

Songs of Rubbish: Little Magazines, City Space, and the Grand National Narrative

AVANI TANDON VIEIRA

‘If you also have been a part of the literature being mapped, then its contour will somewhere bear a likeness to your own.’

— Arvind Krishna Mehrotra¹

In an essay entitled ‘Maps for a Mortal Moon’, poet and publisher Adil Jussawalla makes a short trip through the city of Bombay.² He begins at the Asiatic Library, where ‘four grey-haired men discuss, among other things, the Sumerian script.’³ As the men exit the neo-classical structure for the space of the city they are greeted by chaos. Dodging traffic on a street dug up for new gas lines, they make their way past workers and pneumatic drills to a restaurant in a building much younger than the Asiatic; ‘only about seventy years old, I think.’⁴ Here, they begin a new discussion on a subject in ‘real time’: ‘Who’s a good poet, who’s not?’⁵ After they have gone their separate ways, Jussawalla walks up Mahatma Gandhi road, through Kala Ghoda, and to Jehangir Art Gallery. His route delivers

1 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014), p. 234.

2 Adil Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon: Essays and Entertainments* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014), pp. 82–83.

3 The four men are Arun Kolatkar, Jussawalla, a ‘scholar’ and a ‘bibliophile’.

4 Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, pp. 82–83.

5 *Ibid.*

to him a range of sights: first a group of brightly dressed attendees from the World Social Forum, then a street lined with saffron flags and men in khakhi, and, finally, a photo exhibit by a Shiv Sena leader. At the end of his journey, a mere kilometre from where he began, Jussawalla contemplates this distance. ‘How many time zones’ he asks, ‘have I crossed and re-crossed in the last hour [...] how many centuries?’⁶

In the 1960s and 70s, a self-sustaining culture of writing and publishing began to emerge in Bombay. Driven by a network of ‘multivocational’ poets, this movement used little magazines and small presses to create a space for poetry at a time when, as Laetitia Zecchini writes, ‘the indifference of mainstream publishers confined [it] to invisibility.’⁷ Simultaneously, it sought to make space for the poets themselves, and for the various literary, linguistic, and geographic worlds that they imagined.⁸ Among them was Adil Jussawalla, whose efforts would keep the Bombay poet from becoming ‘a person who is missing in history [...] just a footnote [...] generally invisible.’⁹

This essay takes as its subject the ‘missing person’ that is the Bombay poet, the ‘songs of rubbish’ of the ephemeral little, and the city that serves as home to both. Attending to the particular cartographic interventions of the little magazine, it considers the little’s treatment of that which is *made* marginal or *rendered* trash, removed from visibility, consideration, and the map. Within the fraught cityscapes of postcolonial India (and Bombay, in particular) the idea of waste or trash is closely linked with space: who may occupy it, what purposes it may be used for, and how it is documented

6 Ibid.

7 Anjali Nerlekar defines the ‘multivocational poet’ as one who ‘as a poet wrote the poem, as a publisher generated the space for it to appear, and as an editor [...] created the conditions necessary for that poem’s dissemination.’ *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 3. While it remains challenging to define the ‘little magazine,’ Ian Hamilton provides a useful description in speaking of it as text with ‘small resources, small respect for the supposed mysteries of “how to run a business”, small appeal outside a very small minority of readers,’ quoted in Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern*, p. 47. In keeping with little magazine conventions, I use ‘little magazine’ and ‘little’ interchangeably. Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 51.

8 Many of the Bombay poets were migrants to the city: Dilip Chitre from Baroda, Arun Kolatkar from Kolhapur; Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who defines himself as a ‘Bombay poet,’ from Allahabad. See Zecchini, Arun Kolatkar, p. 39.

9 Jussawalla quoted in Anjali Nerlekar and Laetitia Zecchini, “Perhaps I’m Happier Being on the Sidelines”: An Interview with Adil Jussawalla, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1–2 (2017), 221–32 (p. 226).

and remembered. Building on Mary Douglas's formulation of dirt as 'matter out of place', Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that, in India, 'the problem of "dirt" poses in turn the problem of the "outside"', ideas of cleanliness and value often understood in *spatial*, and oppositional, terms.¹⁰ Locating the little magazine within these approaches to dirt or waste, I identify the Bombay little as a text that both inhabits and attends to marginality, seeking to reclaim that which is neglected, discarded, or overlooked while also destabilizing the spatial logic that marks it as such. In examining these texts, I attend to their materiality: the conditions of their production as 'small' texts of limited means and circulation, very much located outside mainstream conceptions of literary value, both attuned to and part of the 'outside'.

Within the broader history of the Indian city, Chakrabarty argues that waste — or 'garbage', in his formulation — is understood both through an aesthetic logic and a logic of contamination. As part of imperial project and the later project of postcolonial nationhood, there was a consistent effort to make, of public space, 'benign, regulated places, clean and healthy, incapable of producing either disease or disorder'.¹¹ That which enables mixing or multiplicity, then, introduces both a disruption of order and the possibility of contamination; both untidiness and contact with the unclean. Drawing on this framework, I examine the idea of trash or waste along two axes: that of cleanliness/dirt and that of order/disorder. Treating the little magazine both as literary text and cultural barometer, I argue that the Bombay little supports a narrative of space and self that troubles these categories, functioning, subsequently, at odds with the institutional 'idea of India'.¹²

In the pages of the Bombay little, such disruption is enabled through a literary attention to marginal subjects, unpalatable space, and forgotten writing. As against the visions of State, the Bombay little is concerned with that which is overlooked by the maps of nation — people, sites — and that which must retreat underground: writers, writing. The city, imagined through these inclusions, is a hybrid space of geo-spatial encounter and the text is a vehicle of this more-than-oneness; at once alive and decaying, vital and filthy. This hybridity offers a useful way to think through

10 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2005); Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14.1 (1991), 15–31 (pp. 19–20).

11 Chakrabarty, 'Open Space/Public Place', p. 28.

12 Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004).

the impulses of the State and the potential, against these impulses, for the independently published text to present a vision of space and self that is resolutely multiple, resolutely impure. The little's Bombay is expansive and multi-sited, and the maps that it generates in this space, like the map that Jussawalla haphazardly draws across the city, are improvised, atypical, and often unstable. The act of reclamation, here, is double: poets reckoning with a world in which 'poetry doesn't sell' making room for spaces and lives which do not have an audience in the public record.¹³ These deviations provide alternative ways to see and inhabit space but also to map conceptions of value onto bodies and lives, so that questions of belonging and unbelonging can exceed the boundaries of nation to occupy, variously, local, national, or international frames of reference. If the map functions as 'a model for, rather than a model of, what it purport[s] to represent', the maps of the Bombay little model not only offer alternative geographies, but also alternative ways of knowing and being in India.¹⁴

In what follows, I begin by examining the foundational fictions of the Indian state and their roots in the language of geography.¹⁵ Pivoting to the ways in which the Bombay little receives and transforms these fictions, I consider how cartography is variously deployed by state and by subculture. While one facet of the little magazine's disruption is a direct challenge to the visions of the state, a second involves a shift in focus: a turn from the cartography of the national to the cartography of the local and, in particular, the marginal. Placing the sites and subjects of the little's imagination against those of the state, I argue that the work of the Bombay little is that of reclamation, of invisible writing, forgotten subjects and, even, the practice of cartography.

13 Adil Jussawalla, 'Introduction,' *Three Poets: Melanie Silgado, Raul d'Gama Rose, Santan Rodrigues* (Bombay: Newground, 1978), pp. 5–6 (p. 5).

14 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 130.

15 I adapt the term 'foundational fictions' from Doris Sommer's work on literary nation making in South America to refer to the narratives deployed in the political act of consolidating the Indian nation state. Sommer, Doris, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

The Little Magazine and the Grand National Narrative

'She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet very real and present and pervasive.'

