Indraprastha in Literature

Dr.Sangeeta Mittal
Associate Professor of English
Maharaja Agrasen College
(University of Delhi)
New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

The story of Delhi goes back in time to the Indus Valley civilization. The city of Indraprastha is a glorious presence in legends, folklore and epics. It has also inspired other later date literary explorations and expressions. Since Indraprastha exists in an indeterminate space between myth and reality, little wonder then that, it has been recreated time and again in the imaginative space. The description of the 'city' of Indraprastha in Mahabharta gets implicated of necessity in the same debates which surround the epic itself today, that is, the reiteration of the existence of the city also simultaneously negates the urban, architectural, material and visual culture imbued in the descriptions of the city. The paper examines these literary retellings featuring Indraprastha. ChitraBannerjeeDivakaruni's*Palace of Illusions* reclaims of the fluid space of Indraprasthafromafeminist perspective, Dalrymple relocates Indraprastha in his *City of Djinns* to where he thinks it belongs- to the sites of culture and Trisha Das uses the journey from Indraprastha to heaven and back to New Delhi as a journey of self discovery.

Keywords: Delhi, Indraprastha, Mahabharata, Novel, Delhi culture, urban culture

INDRAPRASTHA IN LITERATURE

The story of Delhi goes back in time to the Indus Valley civilization. Traces of post-urban stage of Harappan culture dating between 1900 B.C. to 1200 B.C, largely chalcolithic in nature, have been discovered on the banks of the Yamuna stretching from present day Mandoli and Sambhaoli villages and from GharondaNimka to Narela. (Babu, 2006) Around 1500 B.C, Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia (Early or Rigvedic phase from 1500 B.C-1000 B.C.). The later Vedic period from 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. is documented in texts like Samveda, Yajurvedaand Atharvaveda and the use of Painted Grey Ware (PWG) is common to the peoples of this period residing in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. (Sharma, 2001, p.8, 9) The Bharatas and the Purus combined to form the Kuru clan who, alongwith the Paanchaals of Middle Doab, are known to have established control in the Upper and the Middle Doab including Delhi, later heading east by 600 B.C. The PuranaQila in Delhi is thought to hold many secrets of these centuries. Finely made Painted Grey Ware and large baked bricks, dug up at the PuranaQila, link it to other sites of the later Vedic age. As A K Narainsummarizes in his essay ' Proto-History of Delhi and its Environs':

> …its protohistoric beginnings are found in the first millennium B.C.; and it covers a much larger area than what now forms only the southern part of older Delhi. Memories of this earlier time and space context are preserved not only in the epics and the Puranas and in the tales of the Buddhist Jatakas, but also in oral traditions about the place names surviving to this day- although the facts in detail may still lie buried underground and traditions yet remain to be substantiated. (Narain, 1986, p.5)

Based on oral traditions and written compilations, the following chart of dynasties having ruled in and around Delhi has been drawn up, though its historicity is debatable:

1. Kurus	1500-345 B.C.e
2. Nands	345-20 B.C.
3. Mauryas	323-185 B.C.
4. Indo-Greeks	185-100 B.C.
5. Saks and Kushanas	50 B.C-320 A.D.
6. Guptas	320-500 A.D.
7. Huns	500-600 A.D.
8. PushyaBhuti	606-47 A.D.
9. Gurjar-Pratihars	836-1018 A.D.
10. Tomars	1051-1151 A.D.
11. Chauhans	1151-92 A.D.

(Bashir-ud-din Ahmad, 1990)

