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Between Enduring Urban Models and Shifting Cultural Trajectories: Unravelling Narratives on Ayodhyā and Bengaluru

SUMMARY: Indian cities seem particularly prone to investigation through narrative both for the abundance of material about the origins and the development of urban centres from ancient to medieval times—which often contrasts with the relative scarceness of purely ‘historical’ data—and for the tendency to elaborate modern and contemporary “a posteriori narrative-myths” (Aravot 1995) through popular media such as cinema and television. Using methodological tools provided by research on narratives and analysing two case studies with reference to the cities of Ayodhyā and Bengaluru, the present paper investigates the processes and the dynamics by which narrations on cities are made to evolve. It builds on the conceptual frame provided by recent narratological scholarship, with a specific reference to the “increasing recognition of the ubiquity of narrative *within* any culture, in discursive practices as diverse as theology, historiography, economics, legal practice, political speech-making, everyday conversation and philosophy” (Rigney 1992: 263–264, italics in the original). Focusing on the ‘constructive’ aspect of narrative, seen as a discourse that intrinsically involves the active (and determinant) participation of the narrator, it argues that this perspective of analysis allows the researcher to interpret urban narratives eminently in political terms, or within relations of power—which also legitimizes the use of narrative materials for historical research. In broader terms, it contends that narration can give back *structured information* about the values and the practices which characterize a given society, and which are selectively communicated by the narrator(s); and that, in turn, this quality of ‘restoring’ structured information may shed more light on the inherent nature of narration itself and lead to further theorization both on its creative dynamics and its created artefacts. Practice of exploration of narration in a context of open communication with other disciplines may undoubtedly facilitate this process.

KEYWORDS: Indian city, narratology, Ayodhyā, Rāmāyaṇa, Bengaluru.

I.

In many cultures, narratives describing the origin of a city often report that it was born out of sin, crime or sacrilege. This notion is known to Western culture as well. In the Hebrew-Christian tradition “contemporaneous cities are considered to be not only man-made but also drawn in a genealogy of sin” (Akkerman 2006: 231). In the Bible, the “need for shelter—for a citadel or a city—arises with the expulsion from the Garden. [...] As a narrative sequence in the Bible, the Garden and the Citadel are inseparable, yet mutually exclusive in time: The Citadel replaces the Garden much as egoism replaces altruism” (*ibid.*: 232). In subsequent Biblical passages, institution of a city is explicitly mentioned as the aftermath of Cain’s fratricidal crime: “Then Cain [...] built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son—Enoch” (Genesis 4.16–17). Traditional accounts on the birth of Rome, as portrayed by Latin sources, present a strikingly similar pattern: “The more common report is that Remus contemptuously jumped over the newly raised walls and was forthwith killed by the enraged Romulus, who exclaimed, ‘So shall it be henceforth with everyone who leaps over my walls.’ Romulus thus became sole ruler, and the city was called after him, its founder” (Titus Livius, I.7).

Indian civilization seems to be similarly aware of the criticalities related to the origin of city. The celebrated *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*, one of the major Vedic Puranas, describes the institution of urban civilization through a succession of highly dramatic processes:

Those kalpa trees [‘trees of desire’] were commonly produced which are called houses; and they brought forth every kind of enjoyment to those people. At the beginning of the Treta age the people got their subsistence from those trees. [...] Afterwards in course of time those people grew covetous besides; their minds being filled with selfishness they fenced the trees round; and those trees perished by reason of that wrong conduct on their part. Strife sprang up in consequence; their faces felt cold and heat and hunger. Then for the sake of combination and resistance they made towns at first. (Pargiter 1904: XLIX.27–35, pp. 239–240)

We may observe how the above passages, in spite of the formidable cultural differences that identify the narrative traditions they are extracted from, seem to share several elements. Firstly, as initially observed, they describe the origin of city as the aftermath of a ‘wicked behaviour’. Secondly, they implicitly or explicitly connect the origin of city to agriculture: Cain “was a tiller of the ground” (Genesis 4.3) while Romulus, in order to mark the city walls, “shod a plough with a brazen ploughshare, and having yoked to it a bull and a cow, himself drove a deep furrow round the boundary lines” (Plutarch 1914: 120); as regards the act of fencing “the trees round”, that is portrayed in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, it may be considered as tantamount both to the exploitation of pristine nature and the establishment of land property. Thirdly, in all the above quotations we may find echoes of later theories on the origin of city, from Vico (1959)—who sees prehistoric cities as shelters against external disorders and dangers—to Bairoch (1985)—who considers the advent of farming as pre-condition for city-formation.

II.