– Jawaharlal Nehru¹⁶

In the foreword to Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, Indira Gandhi, his daughter and then Prime Minister, celebrates the text for delving 'deep into the sources of India's national personality'.¹⁷ The idea of a tangible 'national personality' animates much of *Discovery*. Questions of central planning, communal harmony, and the identity of a new nation frequently refer back to some notion of what India *is*. This idea — Nehru himself sometimes admits — is a fraught one. In the nation's seventy three years of independence, the responses to this geographical and social vastness have been numerous, ranging from an insistence on a totalizing, homogenous nationhood — one that even exceeds the boundaries of India to an 'akhand bharat' or undivided India — to 'the naturalization of diversity — the reproduction of a particular imagination of India as naturally diverse'.¹⁸ Consistent in these efforts has been an effort to organise and streamline, to make land comprehensible, to make bodies and spaces palatable, to narrate India within neatly conceived logics. In particular, India's boundaries have been cast as signposts of an eternal nation state — stretching from Kashmir to Kanyakumari — singular because of its geographical diversity, not in spite of it.

It is within this national imaginary that I locate the Bombay little. Setting its cartographic efforts against the maps of the State, I examine two central visions of postcolonial nation-making.¹⁹ The first of these is

16 Jawaharlal Nehru quoted in Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 42.

17 Indira Gandhi, 'Foreword', in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

18 Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 7.

19 In choosing these two visions, I do not suggest that the field of post-independence thought was homogenous. I seek to recognize, instead, that in the early years of the nation, 'the nationalist élite came to be dominated by a vision most closely associated with one man, Nehru' and that, within a field of varying approaches, the constitutional project and Nehru's vision, with the backing of state machinery, took centre stage. Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 8.

Nehru's, shaped by a commitment to social welfare, a reliance on planned and centralised development, and a faith in the technocrat. The second is that of the Indian constitution — of which Nehru was also an architect — which sought to establish a 'strongly armed state', which would take India from 'a backward past to a modern future'.²⁰ Common to these visions was a belief in a strong centre, a faith in a unified India, and a commitment to carrying out 'the historical tasks of nation-building while functioning as a democracy'.²¹ The constitution would enshrine these principles in law while the Nehru government pursue them in policy. Together they would attempt to establish a 'powerful pedagogic State' which would undertake the inherently contradictory task of 'act[ing] with extraordinary power to guarantee freedom and introduce social change'.²² Against this model of a 'state-sustained postcolonial Indian identity', the *Bombay little* identifies a less neat, less coherent sense of self.²³ The little magazine shifts the borders, coordinates, and sites of nation-making, unsettling its foundations, inverting its symbols, and replacing the monumental with the marginal. Within this unsettled geography, the little presents a 'national personality' that is fragmented, multiple, troubled, and, also, less limited.

Many things precipitate the confrontation between the *Bombay little* and India's foundational fictions. Writing over a decade after Independence, the poets of the *Bombay Modern* saw themselves as 'first poets', set apart from the writers who came before them.²⁴ Aga Shahid Ali would say of these writers: '[t]he earlier generations followed the rules inflicted by the rulers so strictly that it is almost embarrassing. They also followed models, especially the models of realism, in ways that imprisoned them. I think we can do a lot more.'²⁵ The *Bombay* poets were at once distinct from 'the Marxist-influenced Progressive Writers' Association' and removed from 'the ideal of nation-building and [...] a form of cultural nationalism'.²⁶

20 Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 71.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 69.

23 Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, 'Postcolonial Relations', in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Rosinka Chaudhuri and Elleke Boehmer, 1st ed (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 238–260 (p. 248).

24 Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern*; Arvind Krishna Mehrotra quoted in Zecchini, "'We Were like Cartographers, Mapping the City": An Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1–2 (2017), 190–206 (p. 199).

25 Aga Shahid Ali, in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

26 It may be useful, here, to define the geographical limits of this effort. The *Bombay* of the little magazine was in equal parts an affective, social, and physical construction; 'simul-

Nehru's hope was for 'a relationship of intimacy and responsibility between nation and people'.²⁷ The Constitution's hope was for an India where 'the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source'.²⁸ The Bombay poets sought to accept neither. That they were able to do so was, in large part, a function of technology. In Bombay, as in New York, Mexico City or Ibadan, the late twentieth century little flourished because of 'the low cost of new printing technologies and the fact that no special training was required to operate a mimeograph machine'.²⁹ The profoundly democratic little magazine weakened the reliance on editorial intervention or formal material assistance, making it so that 'any student willing to publish a mimeographed "little" could do so in [...] in their parents' garage or back yard'.³⁰ These freshly minted poets, untethered from their political and literary inheritance, now had a means through which to generate their own visions of space.

If these visions of space were liberating, they nonetheless maintained a complex relationship — much like that of the State — of 'claim and allegiance' to the national body.³¹ To begin, I turn to Nehru's *Discovery* and to an extract that illustrates his idea of the nation:

When I think of India I think of many things: of broad fields dotted with innumerable small villages; of towns and cities I have visited; of the magic of the rainy season which pours life into the dry parched-up land [...] of great rivers and flowing water; of the Khyber Pass in all its bleak surroundings; of the southern tip of India; of people, individually

taneously real and imagined and more.' Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996), p. 11. The use of the city as a geographical marker is significant in that it does not represent a body of native poets writing chiefly about Bombay, but a nexus of writers who created shared modes of writing and publishing. The Bombay poet was sometimes in Allahabad (as in *damn you*), sometimes in Baroda (as in *Vrishchik*) but always speaking within and through a literary conversation that took the city as its locus. Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, p. 20.

27 Sunder Rajan, 'Postcolonial Relations', p. 239.

28 In order to achieve this dream of oneness, the constitution provided for a 'form of government based on a single judiciary, a uniform set of laws across the country, and a common, all-India administrative service'. Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 57; Ambedkar quoted in Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 57.

29 Abel Debritto, 'The Literary Explosion of the 60s (I): The little magazines', *Magazine Modernisms*, 22 Feb 2011 <<https://magmods.wordpress.com/2011/02/22/the-literary-explosion-of-the-60s-i-the-little-magazines/>>.

30 Ibid.

31 Sunder Rajan, 'Postcolonial Relations', p. 249.

and in the mass; and, above all, of the Himalayas, snow-capped, or some mountain valley in Kashmir in the spring.³²

The centrality of a cartographic imagination is clear in this extract, as is a dual insistence on diversity and geographical range: towns/small villages, parched land/great rivers, and, framing it all, a boundary that stretches from the snow-capped Himalayas to the southern tip of India. What is clear, further, is that cartography is approached as a profoundly affective exercise: India as it is mapped is India as it is felt and, conversely, felt as it is mapped. Against this, consider the opening of Arvind Mehrotra's 'Bharatmata' ('Mother India'), published in Nissim Ezekiel's little magazine *Poetry India* (1967), and by Mehrotra's Ezra-Fakir press (1968):

O BHARATMATA
 O SOCIALIST MOTHER INDIA
 O BRIGHT STAR ...
 LAND OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA AND THE HIMALAYA
 OF THE BRAVE JAWAHAR
 OF THE MIGHTY GANDHI
 HOMAGE TO THEE³³

With this mock invocation, 'meant entirely ironically' and presented all in caps, Mehrotra reverses the momentum of Nehru's Indian vision, replicating its vocabulary but exaggerating its affect.³⁴ For Mehrotra, his 'beloved country' is, simultaneously, 'the septic tank where in paper gutters | fall the | marksroublesdollarspoundslirafrancs', the land of a Ganga 'overflowing | With hydroelectric projects | And pretty houses of prostitution'.³⁵ An awareness of filth or contamination is embedded in Mehrotra's experience of nation, even when the sites that he centres overlap with those of *The Discovery*. Much like Nehru, Mehrotra locates the self within the landscape he maps:

I am in the dryness of each twig
 I am in the monsoon clouds which rain

32 Nehru does, however, qualify this statement, admitting that '[a]ll of us [...] have varying pictures of our native land and no two persons will think exactly alike'. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 62.

33 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Bharatmata* (Bombay, Ezra Fakir Press), Box 4, Folder 20, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra Papers, #8511. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. (Hereafter 'Mehrotra Papers').

