
"Designing the Ordinary: Class, Bureaucracy, and Resistance in the World of Malgudi"

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of urbanization and modernity on the everyday lives of the common Indian urban dweller, drawing on sociological studies and narrative accounts—particularly from R.K. Narayan’s *Malgudi Days*. It explores how modernization reshapes identity, family, education, work, technology, and mental well-being. Through a mixed-lens of literary analysis and policy critique, the study reveals that while urban migration offers opportunities—employment, education, social mobility—it also brings critical challenges—housing crises, emotional isolation, mental health burdens, and inequality. The paper argues that true urban progress lies not only in infrastructure and economic growth, but in inclusive, psychologically safe, and culturally nuanced policies that empower all residents.

Keywords: Urbanization, Modernity, Malgudi Days, Mental Health, Social Inequality**Introduction**

Urbanization in India has evolved far beyond the rural-to-urban migration story; it now fundamentally transforms individual dreams, lifestyles, and self-perceptions. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai have become aspirational hubs, attracting millions seeking better livelihoods. Yet this transformation carries complex consequences. The common person in the city—who neither enters elite politics nor leads major businesses—faces a daily struggle between ambition and adversity.

This paper investigates how modernity alters social structures, personal identity, and daily experiences. It develops a dual analysis: first, through literary illustrations in Narayan’s *Malgudi Days*, and second, through academic frameworks that evaluate contemporary urban phenomena—housing, education, employment, technology, mental health, and public policy. By centering the ordinary urban resident, we highlight the tension between individual agency and structural constraints.

Literature Review

Urban Migration & Family: Srinivasan discusses migration driven by hopes for employment, education, and healthcare. Narsimhaiah emphasizes the shift from extended to nuclear families amidst urban pressures (Srinivasan 47; Narsimhaiah 34).

Education as Mobility: Narayan’s “The Martyr” and “Second Opinion” have often been analyzed through the lens of aspiration and parental pressure. Choudhury highlights the communal stakes tied to a child’s academic success and associated mental health strain (Choudhury 235).

Labor, Bureaucracy & Identity: Mukherjee and Dupont argue that urban workers—especially in public service sectors—are caught between aspirations and mundanity, often grappling with systemic bureaucracy and socioeconomic exclusion (Mukherjee 85; Dupont 540).

Technology & Cultural Change: Dupont traces how digital technology reshapes social interaction, empowerment, and exclusion; older generations struggle to adapt (Dupont 540). Narayan’s pre-digital stories provide early indications of this tension.

Tradition vs. Modernity: Pathak and Mukherjee examine the coexistence and friction of religious and traditional practices with modern urban lifestyles, where faith remains vital even in rational, metropolitan spaces (Pathak 123; Mukherjee 105).

Mental Health & Policy Gaps: Emerging studies on mental health in urban India highlight rising stress, limited access to care, and stigma. Infrastructure improvements alone do not alleviate these deeper social needs.

Thematic Analysis**1. Urban Mobility and Family Structures**

Urban migration is fueled by aspirations for economic and educational betterment. Yet it prompts a shift from joint family to nuclear living, increasing autonomy but also emotional vulnerability. While nuclear families offer private agency (choosing finances, lifestyle, roles), they often lack emotional cushioning in times of crisis—a trade-off seen frequently among migrants (Narsimhaiah 34).

2. Education: Aspirations, Strain, and Identity Formation

Urban schooling promotes mobility via access to quality education. However, intense competition and high costs generate mental health challenges. Narayan’s characters show how academic pressure can fracture family relationships and burden students with communal expectations (Choudhury 235; Narayan).

3. Employment:

Stability, Bureaucracy, and Lived Realities Public-sector jobs are prized for stability. Yet Narayan’s humor in “Engine Trouble” reflects a common urban experience—persistent

bureaucratic hurdles, monotony, and disillusionment (Mukherjee 85). Most migrants remain excluded from political or economic power, limited instead to low-paying informal labor.

4.Digital Divide: Inclusion vs. Alienation

Modern technology transforms urban life by enabling education, communication, and civic participation. For the young, smartphones and online platforms open new avenues of protest and learning (Dupont 540). For the elderly or poor, however, digital tools can exacerbate exclusion and dislocation.

5.Modernity and Cultural Continuity

Contrary to assumptions that cities suppress tradition, they often become spaces where modern and traditional coexist. Religion, rituals, caste norms, and astrology remain powerful forces, even among the digitally connected urban middle class (Pathak 123; Mukherjee 105). Narayan's "Watchman" exemplifies this hybrid identity.

6.Urban Identity, Mental Health, and Policy Implications

Urban life invites self-reinvention—modifying appearance, language, and behaviours to fit. This continuous performance leads to emotional fatigue. Mental health issues, exacerbated by commuting stress, economic insecurity, social isolation, and cultural dissonance, are widespread yet underserved. Stigma, low awareness, and infrastructural gaps hinder recovery.

Inclusive policies must address more than physical infrastructure: equitable housing, formal labor protections, mental health services, and culturally sensitive education systems are essential for sustainable urban ecosystems.

Conclusion

The transformation of Indian cities over the last century has profoundly reshaped the lives of ordinary people. While urban centers promise progress, they also amplify inequality, emotional stress, systemic vulnerability, and social fragmentation. R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* offers a timeless mirror to these dynamics, rendering the intimate effects of modernization visible.

To build equitable and compassionate cities, we must go beyond technological upgrades and economic growth. Urban planning and public policy must include mental health support, inclusive education, stable formal jobs, affordable housing, trusted civic services, and respect for cultural practices. Only then can cities become truly "modern"—not just media-rich or economically advanced, but humane, psychologically whole, and democratically inclusive.

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