Politics of Mobility and Delhi's Migrants: Examining Modes of Cosmopolitanisms in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man*

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The idea of cosmopolitanism suggests recognition and respect of all forms of differences and diversity, and engagement across various class, ethnic, cultural and national affiliations. In the literature on cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitanism is conflated with globalisation and mobile capitalism, which focuses on the lifestyles of those 'elite' few who are world travellers and have cultivated the taste for 'difference' and 'diversity' in the designated 'consumptionscapes' of the city. But what about those not belonging to the upper classes and moving from one place to another within the same country or the city? What about the acceptance and respect for the differences embodied in the figure of the 'Other', migrants? Can a migrant, who does not belong to the upper class, be called cosmopolitan? The paper aims to examine the class consciousness and the centrality of mobility in cosmopolitanism by looking at the varied modes of cosmopolitanism as displayed by the working-class migrants in urban areas. In contrast to the cosmopolitanism of transnational elites or the capitalist cosmopolitanism of the rich and upper middle classes, cosmopolitan generosity and reasoning have been shown to exist amongst non-intellectual, relatively immobile and working-class groups that provide a significant challenge for how we think about the cosmopolitan identity.

It is suggested that we need to reconsider any dualistic notion that cosmopolitans are mobile or elite, or better still, both mobile and elite. Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* is interrogated for its representation of the working-class migrants in Delhi to study the (im)mobility and cosmopolitanism of the marginalised migrants who do not belong to the privileged section of the society.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Mobility, Informality, Migrants, Delhi.

A cosmopolitan identity is marked by an attitude of openness towards difference – new experiences, people, places and ideas – and encountering the 'Other' within spaces of cultural flows with willingness to not just accept but be changed by it as well, allowing the play of otherness to act upon oneself. A cosmopolitan identity is incorporated within the networks of flows and plural cultural influences and increasingly gets decentred from identity markers of modern social life based on one's class, creed, religion, etc., and gets cognisant of hybrid nodes of belonging. A cosmopolitan identity is, at least in theory, a model of identity liberated from the modern grid of identity formation (Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p.11). Thus, in recent literature on cosmopolitanism, openness is the sine qua non of cosmopolitanism. The idea of cosmopolitanism is also centred around the idea of mobility of people, cultures and free movement of ideas around the world. Mobility of consumer objects is also a crucial aspect of the phenomena of cosmopolitanism. These are the objects which are locally consumed through cosmopolitan frames but are produced in the global capitalist marketplace, "from tropical fruits to home decorations, notions of 'exotic' and 'different' become positively valued" (Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p. 15). This makes mobility an important part of cosmopolitan thinking.

The dominant image, in cosmopolitan studies, is the figure of the cosmopolitan as a privileged elite who possesses higher education, surplus capital and a capacity to be globally mobile. Cosmopolitans are defined as people with financial, cultural and social resources, who shape their subjectivities through global, mobile narratives. They have mastered "the language of cosmopolitanism", fusing humanist understandings with "designer brands and opulent living" (Elliott and

Urry, 2010, p.78). According to Anthony Elliott and John Urry, this kind of cosmopolitanism "fits hand in glove with the values of transnational corporations" (2010, p. 78). Transnational mobility, however, is dependent upon privileged forms like one's income and occupation, or in Pierre Bourdieu's terminology – social, cultural and economic capital. It is, thus, argued that because of the dependency of transnational mobility upon forms of social, cultural and economic capital, it is not equally accessible to or a resource that is available to all. This is a type of privileged cosmopolitanism (Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p.59) where cosmopolitanism is a result of a kind of mobility that allows one to leave behind one's routine existence to experience something new. Though it is an example of cosmopolitanism, it is one that is based on cultural appropriation, operationalised only by the fantasy of engaging with the Other, with difference. The paper argues that cosmopolitan openness is not merely about curiosity or touristic voyeurism, and it is not only individuals possessing high levels of cultural and economic capital that can be associated with such openness.

