 19), the redeployment of the term “comix” to describe the artistic practice of the Pao Collective emphasizes key elements – its collaborative production processes, its subcultural self-identification, and its socially dissenting politics – that must not be overlooked. When these components are emphasized, as this article’s readings have shown, the spatial form of the comic becomes adept not simply at representing Delhi’s increasingly stratified urban society that, as for neoliberal cities the world over, now divides citizens horizontally as well as vertically (Graham 2016). Perhaps more importantly, when the Pao Collective’s various comics productions and activities are viewed as a networked social movement, it also becomes possible to see how they draw on the long historical relationships between comics, city-mapping and urban navigation to see “justice spatially”, thereby mobilizing “more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism” (Soja 2010, 6).

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Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories & Graphic Reportage, to be published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2019.

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Notes

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ii Ghosh's allusion to *self-censorship* further invokes the Comics Code, which was in fact created by the comics industry to protect itself from legal regulation by external state organizations (Wolk 2007, 38).