Actually, a large number of narratives on cities from diverse cultural areas seem to have been born, or developed, with the aim of giving sense to the otherwise sacrilegious establishment of city—and/or to the institution of a ‘new’ urban civilization. Such is the case with the “first poem” (*ādikāvya*) of Sanskrit literature, Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* (Bhatt, Shah 1960–1975, quotations from the text refer to this critical edition; Goldman 1984–2009), whose older parts could be dated back to 500 B.C.E or slightly earlier (Brockington 1985: 309–310). Though not concealing the critical issues deriving from the establishment of an urban civilization based on the advent of plough agriculture, *Rāmāyaṇa* seeks in fact to outweigh them by introducing elements of strong indentitarian character—a strategy that is regularly recurred to in civilizational narrations. Such a result is achieved through a double process: on the one hand, there is the celebration of shared values and practices of social and political significance that

enhance a sense of belonging and simultaneously define a strict social hierarchy. On the other hand, there is the process of delegitimizing negative values, habits and practices that are emotionally portrayed as typical of antagonist communities. In this perspective, the central features of the collective identity outlined in the poem are represented by the establishment of an urban civilization based on the adoption of settled agriculture and its confrontation with alien peoples and cultures.

‘Rāma’s advancing’, or ‘Rāma’s journey’, as we may translate its title (*Rāma-ayaṇa*), is a complex work, that settled over a few centuries, acquiring a theological connotation that added to its initial epic nature and that contributed to the later development of the devotional cult of Rāma as a full *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (Brockington 1985: 220–222; 238–241). Yet its central theme remains the establishment of Rāma’s kingdom (*Rāma-rājya*) in the city of Ayodhyā (the ‘Unassailable’), which the myth describes as founded by Manu, the progenitor of human race, and which the poem elaborates into an ideal city that was bound to remain as an urban paradigm for nearly two millennia (Milanetti 2012a: 392ff.). The story is presented on the background of a dramatic dynastic crisis, which tradition sets at the very turning point between two cosmic eras, *tretā* and *dvāpara yuga*, thus emphasizing the element of change and ‘modernity’ that is conveyed by the plot and that is widely articulated through the ‘advancing’ of Rama and his companions, amidst the wild and tribal setting of densely forested areas of the Indian subcontinent, to the faraway island of Laṅkā. The identitarian character of Vālmikī’s work is also underlined by the fact that the conflict originated within the reigning dynasty, due to the sin of the “wicked Kaikeyī” (cp. e.g. *Rāmāyaṇa*, II.37.22), is soon replaced by the confrontation “between the urban culture of the kingdom of Ayodhyā based on a fairly extensive agricultural economy” and “the hunting and food-gathering culture of the enemies of Rāma, the *rākṣas* peoples” (Thapar 1971: 438). It was through this narrative that the new civilization, expanding and taking roots all over the Indian subcontinent, could recount itself and represent its conflict with the other existing cultures, within the scenery of a “continuum of social and economic

forms, moving from hunting and gathering peoples to chiefdoms and [...] the monarchical state” (Thapar 1989: 10) which characterized that historical period and which the poem quite accurately depicts.

I have been writing and lecturing for a few years on the importance of re-reading *Rāmāyaṇa* as a treasure trove of historical data and, more specifically, as an invaluable document on (and a breathtaking account of) the adoption of plough agriculture (cp. e.g. Milanetti 2007; Milanetti 2012a), describing the elements that have contributed to the origin and the development of what can be termed ‘the Ayodhyā archetype’. In this regard, particularly significant are the features that characterize Rāma’s spouse, Sītā. Her very name (‘furrow’) constitutes in fact a clear reference to the new agricultural technique which was being introduced and which represented one of the main features of the ‘new’ civilization that was then taking shape, as opposed to other forms of social and economic organization. In Vālmīki’s poem, Sītā has a central role in most part of its key episodes and is also specifically portrayed as the element that unleashes the dispute between Rāma and his devilish enemies, since she is firstly abducted by their monarch Rāvaṇa, then rescued by Rāma and his allies after a slaughterous battle. The fight for possessing Sītā and Rāma’s momentous victory over Rāvaṇa thus appear as the real turning point for the *Rāma-rājya* to take place. It is noteworthy, however, that the prosperity brought about by plough agriculture was known since earlier times. If in the *Brāhmaṇas*—texts that contain instruction for, and philosophical elaborations of, the sacrificial rite—the term *sītā* indicates the “(plough’s) furrow” in a ritual context (*Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, 7.2.2.1–21, in Eggeling, 1966), the *Kauśika-sūtra* of the *Atharva-veda* more specifically identifies the furrow with agriculture (*kṛṣi*), personifying it as a goddess and profusely celebrating the gifts it bestows (*Kauśika-sūtra*, 106,6–7, in Bloomfield 1890: 259).