Craig Calhoun criticises the class basis of cosmopolitanism and credits mobile capitalism as the leading factor in the propulsion of cosmopolitan projects (2002, as cited in Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p. 20). He calls it as an ideological diversion, "a soft cosmopolitanism that does not challenge capitalism or Western hegemony" (Calhoun, 2002, as cited in Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p. 21). He states that: "food, tourism, music, literature and clothes are all easy faces of cosmopolitanism, but they are not hard tests for the relationship between local solidarity and international civil society" (Calhoun, 2002, as cited in Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p. 21). In this case, cosmopolitanism is a cultural tool of the privileged which then comes down to become a fashion or style statement by the middle classes. Through the consumption spaces in the gentrified city centres, there is a capitalistic and commodified expression of cosmopolitanism that leads to the creation of 'cosmopolitan spaces', where those who possess the 'right' kind of cultural capital can indulge in menial and hollow encounter with difference and diversity, accomplished through buying exotic things, participating in the café-bar culture or visiting ethnic restaurants, etc.,

without in any way knowing the 'Other' person or culture. These gentrified urban settings are then regulated and cleaned to support consumption and allow certain businesses that cater to 'cosmopolitan aesthetic' to prosper and in turn lead to a systematic exclusion of some groups (Binnie et al., 2006, p. 25).

Thus, certain areas and certain groups of people are labelled as cosmopolitans or non-cosmopolitans in urban areas solely based on patterns of consumption. This process also makes certain types of 'differences' as acceptable and non-acceptable in these areas based on their suitability in being able to aid one's construction of identity as cosmopolitan. Also, the mobility associated with transnational elites, their status and ability to develop global attitudes is derived from and counteracted against the immobility of certain groups for whom local and national priorities still hold relevance. In contrast to the cosmopolitanism of transnational elites or the capitalist cosmopolitanism of the rich and upper middle classes, cosmopolitan generosity and reasoning have been shown to exist amongst non-intellectual, relatively immobile and working-class groups that provide a significant challenge to how we think about the cosmopolitan identity. It is suggested that we need to reconsider any dualistic notion that cosmopolitans are mobile or elite, or better still, both mobile and elite.

Delhi is a global metropolis inscribed in transnational population flows, a growing economic hub that generates employment and is an important node in the flow of transnational, global finance. Delhi's heterogeneous society and diverse culture has been a magnet for attracting migrants, both from outside and from within the country. Ulrich Beck, in his essay "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies", contends that "in the struggles over belonging, the actions of migrants and minorities are major examples of dialogic imaginative ways of life and everyday cosmopolitanism" (2016, p. 21). Migrants, who come to Delhi from other states of India, belonging to economically poor classes or other minority groups, when faced with the restrictive class regime, bias and prejudices, adopt a series of "cosmopolitan tactics" (Landau and Freemantle, 2009, p. 376) that enable them to achieve a modicum of inclusion in the society of Delhi but without being bounded by it. It helps them resist the effects of a social system that treats

them as outsiders, meant to stay at the peripheries only. Addressing quotidian challenges, and to meet their individual and broader collective objectives, these poor migrants show examples of existing cosmopolitanism. This focus on engagement with the "Other" as shown by working class migrants, as a form of survival strategy in an alien environment, is a move away from the idea of cosmopolitanism as based primarily upon class and forms of aestheticisation, refined taste and consumption that exists amongst the elites.

The migrants in the city are marginalised because of their inferior status within class structure and lack of access to cultural capital. Thus, to become socially mobile and gain livelihood, they interact with the 'Other' and form associations with those assumed to be in positions of power within the hierarchy of social and cultural capital. The relationship between Aman Sethi and Ashraf and other working-class migrants in Bara Tooti Chowk in the novel, *A Free Man* by Aman Sethi (2011), is a relationship born out of this necessity only. It is in these interactions, not just between Sethi and the migrant workers but also between Ashraf and other workers, that we can observe "trajectories, projects, and scenarios" of cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviours among Delhi's working-class migrants (Datta, 2009, p. 355).

Although it is migration of people from other parts of the country that contribute to the rich tapestry of Delhi's claim to cosmopolitanism, it is also a widely held view that migrants put a strain on the city's employment levels, housing and public services. Behind the apathy towards the poor migrants, and their treatment as outsiders, is a suspicion that these migrants derail the process of city's development and growth and are a blot on its otherwise gentrified façade and urban landscape. Though these migrants are the 'walas' of the city, the *doodhwala*, *subziwala, koorawala, bijliwala, safediwala*, the ubiquitous service providers on whose entrepreneurship the city runs smoothly, and the rich and middle class depend upon, they are displaced from the city spaces, relegated to the margins and unacknowledged. Thus, for many of the poor migrants, Delhi is a contradiction – it is a place of hope but also despair, a space

that offers them opportunities of livelihood but also one where they are far more vulnerable.