34 Ibid.

35 A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

Upwards
 I am in the reptile like cracks
 I lie stretched beneath the three oceans
 And keep watch from the mountains³⁶

The landmarks are the same: the sites and motifs of a collective national imagination. But in Mehrotra's India, the great river never meets the parched-up land, the oceans and mountains that encircle the nation are watchful, not benevolent. The national body is, at once, laid waste to and wasting away, robbed of vitality and reduced to barrenness. Anjali Nerlekar identifies, in little magazine cultures, 'a dismissal of the grand narrative in favour of the smaller, both in size (the fragment) as well as the marginal (that is, life on the street).'³⁷ Yet 'Bharatmata' betrays a preoccupation with the grand narrative, one where the impulse is not just to look away — to the small or local — but to deploy the mythology of the grand narrative against itself. In place of the Nehruvian ideal of a 'nationally integrated, disciplined citizenship community', Mehrotra offers 'the village reduced to a bone | and then swallowed' alongside 'anglo-indian women [who] teach | newrich couples the ballroom'; an India in which disparity is part of the national fabric.³⁸ The little magazine, then, does not turn from the grand narrative. Instead, it appropriates and redeploys its vocabulary.

In Arun Kolatkar's 'Song of rubbish 34', the challenge to Nehru is via playful inversion:

We too
 Have our own tryst with destiny, and feel
 The birth-pangs of a new
 city,
 But prepare for a long period of exile
 in the wilderness of a landfill
 site.³⁹

Echoing Nehru's words on the eve of Indian independence, Kolatkar presents a story of origins that is simultaneously one of ends. If, as Srirupa

36 Ibid.

37 Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern*, p. 127.

38 Alex Tickell, 'Writing the City and Indian English Fiction: Planning, Violence, and Aesthetics', in *Planned Violence*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 195–211 (p. 204); A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

39 Arun Kolatkar, 'Song of rubbish 34', in *Collected Poems in English*, ed. by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 89.

Roy argues, for the ideal citizen of India, ‘individual freedom [was] seen to derive from rather than precede and make possible the sovereignty of the nation-state’, Kolatkar disrupts this narrative of joint freedom.⁴⁰ If the urban sprawl is one facet of a shining India, that which must make way for it, moving ever outwards, is the other. People and waste, often interchangeably treated, clear a path for national progress. Kolatkar’s exiles are echoed in ‘Bharatmata’ when it speaks of:

a chain reaction of suburbs
 where whole families live in bathrooms
 and generations are pushed out of skylights
 and the next one sticks out its head
 like a tapeworm through frozen shit.

Kolatkar and Mehrotra alike centre that which is, both literally and metaphorically, outside the grand narrative, resisting an easy trajectory of progress. To borrow from Chakrabarty, the effort here is to recognise the spatial configuration of the new nation, the deliberate separation of the enclosed inside from the contaminated outside; the outskirts of the city, the outliers of the national project. The constitutional framework of the democratic republic was expected to usher in a ‘new period of history.’⁴¹ Instead, as the uneven geography of the little illustrates, there was ‘no revolutionary overthrow of the old social order, economy, [or] law.’⁴² To return to the question of whom, or what, the little is looking at, I suggest that while the focus of these texts is on that which is left out of the grand narrative, the impulse is also to facilitate a *direct* confrontation; setting these marginal subjects against that from which they are excluded.

In another text published by Mehrotra’s Ezra-Fakir press, Ashok Chopra’s *Town Poems*, the language of a national mission is similarly challenged, this time by placing its vocabulary against that of everyday Bombay. *Town Poems* announces itself as a first collection and presents its thirteen poems on plain, mimeographed sheets, stapled together and published without illustrations. On the cover of the text is a set of indistinct marks, resembling a spill or stain. It is difficult to ascertain whether this ‘spill’ is an accident or a deliberate inclusion, but what it does gesture at is the profound, and generative, irregularity of the Bombay little; a text that chooses to centre dirt on its cover or, perhaps more valuably, is unable to remove it. This

40 Roy, *Beyond Belief*, p. 20.

41 Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 40.

42 Ibid.

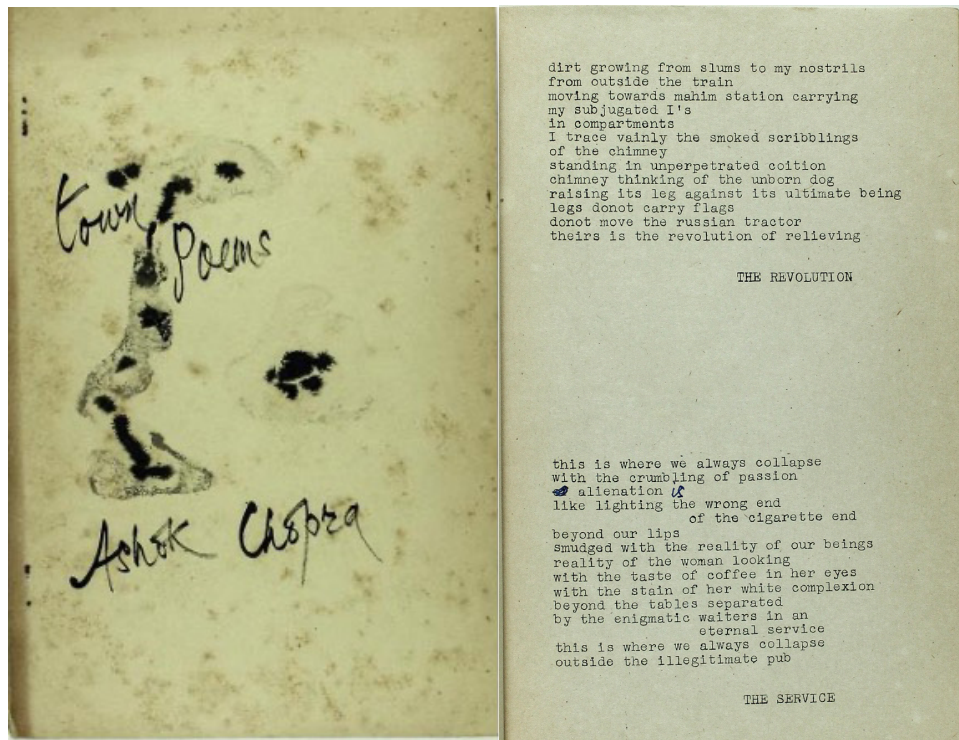


Figure 1. Ashok Chopra, 'The Revolution' and 'The Service', *Town Poems* (Bombay, Ezra Fakir Press), Box 4, Folder 16, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra Papers, #8511. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

sense of the Bombay little as an object — not only a collection of writings but also a physical *thing* that is printed, bound and transported before it is read — is significant. The reader of the little is presented not just with the contents of its pages, but also with the unique features of the page itself: indications of the places that the little has travelled through and the hands that it has been made by.

Paying close attention to *Town Poems*, for instance, reveals distinct marks of editorial intervention. Corrections are made by hand: an out of place 'of' is crossed out and replaced with an 'is' (see Figure 1), a misprinted 'y' is covered up with a handwritten 't'. On the page following the cover, the title of the collection is repeated, this time in the sputtering strokes of a felt-tip pen that is running out of ink. The little reveals, through these details, both its size and its locatedness. It is a text small enough for corrections to be made by hand, marginal enough for its contents to be determined, in large part, not by what is sought out, but by what its surroundings make available. Significantly, these are features that would be considered misprints or glitches by the mechanics of more mainstream publishing and therefore omitted or 'cleaned up'. The little then, in comparison with the 'clean' text of the large publisher, embodies both an

inability to distance itself from the persons and processes that enable its production and, perhaps, and unwillingness to be.

If the place and conditions of the little's production are made visible on the physical page, they are foregrounded, also, in its contents. Among the poems in Chopra's collection is 'The Revolution', in which observations made from a local train shift their focus from the immediate to the national. The images deployed, as in Mehrotra and Kolatkar, centre on dirt and decay:

dirt growing from slums to my nostrils
 from outside the train
 moving towards mahim station
 ...I trace vainly the smoked scribblings
 of the chimney
 standing in unperpetrated coition⁴³

This insistence on the contaminated or unsightly is significant. As Zecchini argues, in the Indian context, 'the *aesthetics* of the new is [...] much more significantly [...] connected to the *politics* of the new'.⁴⁴ While this statement has valuable implications for questions of form and language, within the framework of state imaginations it offers other possibilities. In a newly independent India reckoning with its vision of self, Chopra, Kolatkar, and Mehrotra draw attention to the nation's underbelly — bleak, decaying — calling for acts of 'demolition and disownment' in response to the vision of a 'noble mansion of free India'.⁴⁵ In Chopra's poem the comparison between the two is direct. As the train traverses Bombay, the socialist mission that, at independence, was meant to animate a citizenry is parodied and deflated:

chimney thinking of the unborn dog
 raising its leg against its ultimate being
 legs don't carry flags
 do not move the Russian tractor
 theirs is a revolution of relieving.⁴⁶

43 Ashok Chopra, 'The Revolution', *Town Poems* (Bombay, Ezra Fakir Press), Box 4, Folder 16, Mehrotra Papers.

44 Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, p. 41. Original italics.