The earliest reference to 'Indraprastha' is recorded in *Mahabharata'sBhishmaparv*, *Sabhaparv* and *Adiparv*.BhagvadPuran sings the rule of thirty generations of Arjuna's descendants in Indraprastha.In the epic *Mahabharata*, the capital of the Pandavas was Indraprastha. There is little evidence apart from conjectural possibility of Indraprastha being Delhi. This deduction is based on the facts that the war between Pandavas and Kauravas was fought on five 'pats'- four of which have been established to be Panipat, Sonepat, Baghpat and Tilpat. There is solid ground for indrapat or indraprastha to be the fifth 'pat'. As Narain states, a village by the name of indrapat existed within the PuranaQila until the beginning of the twentieth century which was later demolished.Archealogical excavations confirm the existence of city life around the first millennia Before Christ, and the area between Firoz Shah Kotla and Humayun's tomb is the probable site of the city. The ancient Buddhist and Jain literature also corroborates the existence of this settlement. Dated between sixth and fifth centuries Before Christ or the post-Vedic period, these texts proclaim Indraprastha to be an important political domain. *PaliTipitika* mentions Indraprastha in several contexts. (Sharma &Tewari, 2012) The existence of Indraprastha has been confirmed by later writers, including AbulFazal, but there are no confirmatory records about its rise and fall. (Abul-Fazl, 1978 trans. and reprint) The Mahabharata legend has it that when compelled to divide the kingdom between Kauravas and Pandavas, Dhrutrashtra gave Khandavaprastha (a forest area to the right of river Yamuna, for about 80 kms. from Delhi) to Yudhishthara, the eldest Pandava brother, to establish independent reign over which the descendants of Arjuna, Yudhishthara's younger brother ruled for many years. The Pandavas built their capital, Indraprastha, in this area.

The city of Indraprastha is a glorious presence in legends, folklore and epics. It has also inspired other later date literary explorations and expressions. Indraprastha was built where there was a forest Khandavprastha. Dhrutrashtra divided the kingdom into two parts and gave this thorny forest to the Pandavas. They were faced with the daunting task of setting up their kingdom on this barren and arid land. They had to raze the forest by fire to create space for their new capital. As described in Sabhaparv, Maya- an *asura* who managed to escape from the forest fire, offered to build a magnificent edifice for the Pandavas as a token of his gratitude being a "great artist, a Visvakarman" (Buitenen, 2006, p. 62). Krishna suggested to him to

> … Build an assembly hall, Daitya, such as you deem worthy of the King Dharma. Build a hall, Daitya, such as you deem worthy of the King Dharma. Build a hall of such magnificence that people in the entire world of men will be unable to imitate it, when they have beheld it in wonderment. Build an assembly hall, Maya, where we will see the designs of the Gods laid out by you, and the plans of asuras and men. (Buitenen, 2006, p.62)

Maya was delighted to obey and decided to build a palatial hall resembling a chariot of the Gods. Then he set out in the north east direction towards Mount Mainaka and lakeBindu which are known for their mineral and ethereal splendors to retrieve a few treasures like gemstones from the assembly hall of Vrsaparvan, a club from King Yauvanasva and a conch by Varuna. Maya collected crystal building materials called Hiranyasranga with the help of KimkaraRaksasas to construct the peerless hall he had promised to the Pandavas. He took four months to accomplish the project. The hall is described thus:

> The hall, which had solid golden pillars … measured ten thousand cubits in circumference. Radiant and divine, it had superb color like the fire, or the sun, or the

moon. Challenging as it were with its splendor the luminous splendor of the moon, it shone divinely forth, as though on fire, with divine effulgence. It stood covering the sky like a mountain or monsoon cloud, long, wide, smooth, faultless, and dispelled fatigue. Made with the best materials, garlanded with gem-encrusted walls, filled with precious stones and treasures, it was built well by the Visvakarman. Neither the Sudharma hall of the Dasarhas (Krsna's people), nor the palace of Brahma possessed the matchless beauty Maya imparted to it. (Buitenen, 2006, p. 64)

Thousands of Kimkararaksasas stood guard to it. Inside the hall, there was a lotus pond, covered with beryl leaves, and gem stalked lotuses. Turtles, fishes and fowls added to its beauty. The water was clear and a flight of steps descended into the pond. People who saw the pond were so bedazzled by its gems and other wonders that many a times they fell into it. The hall was surrounded by evergreen and verdant trees. There were fragrant groves and ponds full of wild geese and ducks all around. The winds perfumed with natural scents wafted to the Pandavas sitting in the hall to give them joy and comfort. With the help of Maya, thus, "Pandavas built the city of Indraprastha with its forts, moats, encampments and in due course, a brilliant city came into being with a 'wall as high as heaven and as white as silver'. People flocked to the city and song birds to the parks and gardens". (VedVyas, 2001, p.1)