A place, therefore, cannot be called cosmopolitan, or a place of refuge and opportunity, unless it has provided facilities to all its citizens equally. According to Sethi,

> For as long as I can remember, Delhi looked like a giant construction site inhabited by bulldozers, cranes, and massive columns of prefabricated concrete; but the rubble has masked the incredible changes and dislocations of factories, homes, and livelihoods that occurred as Delhi changed from a sleepy north Indian city into a glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower. Working-class settlements like Yamuna Pushta, Nangla Machi, and Sanjay Amar Colony were flattened by government demolition squads to make way for broader roads, bigger power stations, and the Commonwealth Games. (2011, p. 38–39)

Annapurna Shaw writes that forty to seventy percent urban people live in informal residential settlements that fall outside the purview of formal planning institutions, about a third of Delhi's housing is unauthorised and it is located mostly on the urban periphery (2012, p. 97, 114). The squatter settlements of the poor are built of mud, thatch and locally discarded materials, without any access to water supply, sewage system, waste collection, and they have to make arrangements for their own basic services. Pramod K. Nayar identifies this practice of urban marginalisation as "postcolonial subalternisation", in which "women, 'lower' castes and classes, ethnic minorities became the 'Others' within the post-colonial nation-state" (2010, p. 177).

According to Mike Davis, street and those associated with it are seen as "suspect, smacking of the marginal, the criminal or the dysfunctional. They are out of place in the social and spatial order" (1990, p. 226). The problem of homelessness is reduced to the question of visible presence of some homeless person on the street, that is, the wider social problem of lack of housing is brought down to intolerable public spectacles such as begging, drinking or sleeping on the streets, which are viewed as blemishes on the canvas of the cityscape. The response to such disfigurement of public spaces then is to lock people

out or move them in the name of planning and design of "sadistic street environments" which prevents people from lying down or even sitting comfortably in common spaces (Davis, 1990, p. 232). These exclusionary practices become part of what Davis terms the "social relations of the built environment", that is the way in which social and economic divisions in the city are inscribed and reproduced in the spatial organisation of urban areas. The ways in which the spatial economy of a city is regulated in terms of access, exclusion and control defines a city's cosmopolitan character.

Jan Breman and Ravi Agrawal (2002) describe the migrants in Delhi as part of the "amorphous informal sector", that gather in the mornings in specific places such as the crossroads, near railway stations and at bus stands, at markets and at the city's entry point, waiting to sell their skills, strength and raw labour just like the working class migrants in Sethi's book who wait by the main road in Bara Tooti Chowk for work. While "those among them who have some skills are a little more confident", and "those who have their own tools are a little more dignified", Breman and Agrawal argue, "in the end, they are all mere commodities – to be haggled over, 'purchased' for the day or for the job, and taken away to the worksite" (2002, p. 128). This amorphous informal sector is further disadvantaged because "left to the unpredictability of lives at the urban fringe, kinship links, social ties, and cultural connections (constituting the backbone of the slum economy) dissolve into dysfunctionality" (Arabindoo, 2011, p. 641). The itinerant workers in Sethi's account also lose touch with and are unable to maintain any social and familial connections largely as a result of their way of life and dire working and living conditions in Delhi. Sometimes their families move to another location and are no longer traceable, as in the case of Ashraf who loses contact with his family when he forgets his mother's phone number and address, and she moves away thereafter. Satish, another migrant labourer in Bara Tooti, too loses touch with his family, "A phone number in a small town near a big railway station – waiting to be dialed once more, ten years too late. "Hello, I'm calling from Delhi, can I speak to Lallan Singh?" "I'm sorry, but this isn't his number anymore" (Sethi, 2011, p. 59).

According to Andrew Irving and Adam Reed, "cosmopolitanism is the province of the small movements of the finite human being who can live in, act and imagine the world, otherwise" (2010, p. 461). The movement of people into and out of cities within India, that is migration, has been an important contributor to the changing social and economic composition of the cities. Inter-state migration to Delhi from other parts of India is mainly due to economic distress faced by people in their own states and thus in search of jobs, the poor migrants end up doing even menial or low-end jobs in the city or seek self-employment in the informal sector. Unable or unwilling to address the ideological and structural roots of their exclusion in the city, the economically impoverished migrants develop tactics to exist in the city.