45 Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, p. 42; "A New Star Rises": Jawaharlal Nehru's Speech on the Birth of Independent India, *Hindustan Times*, 2018 <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/a-new-star-rises-jawaharlal-nehru-s-speech-on-the-birth-of-independent-india/story-ft9JIPYpMnz2OkRUgGNIZP.html>>

46 Chopra, 'The Revolution', *Town Poems*, Mehrotra Papers.

The unborn dog, ordinary resident of the city, finds little motivation to pursue the vision of revolutionary soviet nationalism that inspired much of India's early central planning. The sequence of the waving flag, Russian tractor, and urinating dog suggest a chasm between citizenship as it is imagined by the state and experienced by the citizen, the shining embodiments of progress set against the grime of the city and of bodily waste. Nehru envisioned a technological revolution that would uplift the many. The average Indian, Chopra suggests, just wants a place to urinate.

This ordinary Indian — wage worker, ration recipient, or even a dog — is frequently a conduit for the little magazine's engagement with the nation state. The concerns that animate 'Bharatmata' are echoed in Mehrotra's *Ezra*, published and distributed in Bombay between 1967 and 1971. In *Ezra* 5, for instance, Kolatkar's 'one poem' is translated 'from bombayhindi' by Mehrotra and performs an intriguing border-crossing.

i said to manayger i wanta my wage
manager said by company rules youll get money on first

[...] i wen to Burma where aag picture was showing
went to see the picture
there yooveto show passport and all for a revolution
the ticketwala asked me for passport
i said you sisterfucker
i wanta bloody ticket

they sent me back to Manipur
the police commissioner asked why I went to Burma
i said you! Kid of a chick
whatthell is india⁴⁷

Kolatkar's 'one poem' is made up of snippets of reported speech. Putting together disparate fragments in the manner of assemblage or collage, Kolatkar builds a semi-coherent narrative.⁴⁸ Treated as a single entity, the poem follows as Kolatkar's wage worker, repeatedly coming up against an impenetrable bureaucracy, makes a seemingly unnecessary trip to Burma to watch the film 'Aag', is refused entry, deported, and interrogated. Taken apart, the fragments of this nonsense-narrative suggest various border crossings — bureaucratic and geographic — that, while unthinking in their irreverence, indicate the absence of a foundational logic that justifies

47 Kolatkar, 'one poem', *Ezra* 5 (Bombay) Box 4, Folder 20, Mehrotra Papers.

48 Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, p. 120.

their existence. There is an interesting alignment between the stylistic qualities of the poem and the spatial manipulations it performs. A poem cobbled together from overheard speech creates, also, a patchwork map with little regard for neat geographical boundaries or a neat separation of populations. At the core of the poem is a messiness that is generative, even as it is confusing. By demanding a definition of the nation in positives, Kolatkar draws attention to the question of ‘whatthehell is india’ and not what it is *not*, compelling an acknowledgement of the instability of the ‘idea of India’.

The uncertainty of Indianness is frequently presented, in the Bombay little, as originating in the land. In *damn you 5*, for instance, its editors locate themselves in a summer that dissolves ‘in the much-needed promise of rain a wholly unnecessary famine.’⁴⁹ Coming less than two decades after independence, the summer of 1966 saw the north-Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh experience ‘one of the worst and most widespread droughts and crop failures in the history of the region.’⁵⁰ The trope of drought and famine recurs in the issue. In a poem written ‘BY OUR STAFF’, we are given a landscape of fields that are ‘clean as ice [...] and too hard, even for grave digging’ and ponds that are ‘no bigger than my toe nail.’⁵¹ Amidst this desolation, ‘the farmer hangs from a vulture’s beak | like an earthworm.’ As in ‘Bharatmata’, the countryside is presented as wasteland, the death of a people following from a death of the land that is so complete that even burial is denied; death and decay resisting invisibility. The reader is urged to abandon faith, both in oneself and in the nation:

don’t clank your prayers
nor keep the faith [...]
nor wish nor do nor wait
nor sigh when the cattle die⁵²

If the ‘strong, centralized state’ of the constitution had promised ‘order and stability in the wake of [...] mass upheavals’, the little’s topography of lack signals the collapse of this promise.⁵³

49 ‘statement’, *damn you 5* (Bombay and Allahabad, 1965–68), Box 4, Folder 17, Mehrotra Papers.

50 Paul Brass, ‘The Political Uses of Crisis: The Bihar Famine of 1966–1967’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 45.2 (1986), 245–67.

51 *damn you 5*, Box 4, Folder 17, Mehrotra Papers.

52 Ibid.

53 The upheavals and subsequent mass migrations were largely the result of ‘the violence and displacements of Partition’. Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 40.

For Mehrotra, a different section of the citizenry is implicated in the failure of the national project. ‘Along with irreverence towards country came irreverence towards bourgeois society’ he reflects.⁵⁴ In ‘Bharatmata’, the industrial town of Bhilai becomes the space in which this critique is realised. Bhilai, where Mehrotra’s father worked, was one of several cities developed with Soviet aid as key elements of a larger vision of industrialisation launched by Nehru.⁵⁵ Speaking at the opening of the Bhakra Nangal Dam in 1954, he described the venture as having been ‘built up with the unrelenting toil of man for the benefit of mankind and therefore [...] worthy of worship. May you call it a Temple or a Gurudwara or a Mosque.’⁵⁶ Khilnani describes these monumental industrial projects — dams, power plants, townships — as the ‘spectacular facades, luxurious in their very austerity, upon which the nation watched expectantly as the image of its future was projected.’⁵⁷ Mehrotra’s Bhilai, in contrast, is neither industrial marvel nor secular site of worship. His descriptions of the town are stark:

Steel town
Shrub in the sand dune
Town of red streets
And endless parallels⁵⁸

The planned city is restrictive and sanitized — ‘Houses | Isolation wards’ — and the people follow suit:

Male : is engineer
Doctor
Administrator
Age 30

54 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in Zecchini “‘We were like Cartographers’”, p. 194.

55 This facet of post-independence India is of particular significance to Mehrotra: ‘I was born in the year of Independence, so the nation-building project, for me, was a very tangible thing. In Bhilai there was a steel plant being built with Russian aid. It was one of Nehru’s temples of modern India, a part of the five-year Plans, which were modelled on the Soviet system. You went to a non-private school where the children of the workers also went. Education was free and you got a banana and two slices of buttered bread for your midday meal. So you grew up in an egalitarian community which I suppose believed in Nehru’s vision, or was a product of it.’ A. Mehrotra in Zecchini, “‘We were like Cartographers’”, p. 194.

56 Jawaharlal Nehru quoted in Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, *Rivers, Memory, and Nation-Building: A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), p. 150.

57 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 62.

58 A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

Female : part time wife
Age 25⁵⁹

Bhilai itself offers none of the vitality with which Nehru imagined the steel towns of India would infuse the national body. If ‘order’ or neatness, as Chakrabarty argues, allows the State to make urban space both comprehensible and ‘benign’, it also renders it barren. Bhilai is not a ‘completely new urban centre, symbolic of independent India’s leap into modernity’ but a ‘Temple of modern india | Where anglo-indian women teach | Newrich couples the ballroom.’⁶⁰ Against this stagnation, ‘Bharatmata’ issues a call to ‘Shake off the dream of | “the wonder that was india”’. In its place Mehrotra prompts a recognition of the failures of the national project, a Ganga that ‘is overflowing | with hydroelectric projects | and pretty houses of prostitution’, the village ‘reduced to a bone.’⁶¹ Moving between visions of deprivation and visions of state overreach, Mehrotra looks past the ‘spectacular facades’ of the national project to a topography of decline.