The description of the 'city' of Indraprastha in Mahabharta gets implicated of necessity in the same debates which surround the epic itself today. The foremost debate is about the historicity of the epic. In 'Mahabharta: Myth and Reality', S. P. Gupta and K. S. Balachandran put together the predominant threads in this much entangled debate. (Gupta and Ramachandran, 1976, 2006) Apart from the fact that there was a family feud which escalated into a war, there is agreement over little else. The date of the occurrence of the war ranges from 4th millennium BC to 600 BC. The mode of establishing this date also varies from usage of internal evidence as against the usage of external evidence. The cultural material aggregated in the epic need not have been aggregated in a strictly chronological sense. While a holistic approach deriving from all three of the abovementioned insights seems to be the only viable way out of this conundrum, there is now an inclination also towards epic archeology to solve some of these riddles. Professor B. B. Lal is the foremost exponent of this method. Through excavation of potential sites, it has been found that Painted Grey Ware (PWG) has been found at all Mahabharata sites. Though still a lot needs to be done in this regard, yet one seems to be moving steadily towards a conclusion stated thus by Gupta and Ramachandran;

But one thing seems to be certain, the emergence of the later Vedic people, the Painted Grey Ware and the ushering in of iron seem to be inter-related, and a proper study of these is bound to lead to some tangible results. (Gupta and Ramachandran, 1976, 2006, p. 94)

The implications of these debates on the nature of Indraprastha as a city are manifold. As argued by M C Joshi, the culture represented by PWG is rural culture. However, the settlements and society described in Mahabharata appears to be urban. Archaeologically speaking, after the Harappans, the first Indian cities did not appear till the Mauryan period. Then either one should date the Mahabharta in the Mauryan period or consider the urbanity of the culture presented therein a later day interpolation? The latter seems a wiser approach to take as apart from urbanity, the other cultural and kingly virtues presented in the Mahabharata are more akin to Vedic or rural/agrarian as summarized by Gupta and Ramachandran. (1976, 2006, p.109)

Fascinated by the spectacular descriptions of Indraprastha in Mahabharata, William Dalrymple in his *City of Djinns*, finds himself persuaded to probe whether the descriptions are fact or fiction. He meets Prof. B BLal, an eminent epic archeologist, who has carried out excavations at sites related to Mahabharata. B D Chattopadhyaya specifies that epic archeology endeavors "to correlate archaeology with the epic evidence and to reconstruct the epic milieu in the light of archaeology". (Chattopadhyaya, 1975, 2006, p.69) Professor B BLal has been a forerunner in using the archaeological methods in sieving fact from fiction in a work which began as a piece of 8800 *shlokas* as Vyasa's Jaya and today is available to with three more reformulations, the last one being the elephantine Mahabharata with 100000 shlokas attributed to Lomaharsana and Ugrasrava. Prof B BLal began his excavations on Indraprastha site in 1954-55 with the second season opening in 1971-72. Professor B BLal has been able to disambiguate the following facts mentioned in the epic archaeologically. First, though different scholars through different methods have proposed a wide

range of dates when the Mahabharata war is likely to have been fought, archaeological evidence of discovering PGW culture (dated between 1100-500 BC) existing on all Mahabharata sites in conjunction with Puranic information and dynastic regnal details, tends to fix it between 1000-900 BC. Secondly, the great flood in Hastinapur which forced the Kauravas and Pandavas to shift the capital to Kausambi 3) Habitation of Kausambi by people with PGW culture. To Dalrymple, Prof Lal explains the enormity of the task and limitation of sources for accomplishing a complete analysis of the gigantic work since not only has the work come down to us spiced up with a lot of *masala*, as he puts it, but also today owing to practical and financial difficulties, extensive excavations on and around probable sites is a far-fetched dream. However, even the limited progress which has been made sheds ample light on the eulogized descriptions of Indraprastha city and its architectural tour de force like the Hall. As Lal explains to Dalrymple,