It is the hegemony of agriculture in the economic sphere that *Rāmāyaṇa* seems thus to point out as one of the main bases for the institution of the ‘new’ urban civilization, together with the two other hegemonies which are explicitly delineated in Vālmīki’s poem, i.e. the supremacy of monarchy in the political domain and the primacy

of the Brahman (*brāhmaṇa*) caste in the religious-philosophical sphere. As the foundation stone of an orderly and affluent society, it is this triple hegemony that better characterizes the ‘Ayodhyā archetype’ and, simultaneously, represents the basis for its further elaborations throughout the ages. However, even though the story goes on until the establishment of Rāma’s reign in the city of Ayodhyā and the beginning of a new and prosperous era, there are hints which show that the poem’s plot is more complex than a plain celebration of a hero’s success. In fact, it describes not only the difficulties which Rāma has to overcome before succeeding, but also the elements of loss that are implicitly contained in such epochal events. This account of what we may term as the ‘dark side’ of prosperity represents, at the same time, a form of awareness about the ‘costs’ that any modernity necessarily entails and, in more traditional terms as we have initially affirmed, it asserts the need for the sacrilege implicitly contained in the adoption of plough agriculture to be repaired by an equivalent sacrifice. At the same time, it is exactly this ‘inclusive’ nature of the narration, by which crises and losses are presented as an organic part of the story, that distinguishes it from all its major remakes.

Indeed the poem—inasmuch as it represents a civilizational narration—could have never reached a happy ending. In *Rāmāyaṇa*, elements of a major crisis become evident immediately after Rāma’s victory over Rāvaṇa, when the triumphant hero repudiates Sītā accusing her to be “a woman who lived in another’s abode” (*Rāmāyaṇa*, VI.103,19) and declaring that he has fought Rāvaṇa only for the sake of his family’s honour. Out of despair, and in order to demonstrate her pureness, Sītā throws herself into the fire, which however leaves her untouched (VI.104); she is then brought back to her husband by Agni, the fire god himself, so that the return journey to Ayodhyā might take place. Yet in the last book of the poem—that describes ‘further’ (*uttara*) episodes which occurred after Rama’s enthronement, and that is considered a later addition to the central plot—Sītā’s faithfulness is again questioned by people’s rumours. This time Rāma is urged, though reluctantly, to exile her to Vālmīki’s

hermitage, notwithstanding the fact that she is pregnant. Sītā will return to the king's court only many years later, when Rāma will acknowledge his twin sons' identity during the celebration of a royal sacrifice. She then "publicly affirms her purity by calling upon the Earth to swallow her in testimony; the Earth embraces Sītā and disappears with her (87–8), while Rāma is left to mourn her loss, using a golden statue of hers as a substitute at sacrifices (89)" (Brockington 1985: 8). It is precisely through this loss—a true human sacrifice—that the most intimate meaning of the story seems finally to surface.

Should we select among the several inputs that may be extrapolated from Vālmīki's poem, and from the dynamics which we can read therein, we might single out two of them that seem to be particularly relevant to our discussion. First, *Rāmāyaṇa* provides clear evidence not only for the connection between the origin of urban civilization and the advent of agriculture, but also, more specifically, for the intrinsic relation that seems to be drawn between what we might term a "modern urban prosperity" and the sin (or sacrilege etc.) that derives from the adoption of the 'modern' agricultural technique of ploughing. As we have observed before, it is this connection—and its elaboration into a foundation myth—that gives sense and identity to the 'new' urban *and* agricultural civilization that the poem describes and that is characterized also by the predominance of monarchy and of the Brahmanical caste. And since "identity building is a potential source of strife and devaluation of others, because the creation of identities takes place not in a vacuum but in previously occupied space" (Bernbeck, Pollock 1996: S140), Rāma's and Sītā's journey through the Indian subcontinent, where non agricultural (non monarchical, non Brahmanical) societies prevail, is marked by harsh encounters, violent confrontations and conquest. The second aspect that needs to be highlighted descends from the previous observations, which show how a narrative may be read not only as an instrument of, and/or a support to, historical research, but also, more specifically, as evidence, albeit ciphered, of complex processes of social, political and economic importance, that are *not* (and perhaps *cannot* be) described as much in depth by any merely historical

source. One of the main reasons could be that “ancient cities, like all other ancient and modern sociocultural phenomena, and no matter what the spatiotemporal scale of analysis, cannot be well understood without taking explicit account of *individuals*—their practices, perceptions, experiences, attitudes, values, calculations, and emotions” (Cowgill 2004: 528, italics added). In fact, narratives are made exactly of all these elements. To this we could add that, as shown by narratological analysis, narration inherently has a ‘communicative’ character which opens up new perspectives of research.