As in ‘Bharatmata’, in describing plainly what the India of their immediate experience is like, little magazines release poetic imagination from the limits of a patriotic artistic vision, creating work that is ‘not constrained by the kind of dutifulness towards being Indian, or towards the nation.’⁶² Kolatkar’s wage worker, Chopra’s dog, even Mehrotra’s narrator reaffirm the validity of a topography of the everyday; flawed, often filthy, but accessible to cartographic intervention. If their work betrays a certain pessimism, it also communicates a grim onward journey through a landscape that is *recognisable*.

Michel de Certeau identifies, in the everyday flows of the city, a tendency to appropriate the practice of naming:

These names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passer-by; they detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting points on itineraries.⁶³

59 Ibid.

60 Tickell, ‘Writing the City’, p. 199; A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

61 A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

62 Amit Chaudhuri in Laetitia Zecchini, “‘I Had to Construct Lineages for Myself’”: An Interview with Amit Chaudhuri’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1–2 (2017), 255–63 (p. 259).

63 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 104.

In the Bombay little, the practice of cartography is similarly appropriated. Conventions of mapping, definitions of valuable space, and paths of travel are all remade through the texture of everyday life. An authentic map of the nation may be a map that makes more room for that which is broken, decaying, or lost; not so much a surface onto which an image of the nation's future may be projected as a mirror that reflects its present. This, the little suggests, is a truer path to a more democratic cartography. Nehru argues, in a letter from August 1949, that the people of India 'must have a feeling that they are building something that is permanent, that, in fact, they are the builders of the new India.'⁶⁴ The work of building, little magazines remind us, is sometimes that is also the work of unsettling and unmaking. If a constitutional vision and Nehruvian plan set the coordinates for the nation's progress, the little magazine denies their permanence; choosing, instead, a map of India that is messier, more uncertain, and often profoundly local.

The City and the Commons

To speak of India of the 1960s is to speak of a remarkably young nation, one whose borders, both external and internal, were continuing to shift. Until 1960, for instance, the neighbouring states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were part of a single state, the Bombay state.⁶⁵ While a formal separation on linguistic grounds was enacted by the central government, a common sense of belonging remained. It is, therefore, unsurprising that for artist and publisher Gulammohammed Sheikh, and for many like him, 'Bombay was not "elsewhere"'.⁶⁶ To begin an exploration of Bombay, then, I turn to the city of Baroda and to Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakar's magazine *Vrishchik*. Between 1969 and 1973, Sheikh and Khakar edited and published *Vrishchik*, devoting it to contemporary artistic and literary practice in India. Over its lifetime, *Vrishchik* would bring out twenty-eight issues and establish a close link between the Bombay poets and Baroda painters. Alongside Mehrotra and Kolatkar, it featured the likes of

64 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Letters for a Nation: From Jawaharlal Nehru to His Chief Ministers, 1947–1963*, ed. by Madhav Khosla (Gurgaon, Haryana, India: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 233.

65 Gulammohammed Sheikh, in Laetitia Zecchini, "'More than One World": An Interview with Gulammohammed Sheikh', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1–2 (2017), 69–82, (p. 70).

66 Ibid.

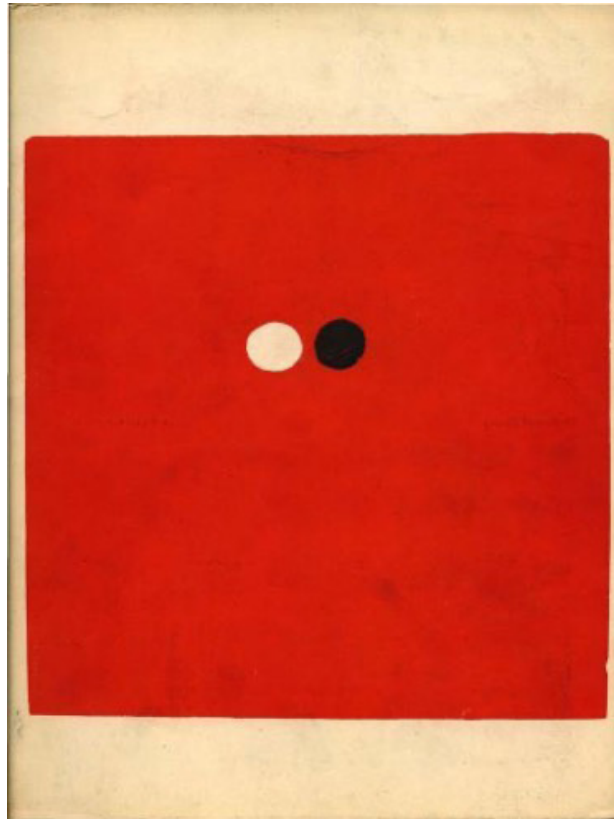


Figure 2. Cover, *Vrishchik 1*, No. 11–12, Asia Art Archive <<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/gulammohammed-sheikh-archive-vrishchik>>. Reproduced with the permission of Gulammohammed Sheikh.

Jussawalla, Eunice de Souza, Geive Patel, and Dilip Chitre, enabling the articulation of the Bombay that these poets inhabited and encountered.

The July-August issue of *Vrishchik 1* (no. 9–10, 1970) opens with Arvind Mehrotra's 'Song of The Rolling Earth'. A poem about an urban landscape at once deeply particular and banal, 'Song of the Rolling Earth' records the rhythms of an everyday Bombay:

same yawning eyes brush me aside
same tired legs on same winding road, under the
same bridge
[...] same red bus
same crooked-eyed crooked-capped conductor
... same honkings of smoke and noise
same stumbling old Parsi woman asking whether this
same drunken bus goes where she wants to go
same train halting at same stations same minute
[...] same Zebra umbrella same Will's Filter tipped
same shops I pass thru same window

[...] same time leaving fingerprints on same hours
lame morning noon and night⁶⁷

Over four decades later, Mehrotra would say of this poem: ‘Zebra umbrellas and Wills cigarettes. Just to be able to name the familiar was, for us, to defamiliarize it. We were like cartographers, mapping the city.’⁶⁸ Mehrotra’s song maps a passage through the ordinary, speaking ‘of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city.’⁶⁹ Ordering these sights chronologically, the poem follows the narrator over the course of a day from ‘same dawn croaking hoarsely’ to ‘same executive knotting weak brows over | same Evening News.’⁷⁰ In its pedestrian wandering, Mehrotra’s song performs an act of spatial manipulation, working ‘to make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, framing it and diverting it from its immobile order.’⁷¹ Superficially, the poem’s pattern of repetition communicates exhaustion. Everything that Bombay is — smoke and noise and buses and trains — it has always been. Yet the poem possesses, simultaneously, an attention to the particular that reanimates the city. The vitality of detail is everywhere: in the ‘busy-legged quick fingered keen-eyed conductor’ and in the ‘coughing and spitting at the milk booth.’⁷² In the particularity of its description, it prompts an attention to that which might otherwise be obscured, compelling the reader to look at the various sights and sites that make up Mehrotra’s Bombay. The ‘Song’ suggests a city mapped through markers at once deeply particular and endlessly replicated: parsi ladies, bus conductors, milk booths that are everywhere in Bombay and yet, perhaps, nowhere *but* Bombay.

I take as a starting point this idea of cartography, of at once naming and displacing the familiar; a poetry that maps and un-maps. If the rejection of a state-sanctioned geographical imaginary is one aspect of the little magazine’s efforts, another is that to which it turns in its place; particular, local, and often marginal. Srirupa Roy argues that the creation of the nation state is a project of sensory repetition, the idea of a unified nation built through ‘recognizing the sights and sounds of the state rather than

67 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ‘Song of the Rolling Earth’, *Vrishchik* 1, 11–12, Asia Art Archive <<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/gulammohammed-sheikh-archive-vrishchik>>.

68 A. Mehrotra in Zecchini, “We were like Cartographers”, p. 199.

69 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 96.

70 A. Mehrotra, ‘Song of the Rolling Earth’.

71 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 102.