> 'You won't find many palaces in the PWG layers,' said Professor lal.
> 'What do you mean? In the Mahabharata…'
> 'Poetic license,' said the Professor. 'The archaeological evidence shows that the Painted Grey Ware culture was fairly primitive- basically it was a rural, pastoral economy. At Hastinapur they had iron and copper implements, a few tools made of bone. Some glass ornaments, good wheel-turned pottery …'
> 'But the buildings?' I asked. 'What would the great hall of Indraprastha have been like?'
> 'If it ever existed it would have been wattle and daub.'
> 'You get some mud-brick walls, earthen ramparts, the odd structure of kiln-fired bricks, but generally speaking PGW structures are almost always wattle and daub.'
> 'Any use of marble?'
> The professor shook his head. (Dalrymple, 1993, p.331)

The conclusion of the interview summarizes the gains and losses to the city of Mahabharata by the archaeologist's intervention:

> The Professor turned and began walking back to the Rest House. 'The Indraprastha of the *Mahabharata*, he said, 'was basically created by the pen of a poet.'
> 'And destroyed,' I said, 'by the trowel of an archaeologist.' (Dalrymple, 1993, p.331)

The cultural irony surrounding Indraparatha, therefore, is that the reiteration of the existence of the city also simultaneously negates the urban, architectural, material and visual culture imbued in the descriptions of the city. While Divakurni's novel exemplifies an imaginative reclamation of the fluid space of Indraprastha, Dalrymple's response to this cultural demolition is to relocate it back to the sites of culture. Historical antiquity and cultural antiquity need not necessarily be synchronous or coterminous. He takes the 'end' or 'beginning' of Delhi history beyond Indraprastha by taking cognizance of a myth which predates Indraparatha- how Brahma was able to retrieve the knowledge of the Vedas at the NigambodhGhat by taking a holy dip in the waters of the Jumna. The sacred *shastras* emerged out of the river flooded by the monsoon cloudburst. In this sense, the NigambodhGhat is the most ancient site in Delhi and he finds the cultural tradition originating on its Ghats preserved even to date as he sees the *doms* and *sadhus* practicing meditation or devotion there on the rainy last day of his visit to India. He writes, "In these wet and disheveled figures sitting cross-legged under the neem and banyan trees of the river bank lay what must be the most remarkable Delhi survival of all". (Dalrymple, 1993, p.338) Rain is the common thread in this cultural continuity apart from the Sacred Knowledge (Nigambodh). Thus, Dalrymple delinks culture from history as the two can progress on very different trajectories.

Since Indraprastha exists in an indeterminate space between myth and reality, little wonder then that, it has been recreated time and again in the imaginative space. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel The Palace of Illusions recreates the space from a feminist perspective. Reworking the Mahabharata from a woman's perspective, she makes Draupadi her narrator and protagonist. She writes

> If ever I wrote a book, I remember thinking … I would place the women (in Mahabharata) in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her

achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. (Divakaruni, 2008, p.xv)

She sees Indraprastha as a Palace of Illusions. Having been created by Maya, it has visual illusions at every step, but as a psychological space which Draupadi inhabits, it ironically is also the space where most of Draupadi's illusions are shattered. Drauapadi relates more to the atmospherics of a place more than its aesthetics. She is curious about spaces and reads them as texts. The urge to belong and possess makes her reclaim her spaces but in the politically treacherous and precariously transient world of power, she painfully realizes that 'palace' cannot be 'home'. Her personal circumstance of being wedded to five men makes it even more impossible for her to have a straightforward and conventional relationship with a given space as 'home'. As she travels with Kunti and her five husbands to Hastinapur, she inquires, "What's the palace at Hastinapur like?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.126) Kunti's phlegmatic reply, "Its very grand" did not dissuade her from fantasizing about her new home. She wishes it to be the opposite of her father's claustrophobic home:

> … airy and effulgent, with windows everywhere and doors opening onto generous balconies. Its walls would be shimmering with red sandstone. Its gardens would be a celebration of colour and birdsong. Situated on the topmost floor, my rooms would be washed by breezes carrying the distant fragrance of mango blossoms. From a balcony inlaid with marble I would look out over the entire city and know what is going on, so that when Yudhisthir became king, I could advise him wisely. (Divakaruni, 2008, p.126)

