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## **Exploring Materiality, Affect, And Urban Rhythms In Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm***

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### **Abstract:**

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2009) offers a detailed look at life in Delhi, showing the city not just as a place of dwelling, but as a space full of activity, objects, and interactions. The use of panels, gutters, and shifting perspectives demonstrates how fragmented yet interconnected the urban experience is, visually enacting the interplay between people and their surroundings. It draws on Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" to explore how non-human things, such as vehicles, stray animals, and dust, have their own energy and influence. Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space and urban rhythm help us understand how everyday patterns, movements, and city spaces affect the day-to-day experience of Delhi people. Sara Ahmed's work on affect shows how emotions move through spaces and influence how people feel and interact with the city. *Delhi Calm* presents the city as an active, living, and emotional space, encouraging readers to see the city in new ways. Through its visual storytelling, the graphic novel highlights the connections between humans and the world around them, reminding us that urban life is a mix of physical, social, and emotional experiences. This paper contends that Ghosh's work conceptualizes the city as a space that is both ecological and affective, showing the significance of paying attention to everyday life, feelings, and objects in the urban environment.

**Keywords :** Urban rhythms, ecocriticism, affect, environment, political space, vibrant matter

### **Introduction:**

Cities are dynamic, they are living spaces defined by people, objects and the surrounding environment. Delhi, the capital of India, represents the confluence of ancient heritage and modern development. It stands as the nation's political hub and a rich cultural

mosaic, bringing together people from varied linguistic, economic, and traditional backgrounds. *Delhi Calm*, a 2009 graphic novel by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, foregrounds how the city's sensory and temporal registers are like its sounds, smells, vibrations, and silences are intertwined with daily routines. He shows the city as a blend of people, animals, objects, and weather, all interacting in daily life, in contrast to traditional texts that concentrate on human stories. The novel uses both text and images to illustrate even the minor elements that an urbanite comes across in his day-to-day life such as strolling through crowded streets, waiting for a ride, seeing stray dogs, feeling the physical discomfort of heat and grime, or spotting a peaceful park amidst the hustle - bustle of the urbanscape. *Delhi Calm* is not a traditional, linear tale that deals with one main character. Rather, it follows a series of small, interconnected episodes and observations of city life. The novel presents snippets of ordinary life, such as small rituals of sociability like tea stall debates and shared glances among strangers. Through these panels, the narrative captures both the challenges and small joys of urban life.

A significant aspect of the novel is its portrayal of the Emergency period in India (1975-1977) and its impact on ordinary citizens. During this era, basic freedoms were curtailed; civil liberties were suspended, political oppositions were silenced, and people were constantly under surveillance and subject to restrictions. Visually, Ghosh conveys repression through rigid panel grids, empty spaces, and shadowed figures, which mirror the constrained lives of the citizens. This text reflects this tense atmosphere by demonstrating how the residents' freedom of movement, speech and everyday choices were constrained. Through his panels and narration, the author captures the fear, the uncertainty, and sense of loss that characterized the city during the Emergency period. He highlights how political and social forces directly influence the rhythms of everyday urban life.

This paper looks at *Delhi Calm* from the perspective of ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between human and the natural world. Jane Bennett's idea of "vibrant matter" helps to understand non-human objects, for example dust clouds interrupt vision, forcing detours, while stray dogs redefine movement through streets, making clear that these elements are active agents in shaping space. This concept is important because it emphasizes the agency of these non-human elements as active participants in shaping city life, rather than being mere background details. They emerge as interruptions, provocations, or even companions in the city's story. Henri Lefebvre's theories on the production of space and urban rhythms explore the ways the daily routines, movement, and space utilization. And these elements define how people live in and experience the city. In this way, the novel demonstrates that the city is never finished; it is constantly produced and re-produced through embodied practices. Sara Ahmed's work on 'affect' and emotions shows how feelings travel through spaces, and how it influences people's perception and their response to the surroundings.

By combining these ideas, this study explains three main aspects of *Delhi Calm*: the material world of the city, the rhythms of daily life, and the emotional experiences of Delhi

urbanites. This paper argues that the city is a place where matter and mood are inseparable, where political authority meets sensory life. The literary text uses its visual and textual elements to present Delhi as an active, living, and emotional space, helping readers understand the city as an ecological and affective environment. In doing so, the graphic novel describes how urban life is complex, interconnected, and full of small but meaningful interactions that define the way the city is lived, felt, and experienced.

The graphic novel insists that the city itself is a protagonist, acting upon its inhabitants with as much force as they act upon it. Ghosh draws attention to not only the material elements but also its atmospheric qualities like shifting light, monsoon rains, and oppressive heat, which alter collective moods. These elements are not passive: they have their own agency, energy, and capacity to affect human behaviour. For example, stray dogs navigating crowded streets or dust stirred by traffic create obstacles, shape routes, and provoke emotional responses from city dwellers. This aligns with Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," which suggests that non-human objects and forces have vitality and influence, affecting the flow of urban life and interactions in subtle but significant ways.

Ghosh's focus on materiality also reinforces the ecological dimension of urban life. The city is depicted as an ecosystem where human life is entangled with spaces, plants, organisms and other environmental agents. The influence of natural and material forces on urban life is made evident through the presence of stray animals, puddles, trees, and dust storms which subtly shape the city's texture and mood. Through these portrayals, Ghosh encourages an awareness of the environment among the readers and highlights how everyday urban life relies on constant negotiation with these non-human agents.

The graphic novel portrays the impact of urban infrastructure and human activity on ecological systems. The hectic pace of crowded streets, continuous traffic, ongoing construction and waste accumulation are contrasted with moments of tranquility such as secluded lanes, peaceful parks and gentle rain show how both human and non-human actors interact in slower and reflexive ways. Ghosh highlights the interdependence of humans, non-human entities, and the environment, showing that the city's life is co-produced through these interactions.