72 A. Mehrotra, ‘Song of the Rolling Earth’.

“buying into” its mythologies.⁷³ Compared to the project of creating and consolidating a State imaginary, I consider the ways in which the little magazine unsettles the planned or ordered city, foregrounding the sights, sounds, and encounters of the local. In doing so, I argue, it enables new ways of navigating Bombay and, through it, notions of valuable space and legitimate citizenship.

In setting out to remap Bombay, the little was joining a long tradition of city-making. Within the contested history of India, the city served as a site of claim, a place for the ‘idea of India’ to be ‘disputed and defined anew.’⁷⁴ Under the Raj, it was where ‘the regalia of British sovereignty was displayed, where the Indian was ruled, where space was most explicitly governed.’⁷⁵ In independent India, it would become home to the nationalist state, a site from which ‘the Nehruvian ambition to modernize [...] was scripted and broadcast.’⁷⁶ Bombay, in many ways, remained shielded from this exercise; never fully absorbed, as Delhi, Bhubaneswar or Chandigarh were, by the worlds of planning and government. Its place in the national project was, instead, that of an object of faith, a place ‘permanently lodged in the popular imagination as a totem of modern India itself.’⁷⁷ First a set of fishing villages, then linked ‘by bridges and causeways and turned into a seat of colonial government’ and finally recast as an ‘indispensable hub of a modernizing process’, the city was subject to multiple attempts at urban restructuring.⁷⁸ For the British, this meant ‘physically and visually structuring the city to read as a cohesive whole’ for the postcolonial city administration it involved haphazardly ‘welding together a Greater Bombay region’ for a burgeoning migrant population.⁷⁹ The impulse across these discrete moments was to make of the city’s chaos a presentable, *manageable* space. I identify, in the little, an interruption of this effort; an attempt to remake the city, this time from below.

In late twentieth century Bombay, space eked out by artistic communities both allowed and animated literary production. Arun Khopkar locates the emergence of these spaces in an accident of infrastructure: the

73 Roy, *Beyond Belief*, p. 15.

74 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p.109.

75 Ibid., p. 118.

76 Ibid., p. 109.

77 Ibid., p. 136.

78 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai’, *Public Culture*, 12.3 (2000), 627–51 (p. 628); Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 128.

79 Rahul Mehrotra, ‘Evolution, Involution, and the City’s Future: A Perspective on Bombay’s Urban Form’, *Marg, a Magazine of the Arts*, 49.1 (1997), 14–33 (p. 23).

spontaneity of Bombay's growth and the absence, despite state efforts, of an effective plan for its development. 'Bombay's architecture and town "anti-planning," he argues, 'unintentionally created spaces where new ideas in the arts found perfect incubators.'⁸⁰ These incubators are the 'nerve centres' of the city's action in Khopkar's vocabulary: Irani Cafés, Strand Book Stall, Samovar Restaurant, a constellation of ordinary sites that form the heart of the literary undercity even as they are absent from the maps of State. Alex Tickell argues that 'the planning of the contemporary Indian city-space involves an urban apartheid where the state has abdicated any responsibility to the commons.'⁸¹ In late twentieth century Bombay, an absent or failing commons prompted strategies of reclamation from within the Bombay underground.

In speaking of the commons, I rely on David Harvey's definition of it not as:

a particular kind of thing, asset or even social process, but as an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its [...] physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood.⁸²

In Harvey's definition, there is, in place of a stable topographical formation, 'a social practice of *commoning*' so that citizens, operating in and through public space, create the commons.⁸³ This act of commoning finds reflection in the worlds of the Bombay little. If we return to Mehrotra's 'Song of the Rolling Earth' we find, amidst its many subjects, the figure of the young artist: 'same me entering the airconditioned bookshop | same me identifying myself with the "Journals" of Gide and "Counternotes" of Ionesco.'⁸⁴ Mehrotra's bookshop is an easy stand in for Strand Book stall in Fort, a central meeting place for the city's literary community where '[c]hance meetings of like-minded people were the sine qua non.'⁸⁵ In the poem, the bookshop acts as meeting place for the proximate — the community of 'invisible' writers and artists in the city — as well as a site of interaction for the distant: the young Bombay artist and the worlds of Gide and

80 Arun Khopkar, 'Footloose and Fancy-Free in Bombay: A Partial View of the 1960s and 1970s', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1–2 (2017), 12–24 (p. 16).

81 Tickell, 'Writing the City', p. 206.

82 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012), p. 73.

83 Ibid. Original italics.

84 A. Mehrotra, 'Song of the Rolling Earth'.

85 Khopkar, 'Footloose and Fancy-Free in Bombay', p. 17.

Ionesco, the two interactions generating a multi-sited cultural commons. Immediately outside, the rhythms of the city continue unhindered: ‘same hawker outside shouts bananas at twenty paisa per pair.’⁸⁶ At Kala Ghoda, similarly, we are introduced to the ‘Same blinking Samovar same lonely beards | Same young rimbauds systematically disordering their senses’ and, immediately after, to the ‘same local at the same platform-point’; the frenetic energy of the everyday inseparable from the ‘nerve centres’, the alternative landmarks of the literary undercity.⁸⁷

As with Mehrotra, in Kolatkar’s ‘Irani Restaurant, Bombay’, the young artist — now a ‘loafer’ — finds ‘A sticky tea print for his scholarly attention | Singles out a verse from the blank testament of the table.’⁸⁸ The Irani café, ubiquitous in late twentieth century Bombay and ‘the cheapest of subaltern “clubs”’, serves as site for the loafer’s creative energies but retains the grime that marks much of Bombay: ‘a fly on the make [...] finds in a loafer’s wrist an operational base’ while ‘the cockeyed shah of iran watches the cake | decompose carefully in a cracked showcase.’⁸⁹ Even as they seek to build spaces of their own, Bombay’s poets imagine a cultural commons that is not firmly bounded or removed from the mundane. These spaces, themselves ‘marginal’ within the maps of state, resist, also, the organisational logic of ‘the enclosed inside [of the nerve centre] and the exposed outside [of the footpath or platform]’, identifying the dirt inherent to both and, additionally, a continuity between the two.⁹⁰ Everyday Bombay — grimy and decaying — bleeds into these spaces, even as its artists find in everyday Bombay a city worthy of poetry.

For the Bombay little, the project of mapping cultural sites was aesthetic and political but also necessary. Functioning outside the frameworks of formal publishing and state support, these poets were compelled to look to the broader public space of the city to find sites for literary production. The little magazine, distinct from the commercially produced text,

86 A. Mehrotra, ‘Song of the Rolling Earth’.

87 The Samovar was the restaurant located at Jehangir art gallery and a meeting place for film makers, artists, writers in the city; A. Mehrotra, ‘Song of the Rolling Earth’.

88 Arun Kolatkar, ‘Irani Restaurant, Bombay’, in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, ed. by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 57.

89 ‘[Y]ou could meet, eat and spend endless hours with friends, leaving a broad trail of cigarette stubs, circular stains of teacups and curlicues of tomato-blood (mixed with vinegar, bottled and sold as ketchup) on the white marble tabletops’. Khopkar, ‘Footloose and Fancy-Free in Bombay’, p. 16; Kolatkar, ‘Irani Restaurant, Bombay’.