However, on reaching the Palace in Hastinapur, she is bitterly disappointed by both its ambience and aura. Her yearning for openness is crossed by concern for safety and her dislike of clutter is crossed by reverence for tradition. Her reaction to the Hastinapur is characteristically psycho-spatial:

> Though I felt stifled by my apartments, I was strangely reluctant to leave them. The place itself was a curiosity, with its bulging gold domes and curlicuedmouldings, its doors embossed with beaten metal, its furniture massive enough to accommodate a race of giants. But beneath the gay pomp crouched something ominous and slavering that wished my husband's ill. Now it had turned its attention to me to ascertain if I was the weakest link in the Pandava chain. I felt it approaching, though I could not guess from which direction. It made me long to tunnel underground and hide- I, who'd chafed so impatiently to leave the safety of my father's house and plunge into history. (Divakaruni, 2002, p.127)

Her tryst with history continues when Dhrustrashtra divides the kingdom into two and the Pandavas have the opportunity to set up their own palace and city, albeit in the wilderness of Khandavprastha. Draupadi is intuitively uneasy with the act of setting the forest on fire for clearing a tract of land for building Indraparastha. She keeps hearing the shrieking of animals which had been thoughtlessly consigned to fire by the purposive masculinity of her valiant husbands. She refuses to accept both the logic of pragmatism and piety for this heinous crime. She earns a rebuke from Krishna for this untamed idealism which he warns her she will have to temper in good time. The fire is also instrumental in introducing Maya to Pandavas who creates a palace so deceiving that Draupadi's amusement at Kaurava's discomfiture becomes not only a source of her personal ignominy but also an unprecedented bloody war. However, before the palace unfolds this dark chapter of history, it beguiles Draupadi into believing that she has finally found 'home'. While each of the five brothers has his own expectation from Indraprastha in accordance with his predilections, Draupadi chases her unfulfilled dreams by weaving in streams and ponds brimming with water and lotus in the palace's splendor and grandeur. Maya magnifies their dreams hundredfold as Draupadi secretly suspects more out of malice for "his home reduced to cinders around him, his companions dead and scattered forever" and less out of gratitude. (Divakaruni, 2008, p.146) In making the Palace inordinately devious and impressive, he sowed the seeds for rousing resentment and jealousy in others. As a cryptic clue to his design, he leaves the Pandavas with the warning, "Live in palace. Enjoy. But not invite anyone to come see". (Divakaruni, 2008, p.147) The palace soon engulfs Draupadi in a state of self-satisfied insouciance and the brothers in a state of house proud vanity. Draupadi resolves all her dilemmas by drowning them in the warmth and serenity she feels in the palace. The palace becomes an essential part of her life and identity. When she expresses her attachment to the palace, Krishna reminds her sternly, "Don't be attached to what is, after all, no more than stone and metal

and asura sleight of hand. All things in this world change and pass away- some after many years, some overnight. Appreciate the Palace of Illusions, by all means. But if you identify so deeply with it, you set yourself up for sorrow." (Divakaruni, 2008, p.149).Draupadi makes the mistake of not heeding this advice in her false sense of security and immortality which the Palace imparts to her. This is the damaging illusion which the palace casts on her- the person who herself named the structure "The palace of Illusions". The brothers invite the Kauravas to the palace against Maya's advice, get drawn into a game of dice, lose not only Draupadi'shonour, love and respect but also the kingdom and the very palace. The psycho-spatial perspective towards the building of the city of Indraprastha adds a very interesting dimension to the fabled city where downfall was inbuilt in its very conception and creation.