Cosmopolitanism involves development of an ability to acquaint and make familiar the different cultures that one encounters and to also learn to adjust to these multiple cultural systems (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002, p. 13-14). However, the motivation for the growth of this ability for these migrants is not because they devour all cultures indiscriminately (Peterson and Kern, 1996) nor are their practices born out of 'respect and enjoyment of cultural difference' (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002, p. 13). According to Loren B. Landau and Iriann Freemantle, the cosmopolitanism displayed by migrants does not appear to involve any "specific desire for pleasurable experimentation of foreignness, or a strong appreciation or respect for diversity, but rather arises as a form of competence and orientation deemed advantageous for a viable work-related future" (2009, p. 382). The 'everyday' activities and practices performed by these migrants in daily life shows how they "practically and rhetorically draw on various, often competing, systems of cosmopolitan rights and rhetoric to insinuate themselves, however shallowly, in the networks and spaces needed to achieve specific practical goals" (Landau and Freemantle, 2009, p. 380).

Ayona Datta acknowledges that there are people in the city for whom openness towards difference and accepting it is not an ethical or a political act, but rather a way of "getting by" in the place "that requires a strategic engagement with others through coerced choices in order to survive in new environments" (2009, p. 2) and this

can be one way of understanding this phenomenon too. Landau and Freemantle (2009) call this "tactical cosmopolitanism", which is displayed by the people who migrate to the city. In face of opposition to their presence, and to overcome the hostility they face, such people adopt a "variegated language of belonging that makes claims to the city while positioning them in an ephemeral, superior and unrooted condition where they can escape localised social and political obligations" (Landau and Freemantle, 2009, p. 380). Ashraf, when in Patna, was studying to become a doctor, then when he moved to Calcutta he got into the floor-polishing business. He returned to Patna again and started a chicken business. In Bombay, he worked as a butcher. In Surat, he was a 'mazdoor' and in Delhi, a 'safediwallah'. Wherever he goes, he learns new skills, new languages and the codes of the new system and culture to earn his livelihood and thrive in a strange land.

Tactical cosmopolitanism is a set of heterogeneous practices that emerges from a constant struggle against the hardships faced on the city streets and the hostile attitude that is experienced by the migrants, and it is not always conscious. (Landau and Freemantle, 2009, p. 386). This develops to enable the migrants to achieve other social and economic goals. These are a miscellaneous collection of practices and actions undertaken by the groups that are divided along caste, class, or religious lines and do not have any valuable stakes in the economic resources and organisational capital of the city. Their novel strategies of mobility and consequent hybrid deterritorialised identities create new paradigms of belonging, which do not belong to existent modes of identity and belonging and that can be termed as cosmopolitan.

But the cosmopolitanism displayed by the working-class migrants is not a homogeneous attitude towards the 'Other' that only develops because of forced interactions for survival. There are various kinds of cosmopolitanisms that are displayed by the working-class migrants that are connected to specific spatial settings. Their individual histories and particular class and subjective position in the city produces varied cosmopolitanisms. In the novel, the everyday places occupied by the various characters like the work sites, Kaka's tea shop or

Kalyani's shack, where patrons of diverse background and occupation, "mazdoors, beldaars and mistrys could gather through the day, swap stories, and settle contracts over a few drinks" (Sethi, 2011, p. 71), and shared housing, difference is experienced, comprehended and negotiated by them and their families and the 'Other' is accepted and assimilated in one's life in various different ways.

Martha Radice talks about the existence of micro-cosmopolitanisms in urban areas, which is cosmopolitanism that is practised in the microcosm of the multiethnic city (2015, p. 588). Though these migrant workers of *A Free Man* are distanced from their familial and social life back home, they form groups, like Ashraf and his cohorts, to survive in the city. They have their own system where Kaka, who runs the teashop, also serves as everyone's banker at Bara Tooti. Aman Sethi, too, becomes engaged in the lives of the migrants, spending time with them socially, travelling with them, lending or giving them money. Oftentimes he takes them to hospital and provides for their needs. He even involves his own friends and family in such a relationship with the migrants that he meets at Bara Tooti Chowk.