90 Chakrabarty, ‘Open Space/Public Place’, p. 21.

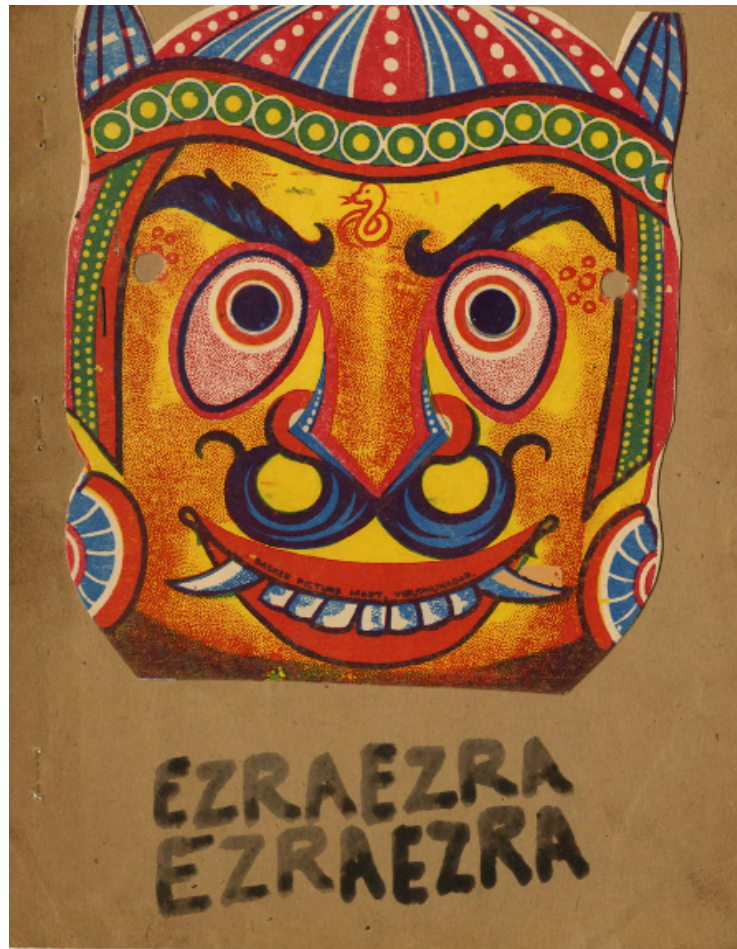


Figure 3. Cover, Ezra 4, Box 4, Folder 20, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra Papers, #8511. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

functions with the material reality of literary creation at the centre of its activities. Frequently limited by the availability of materials, access to funding, or concerns of rent, little magazine editors foreground the conditions of literary production, throwing into relief the *how* of the little. This is true of the text as it is presented — printed on cheap paper, hand bound, manually revised — but also in how it speaks of its production. The little magazine *damn you*, for instance makes repeated reference to the conditions that enable — or inhibit — its creation. Published in Allahabad by Mehrotra, Amit Rai, and Alok Rai between 1965 and 1968, *damn you* was run by three teenagers in small town India and was, as such, particularly susceptible to the material limits of independent publishing. In *damn you* 2, for instance, the editors reveal that:

the inclusion of sketches in this, our more ambitious issue, may be attributed to the rather bathetic [...] fact of our only recently having discovered the availability of stencils in Allahabad [...] we would give

you our programme for the day of Saturday, 4th November, 1960, since we have our diary open before us, but it only seems so much more of stencil-cutting.⁹¹

In providing this casual description of their circumstances, the editors of *damn you* perform a valuable act of positioning, locating their work firmly within the material conditions of its urban environment. Additionally, they bring the reader into the space and moment of literary production: in the room as three young boys cut stencils on a Saturday. The precarity of production is not veiled or denied. Instead, in *damn you* 4, the editors entreat their ‘unappointed salesmen’ to, on receiving a copy of the little, ‘first read it, and sell it for what this effort is worth, and send us the money. we have to buy more paper, & stencils, and ink for our next number.’⁹²

The literary venture is expanded so that it is now a function, not just of artistic output, but also of place, material needs, and a reader who is also a distributor. Writing of the underground is more attuned to its location because *it cannot help but be*. The fragility of the little magazine — limited means, a narrow zone of circulation, and the flimsiness of the finished text — echoes the precarity of the subjects and spaces that find reflection in its pages. While the editors of the little certainly do not face the profound, often violent threats that the city’s poorest and most dispossessed struggle with, their texts move through and imagine spaces that recognize and accommodate these lives; speaking of the ‘gray spaces’ of streets, markets, and railway stations that are reclaimed and remade by the ordinary citizen.⁹³

In *Ezra*, his other little magazine, Mehrotra introduces himself as ‘father, editor, seller, mimeographer, slogger etc. of E.’⁹⁴ *Ezra*, with a modest run of five issues, was created and circulated with whatever was at hand and bears a distinct imprint of its immediate environment. While early issues are mimeographed, bound by hand, and relatively stark, issue 4 bears a bright paper mask on its cover (see Figure 3). The mask was a spontaneous artistic decision, executed with whatever was available at a local stationary store.⁹⁵ In order to distribute his little, Mehrotra would carry copies around ‘in a blue overnight case, trying to peddle them.’⁹⁶ *Ezra*,

91 ‘statement’, *damn you* 2, Box 4, Folder 17, Mehrotra Papers.

92 ‘statement’, *damn you* 4, Box 4, Folder 17, Mehrotra Papers.

93 Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing’, p. 636.

94 *Ezra* 1, Box 4, Folder 20, Mehrotra Papers.

95 A. Mehrotra in Zecchini “‘We were like Cartographers’”, p. 197.

96 Ibid.

then, in both a literary and literal sense, was dependent on the material and infrastructural flows of the city.

Pavankumar Jain's *Tornado* retains this attention to found objects. Published in Bombay between 1967 and 1970, *Tornado* is described in *Ezra* as a magazine that is 'cyclostyled, contains art work and protest and loves adolf hitler'.⁹⁷ The little features Beat poetry alongside an eclectic collection of sketches, stamps, flags, and railway tickets. These objects are presented, like the poetry, without explanation or comment, contributing to a sense of the text having come together at random. The Bombay little is, then, often less composite text and more exercise in improvisation. The editors of *damn you* publish any writing on which they can get their hands: diary entries, reviews of school plays, short stories by their little sisters. The first two issues of *Ezra* are punched through and held together with twine. The pages of *Tornado* bear a ticket from Dadar to Mulund alongside a drawing of the Australian flag, with no apparent impulse to explain either of these inclusions. The little demonstrates a literal willingness to function so that 'whatever comes is accepted': the detritus of the city, any available support, and the writings of a broad community of artists and poets.⁹⁸

In discussing the Bombay little's relationship with place, it is important to recognize that while the little is a profoundly located text, both vulnerable to and mindful of its immediate environment, the spaces it reflects are not limited to the local or even the national, extending, instead, to the distant urban environs from which its overseas contributors wrote. Primary amongst these was New York. In *Ezra* 5, Mehrotra publishes a letter from Tom McNamara, who ran Tompkins Square Press in New York. In it, McNamara describes life on the Lower East Side, making little mention of poetry and choosing to speak, instead, of the challenges of everyday life:

these days, here, we have garbage piled on the streets, particularly in this poor neighbourhood because there is a strike of the sanitation workers [...] without going uptown, which is the citadel of tasteless opulence, America's temple of greed and lust, I know that the streets are not littered. not on Park Avenue.⁹⁹

The uneven city, it appears, is experienced both in India and on the Lower East side. The primacy of these details — the city's filth and its

97 *Ezra* 5, Box 4, Folder 20, Mehrotra Papers.

98 *Ezra* 4, Box 4, Folder 20, Mehrotra Papers.

99 *Ezra* 5, Box 4, Folder 20, Mehrotra Papers.

extreme disparities — in correspondence between one poet and another and the subsequent decision to publish this letter in a little magazine highlights the centrality of the urban every day in the lives of these poets. Denied the stability and protections of mainstream publishing, the little magazine is fragile. It is deeply concerned with what the physical text and its editors encounter on the way to publication: landlords, printing costs, a city whose infrastructure is sometimes enabling and at other times prohibitive. The little magazine is, simply put, not a literary venture alone. Instead, it is a vehicle for the many social, material, and political dimensions of these poets' lives, a text not *about* the city but *of* the city.

For the Bombay poet, this porous boundary between poem and place is maintained by identifying poets among, and as, the regular inhabitants of the city. Anjali Nerlekar recognizes in Kolatkar's writing an impulse to 'provincialize the practice of cartography'.¹⁰⁰ By making landmarks of the mundane and overlooked, Kolatkar 'creates an interstitial space in his work to reflect the reality of the city, where the workers and the poor have to make up/invent spaces to live in the forbidding urban sprawl'.¹⁰¹ In 'Pi-dog', Kolatkar's protagonist, a stray dog living on a traffic island, reorders the city around him:

This is the time of day I like best
and this is the hour
when I call this city my own;

When I like nothing better
than to lie down here, at the exact center
of this traffic island

[...] Just about where the equestrian statue
of what's-his-name
must've stood once, or so I imagine¹⁰².