Trisha Das's*MsDraupadiKuru* is questions the idea of the city by having not just one but two counterpoints of comparison- ancient Indraprastha and heaven. Draupadi, Amba, Kunti and Gandhari choose to revisit the mortal world as they are bored stiff in heaven. Their wish is granted for a sojourn of thirty days, but at the end of it, they decide not to return (except Gandhari) and re-enter the cycle of birth and death for what it has to offer. As they land in erstwhile Indraprastha, they realize their the zoo where their queenly quarters used to be and their tryst with the modern city comprises of their gradual and uneasy discovery of changed codes of accommodation, transportation, communication, technology, professions, economic exchange, food, dress, faith and demeanor. The danger, disparity, debauchery, and squalor, squabble, superfluity accost them at every step. While they do realize that the city is a dangerous place to survive, yet it also becomes the seat of rectifying some of the choices they made in their earlier avatars as well as the stifling meaninglessness of the heavenly bliss. Kunti is able to do penance by her abandoned son Karna, Amba is able to know love and desire, while Kunti succeeds in being a crusader for women's rights. Gandhari choses to return because she is "scared to live" but the rest of the sorority is fired to act, opt and chose rather than idly glut on the excesses in heaven. Thus, in this version of the Indraprastha, New Delhi as experienced by this quartet is the big, bad megacity, but it also the world of self-realization and positive action.

As Indraprastha continues to be invoked in literature as the deepest layer in the archeology of Delhi's successive rebuilding, it nevertheless defeats fossilization primarily because of the imaginative space provided by its epical and mythical origin. Learned debates probing its historicity have also been absorbed in its re-recordings but the enchantment and refinement that ensue from its descriptions in Mahabharata are far too appealing and precious to be sacrificed at the altar of factuality and the world of literature has till now preserved it rather than reject it, enshrining it in the self-validating realm art and culture.

WORKS CITED

Abul- FazlAllami. (1978). *Ain-i-Akbari*, H.S.Jarret (trans.), Vol. 2.Reprinted, New Delhi: Orient Books Reprint Corp., 283,284,286-7.

Ahmad, Bashir-ud-din.(1990). *Wakeat Dar ulHukumat-i-DehliVol.2* (Urdu), Delhi: Urdu Akademi, 1-8.

Babu, B S R. (2006).Mandoli: A late Harappan Settlement in Delhi. In Upindersingh (Ed.) *Delhi: Ancient History*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 29-32.

Barni, Zia-ud-din. (1869) *Tarikh-i-FirozShahi* in *The History of India as told by its own   Historians: The Mohammadan PeriodVol.8*, H.Eliot and John Dowson (Ed. and   trans.),   London: Trubner and Co., 1869, 135-7.

Chattopadhyaya, B D. (2006). Indian Archeology and the epic Traditions.In Upinder Singh (Ed.) *Delhi: Ancient History*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 68-76.

Dalrymple, W. (1993).*City of Djinns*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Das, Trisha. (2016). *Ms. DraupadiKuru: After the Pandavas*. NOIDA: Harper Collins.

Divakaruni, ChitraBannerjee. (2008). *The Palace of Illusions*. New Delhi: Picador.

Gupta, S P and K S Ramachandran. (2006). Mahabharata: Myth and Reality. In Upinder   Singh
     (Ed.) *Delhi: Ancient History*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 78-118.

Joshi, M C. (2006).The Mehrauli Iron Pillar. In Upinder Singh (Ed.) *Delhi: Ancient History*.
     New Delhi: Social Science Press, 133-178.

Narain, A.K. (1986).   On the Proto-Hiistory of Delhi and its Environs. In *Delhi through the
     Ages- Essays inUrban History, Culture and Society*, Frykenberg R.E.(Ed.). Delhi:
     Oxford University Press, 5.

Sharma, R.A. and Tewari, M. (2012). *Delhi: Biography of a City*, Delhi: Aakar Books, xii.

Sharma, Y. D. (2001).Delhi and its Neighbourhood.In *New Delhi: Archaeological Survey   of
India*, Govt. of India, 8,9.

Singh, Upinder (Ed.). (2006). *Delhi: Ancient History*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.

vanBuitenen, J A B. (2006). The Building of the Assembly Hall. In Upinder Singh (Ed.) *Delhi:
     Ancient History*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 62-67.

Vyas, Ved. (2001). The Building of the Hall. In Khushwant Singh (Ed.) *City Improbable:
     Writings on Delhi*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Dr.Sangeeta Mittal