Through its use of visual and textual elements, *Delhi Calm* captures not only the visage of the city but also its movement, energy, and its fragility. This interplay of material forces and human activity shapes the cadence of everyday life, but the graphic medium also makes those rhythms visible. Panel sequencing, spatial composition, and shifts in visual density perform the temporal pulse of the city: elongated frames slow down quiet moments, while clustered panels reproduce the frenetic pace of crowded streets. The form itself thus enacts the rhythm of urban life.

Daily life in Delhi unfolds through overlapping cycles that structure the city's social and material existence. Vendors arranging stalls, vehicles weaving through intersections, and

children improvising games create recurring patterns that define urban tempo. Yet *Delhi Calm* also draws attention to what Henri Lefebvre terms hidden rhythms, for instance pauses at check points, the hesitations of pedestrians negotiating authority, or the suspended anticipation of waiting for official announcements. These subtle patterns remind us that urban temporality is not only about visible flow but also about gaps, intervals, and interruptions that shape experience.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of urban rhythms provides a useful lens to understand these patterns. According to Lefebvre, cities are produced through repeated cycles of activity, rest, and interaction, which together create a temporal and spatial order.



Fig. 1. Panel showing how time, signs, and objects shape urban behaviour and mood through rhythm and atmosphere, from Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* p. 9.

As shown in *Fig. 1*, Ghosh turns the clock and barrier into disciplinary instruments that structure urban life under the Emergency. The big clock and the words “DO NOT THINK” and “PUNCTUALITY IS KEY TO SELF-MASTERY” send a strong message. Everyone should follow the rules, be on time, and should not question the government. The rhythm of urban life is reflected in the clock and the motion of people and bikes, creating a sense of synchronised routine. Objects like the clock, the barrier, and even the birds carry a subtle force of their own, influencing how bodies move and emotions flow through space.

The novel also demonstrates disruptions in these rhythms especially during the Emergency, when political restrictions altered the usual flow of life. Curfews, restrictions, and surveillance on freedom affected when and how people moved through the city, highlighting the connection between political power and urban temporality. Streets that once hosted vendors became empty corridors of power, while domestic interiors acquired new significance as semi-private refuges. In this way, Ghosh's work shows that the rhythms of Delhi are not natural or fixed; they are produced through complex interactions of human behavior, environmental conditions, material objects, and political context.

Sara Ahmed's work on 'affect' provides a useful framework for understanding these experiences. She argues that emotions are not confined to individuals but circulate through spaces, shaping interactions and perceptions. In *Delhi Calm*, this circulation of 'affect' is evident in the way residents respond to the material and social environment of the city.



Fig 2. A blind soothsayer sitting on the streets of Delhi, from Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* p. 27.

This panel depicts a soothsayer sitting on a Delhi street with a sign that says, "I am blind but can see your future". The scene turns an ordinary street moment into quiet irony. The man's blindness hints at how people in the city fail to see what lies ahead. His still figure slows the busy rhythm of Delhi, creating a brief pause in its constant rush. Through this small moment, Ghosh shows how simple street images can carry deep feelings and truth about urban life.

The emotional experiences depicted in the novel are closely tied to the city's rhythms and materiality. The daily patterns of movements, leisure, and work are intertwined with moments of emotional intensity, whether it is the stress of navigating a congested street or the satisfaction of finding a calm spot amidst the urban chaos. Even during the Emergency era, the novelist shows how political restrictions such as curfews, surveillance, and limited freedom heighten the affective tension of urban life, altering both the rhythms of daily activity and the emotional responses of the residents. Through its combination of text and imagery, *Delhi Calm* captures the affective dimension of urban life, depicting that the city is experienced not only through physical movement and material interactions but also through feelings and emotions.

The circulation of 'affect' continues to shape these political and spatial experiences. Anxiety, fear, and vigilance during restrictive periods influence the use of space, while moments of calm or joy allow respite and open possibilities of spontaneous social exchange. Emotions thus act as both indicators and mediators of how power is experienced in urban environments, linking materiality, rhythm, and social structures in complex ways.

In Ghosh's narrative, this circulation of 'affect' is clearly visible. Congested streets, noisy traffic, and constant movement produce tension, while calm parks or shaded lanes of Delhi offer moments of relief. A barricade becomes a marker of fear, while a shaded park corner provides communal respite, showing how 'affect' is embedded in the city's material and social environment. Even during periods of political restriction, collective emotions shaped residents' experience, meditating responses to authority and enabling small forms of agency. Through its combination of text and imagery, the novel demonstrates that the city is lived not only through movement and material interactions but also feelings. Material, temporal, and emotional dimensions are deeply intertwined, influencing how the city is perceived and experienced.

Urban spaces are not neutral; they are socially, politically, and materially constructed. Infrastructure, crowded streets, and market layouts influence movement and access, while quieter or off-peak spaces allow reflection and subtle resistance. Emotions continue to shape these dynamics, mediating how power is felt and negotiated in everyday life.

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By representing the city as both a material and affective environment, *Delhi Calm* shows how politics, infrastructure, and emotion intersect to structure urban experience. Life in Delhi is co-constituted by people, non-human forces, and affective currents, highlighting the interdependence of material, temporal, and emotional dimensions.

Ultimately, the work encourages readers to see the city not as static or purely human-centered but as a living, dynamic system where movement, matter, power and ‘affect’ converge. Understanding urban life requires attention to both visible structures and subtle forces including the vitality of objects, the city’s rhythms, the constraints of political authority, and the circulation of ‘affect’. Through this lens, the novel reveals the complexity, vitality, and interconnectedness that define the experience of living in a bustling metropolis.

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