Kolatkar locates his stray in the place where the Kala Ghoda statue once stood. In doing so, he performs an act of double-erasure: the colonial-era statue — the namesake of both the area and Kolatkar's collection — first

100 Anjali Nerlekar, 'The Cartography of the Local in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49.5 (2013), 609–23 (p. 621).

101 Ibid.

102 Kolatkar, 'Pi-dog', in *Collected Poems in English*, p. 125.

replaced by an ordinary dog and then reduced to ‘what’s-his-name’, located outside collective memory and contemporary experience.¹⁰³

In ‘Breakfast time at Kala Ghoda’, the traffic island becomes a site of community life. As an idli vendor sets up his stall on the ‘trisland’:

Each and every hungry and homeless soul
within a mile of the little island
is soon gravitating towards it

To receive the sacrament of idli
To anoint palates
with sambar,

To celebrate anew, every morning,
The seduction and death
Of the demon of hunger

[...] they come from all over;
Walking, running, dancing, limping,
Stumbling, rolling
- Each at his own speed¹⁰⁴

The humble trisland is, in Kolatkar’s imagination of the city, a temporary monument — a site of religious pilgrimage, even — that emerges and disappears in the course of the day. Its location is marked in public memory but outside geographical fact. It is part of a shifting public space that is at different times parking lot, breakfast spot, and home to Kolatkar’s stray. As against the Kala Ghoda statue, symbol of both a colonial State and an unyielding city plan, Kolatkar presents a transient site of community life. The landmarks of the ordinary citizen, he suggests, defy permanence and grandeur, offering instead sustenance and shelter, humble needs simply met.

The impermanence of Kolatkar’s ‘trisland’ allows us an expanded approach to the idea of cartographic remaking. Alongside an alternative mapping of the city, it suggests a set of co-ordinates that shift and

103 The original statue is of King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales. It was removed in 1965 and is now located at Byculla Zoo. See Mustansir Dalvi, ‘The New Horse Statue in Kala Ghoda Embodies Mumbai’s Efforts to Create a False Memory’, *Scroll.In* <<https://scroll.in/article/827837/the-new-horse-statue-in-kala-ghoda-embodies-mumbais-efforts-to-create-a-false-memory>> 28 January 2017

104 Kolatkar, ‘Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda’, in *Collected Poems in English*, p. 135.

disappear; a dynamic, unmappable city. In Chopra's *Town Poems*, 'Your ticket is due for renewal' follows the Bombay local as it charts circuitous and near impossible routes through the city. Beginning with a relatively straightforward journey on

trains that do not move around platforms
before you are railed home
leaving blue scared twisted smoke
rising out of corpses finally dead
near marine lines station

The poem pivots to a surreal, trajectory:

the rail tracks
wound round the earth
wheels clinging to them in a roll
compartments left behind following the
frenzy of the wheels¹⁰⁵

Chopra's poem switches from a recognizable and easily plotted path to one that does not seem bounded by the map of Bombay or even geographical reality. The sense of a circular journey, of movement without end, echoes Mehrotra's 'same tired legs on same winding road, under | same bridge'.¹⁰⁶ Even as it seeks to consecrate its own landmarks, the Bombay little denies the fiction that 'makes the complexity of the city readable and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text'.¹⁰⁷ The sense of the unmappable city is significant because it rejects not only the State's impulse to order and sanitize, but also the temptation to replace the fixed maps of nation with a fixed map of the little. To traverse the city, it suggests, is not to know it. Conversely, a knowledge of the city and a clear map of its coordinates are unnecessary to the exercise of travel and the project of life in Bombay. In a sequence from 'Pi-dog', Kolatkar's dog describes the city 'with a pirate's | rather than a cartographer's regard | for accuracy'.¹⁰⁸ This approach, Bombay's poets suggest, may allow us to document, understand, and occupy the city more fully.

105 Ashok Chopra, 'Your ticket is due for renewal', *Town Poems*, Mehrotra Papers.

106 A. Mehrotra, 'Song of the Rolling Earth'.

107 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92.

108 Kolatkar, 'Pi-dog', in *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, p. 401.

Conclusion: A Part of the Map

In this article's epigraph, Arvind Mehrotra lays out the links between place, literature, and representation. 'If you have also been a part of the literature being mapped,' he says, 'then its contour will somewhere bear a likeness to your own.'¹⁰⁹ The effort of the Bombay little was to locate a city, and a nation, that bore its likeness: disorderly, dirty, multivalent.

The Bombay little, travelling between Mulund and Kala Ghoda, Kala Ghoda and the Lower East side, generates a sense of space as personal and malleable. As it moves, it performs several inversions, reshaping the landscape so that temples become wastelands, bookshops, shrines. The neat is made disorderly, the shining displaced by the decaying, the ordinary recast as vital. The Bombay poet, in mapping the city, invests the little with an ability to see the overlooked and to make of it a subject worthy of poetry. The 'outside' is brought to the centre of the text, the marginality of its subjects mirrored, in turn, by the fragility of the little; self-published, hand bound, ephemeral. Writers who '[eat] at the corners of literature' turn in their work to that which exists at the edges and corners of the map.¹¹⁰

If the little's project is one of reclamation, it is not just the reclamation of texts and subjects, but also of the practice of cartography. The little takes the hard contours of the maps of State and makes of them flexible, personal cartographic models, oriented less towards navigation and more towards a looser, more democratic knowing. In the little's imagination of Bombay, there is a clear idea of what *is* part of the city without an inhibitive description of what is *not*. Parsi women, local trains, bookstores, and grime all feature in a cityscape that is open to new entrants and new meanings. The little's Bombay enables a redistribution of space, embracing that which is out of place, making room for poets and pi-dogs alike. Simultaneously, it embraces the disorderly, structuring space as indefinite or multi-purpose, oblivious to 'the niceties of [...] pavements, parks or traffic roundabouts'.¹¹¹ In place of the coherence and boundedness of the urban plan, the little suggests a messier vision of the city. Bookshops and apartments become home to small presses, cafes are at once places for socialising, writing, and reading. At base, the city and its constituent parts are never one thing, and certainly never the one thing that the State imagines.

109 A. Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 234.

110 *damn you 4*, 'statement', Box 4, Folder 17, Mehrotra Papers.

111 Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 131.

In speaking of the city, and of its place in the national project, the little enables an assessment of ‘the dream of the wonder that was India.’¹¹² Rendering the nation as it encounters it — desolate, filthy, and uneven, yet vital and dynamic — the little permits a more honest and democratic cartographic vision, one that is built from the ground up, recognising both allegiance and claim.¹¹³ Recycling the language of the grand narrative, the little marks the gaps between the claims of the national mission and the truths of a cartography of the everyday.

In the early 1970s, Adil Jussawalla and Eunice de Souza organized a poetry reading called ‘Nobody wants to see you.’¹¹⁴ In bringing together a cast of ‘missing persons’ — Arun Kolatkar, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, and Kersy Katrak — the event recognized both the absence of the Bombay poet in the public record, or on the literary map, and their determination to find a space for themselves despite it. Speaking of the world as seen from below, the Bombay little allows us to consider what is missing, making visible, in the lines of poetry and on the surface of the map, what nobody wants to see.

112 A. Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, Mehrotra Papers.

113 On marginality, a word of caution may be valuable. Arvind Mehrotra, speaking of the position of the Bombay poet, offers a sobering, and useful, reminder: ‘no one consciously sets out to be marginal’ (See A. Mehrotra in Zecchini, “‘We were like cartographers’”, p.195). Although I argue that disorder may be valuable and dirt liberatory, I recognise that there are those for whom the unclean or disorderly pose real, bodily threat. The suggestion here is not that the unclean is to be celebrated, but instead that it needs to be *recognised*, often in the face of state machinery that seeks to make it, and anyone associated with it, invisible. Similarly, I argue for disorder not as chaos but as a flexibility of space and mapping; a more democratic approach to city and state. The little magazine’s embrace of the marginal — both literary and literal — does not represent a superficial celebration of all that is ‘outside’ but an effort to destabilize the systems that mark it as such.

114 Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, p. 51

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