> Upon arrival in Delhi, Ashraf approaches a few men playing cards in one of the lanes near Jama Masjid and recounts the incident, I said, "Bhaiya, I'm new to this place. Can I sleep somewhere around here?" They looked up. One of them said, "Have you eaten?" I shook my head. He pressed a five-rupee coin into my hand and pointed me towards a stall. I ate, bought some beedis, unrolled my sheet, and fell asleep right there on the pavement… And then I found Bara Tooti and it has been the same ever since. (Sethi, 2011, p. 34-5)

This kind of cosmopolitanism moves away from the centrality of international mobility and focuses not just on intra-state but also intra-urban mobility – the small journeys that people undertake within the city itself – that leads to an encounter with the 'Other' and has the potential of developing cosmopolitan character. According to Radice (2015), till today the word 'local' is still used to term the opposite of cosmopolitan and herein lies the reason as to why international mobility/

travel is still considered as a reason for and means by which people acquire a cosmopolitan attitude. Radice, however, explains that the word 'local' refers to a spatial relationship, whereas if we understand a cosmopolitan as someone who "seeks to engage with those unlike himself/herself", then it concerns a social relationship (2015, p. 590). Therefore, one can be spatially local but socially cosmopolitan or spatially mobile but socially parochial.

Certain aspects of mobility are centrally linked to infrastructure that configures and enables it. These things that enable mobility, themselves fixed in place and immobile, are part of an interdependent technological system which supports various systems of mobility. Such material networks are, thus, agents of a cosmopolitan process that facilitates movement and aids cosmopolitan mixing (Skrbis and Woodward, 2004, p. 59-60). As Sethi says, "Delhi is a city of chance encounters spawned by… public transport… harried commuters come together to hire autorickshaws that charge per trip rather than per person; a gaggle of sleep-deprived passengers exchange notes over cups of tea as they discuss the repercussions of delays at the railway station" (2011, p. 134). Old Delhi Railway station in Sethi's book becomes a cosmopolitan agent too, serving as a means of enabling the mobility of various workers' and a way of connecting to other parts of the county. The proximity into which strangers are thrown together in public buses or railways, combined with the obligations of civility that are peculiar to travel through public means, is an example of how the passengers, who are strangers, are constantly constructing and reconstructing their views of each other, identifying and misidentifying markers of difference in ways that can be exclusive or inclusive – or parochial or cosmopolitan. Public transport can also be "especially formative of collective urban identities, in that it is when city dwellers are crammed together in the same bus, streetcar or subway carriage that they get the best sense of who else constitutes the city" (Radice, 2015, p. 594-5).

The stories of migrants in Delhi, as presented in the novel too, are weaved by their narratives of migration, intra-national associations, everyday movement and encounters, and their expectations for the future. The process of becoming cosmopolitan,

according to Bingyu Wang, is enmeshed with the migrants' specific social characteristics and demographic positioning, along with their individuality, biographies and personal relations with others. Also, the encounters with diversity are "inherently emotional and cannot be understood without an appreciation of the emotional dynamics from which they emerge" (Wang, 2016, p. 2). The relationship that Ashraf shares with Rehaan or Lalloo and even with Sethi himself in the novel is a case in point.

The two men, Ashraf and Sethi belong to the two ends of the spectrum, where Sethi is the journalist and Ashraf his source. With opportunity at his side, Sethi sets out to chronicle the lives of labourers in Delhi who are daily-wage earners. Over the course of the five years that Sethi took to research about Ashraf's life and write about it, a relationship forms between the two of them which is based upon mutual need, dependency and an acceptance of each other's differences. At times Sethi loans Ashraf five thousand rupees to start a new business, at other times, he ends up needing to borrow money for a cigarette and a cup of milky tea. When Sethi gets his wallet stolen, Ashraf digs into a secret pocket sewn inside his shirt for extra money. Sethi and the people he meets during the course of his research accept their difference in status and background, becoming comfortable to share a joint, calling each other and addressing each other as 'bhai', becoming friends, with each person retaining their individuality.

Sethi calls Delhi, "a city of the exhausted, distressed, and restless, struggling with the uncertainties of eviction and unemployment" (2011, p. 42). He does not mince his words while depicting the harshness of a migrants' labourers' life in Delhi and yet he still manages to highlight the openness which characterises the attitude of his subjects, as Ashraf says, "the chowk is our house and this pavement is our drawing room" (Sethi, 2011, p. 59). The writer succinctly drives home the point that due to their being the 'Other', they are marginalised and yet in the microcosm of their own neighbourhoods, migrants, poor or working class, show openness towards difference and diversity that is central to building cosmopolitan sensibilities.

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