III.

On the other hand, this communicative aspect of narration compels us to enquiry about the actors and the dynamics of the narrative act: what (and why) is communicated by whom to whom? In this perspective, the evolution of the narratives on Ayodhyā represents a fertile field for pushing our analysis a bit further than the traditional research on texts and the collection of mainstream historical materials.

Narratives on cities evolve continuously, as cities do. Yet it can be observed that narratives on ancient and medieval Indian cities, drawing from the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s text and/or from the iconography developed thereof, tend often to replicate the ‘Ayodhyā archetype’, variously translating and elaborating the hegemonies and the dynamics that characterize it. This is true not only of historical urban centres, such as Mathurā,¹ Sāketa² and, later on, Vijayanagara,³ but also

¹ On Mathurā and the questions arising from its affiliation with Ayodhyā and the Ikṣvāku dynasty in the *Uttaraṅgaṇḍa* and the *Harivaṃśa*, see Goldman 1986; Milanetti 2012a.

² On Sāketa and its identification with Ayodhyā see Bakker 1986. Kālidāsa’s poetical works had a specially important role in the process (Bakker 1986: 30).

³ The association of Vijayanagara with Ayodhyā was initially eased by the traditional identification of surrounding geographical features with places described in *Rāmāyaṇa*; later on, it was substantiated mainly by means of

of fictional realities, as those created by the imagination of Sūfī poets in the Avadhī language, especially during the 16th century (Milanetti 2012a: 401–406). In fact, as Vālmīki’s text had translated the (perhaps sacrilegious) passage to modernity into a narration of cultural identity, so other texts and other stories, building on the urban model portrayed in the Sanskrit poem, contributed to the construction of other ‘modern’ identities, legitimizing (new) ideologies and the coming to power of (new) political actors. We can thus draw from all these narratives a dynamic line of adjustments and negotiations regarding ideologies, values, and practices, that evolved over more than two millennia, and that found expression through the elaboration and the adaptation of the original narrative materials. These processes strongly contributed to the development and the dissemination of the Ayodhyā archetype, supplying further elements to its growth and yet, at the same time, bending it to the specific cultural strategies that were locally elaborated. In this way, what we may term an ‘a posteriori urban myth’ (Aravot 1995: 81) progressively took form, as will be shown later in the article. Like most narratives of this kind, it was characterized by both rigid assumptions and decisive omissions.

In early modern India, while major cities were turning one after the other into centres of Islamic administration and military installations, Hindu religious authorities began to move to the countryside, where they were forced to deal with, and open to, groups and communities from the social periphery. Within this scenario, a new *avatār* of the ‘story of Rāma’—and, with it, a new elaboration of the ‘Ayodhyā archetype’—was produced. Written towards the end of the 16th century, under the long reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605),

urban planning and temple architecture and iconography; see e.g. Fritz and Michell 1987; Pollock 1993: 267–269. In Vijayanagara, one of the elements which testify to the persistence of the same dynamics characterizing the ‘Ayodhyā archetype’ is the largely attested phenomenon of land donations to temples by members of Vijayanagara’s court or by other state institutions; see Milanetti 2012a: 406–419.

Rām'carit'mānas (Tul'sī Dās 1991), or *Tul'sī Rāmāyaṇa*, as it is often called from the name of its author, represents a highly characteristic illustration of the dynamics by which a narrative evolves and circulates. In fact, although in comparison with Vālmīki's text, its focus shifted from the institution of a modern urban civilization to a broad reformation of Hindu faith, it too was meant to create and propagate a new cultural identity, within the well-defined boundaries of the cult of Rāma. In this regard, it must be noted that its emphasis on the universal character of *Rāma-rājya* contributed *de facto* to a new 'reification' of the urban myth of Ayodhyā—to quote Bakker's formula (Bakker 1986: 10ff) on the processes regarding Sāketa during the 5th century C.E. In fact, Tul'sī purposely expunged from his re-elaboration all the major elements of crisis and loss that marked Vālmīki's original and that gave meaning and measure to the establishment of the new urban civilization of Ayodhyā—the main omission by far being that of Sītā's disappearing into the Earth's depth (*Rāmāyaṇa*, VII.87–88). He chose instead to focus on the ideal character of the *Rāma-rājya* and its orderly stratified society (e.g. *Rām'carit'mānas*, VII.21–223), as well as on the possibility for the non-urban and tribal communities, which had entered in contact with Rāma and the other representatives of the urban culture of Ayodhyā, of being accepted within the ranks of an enlarged and reformed Hindu society (Milanetti 2012b). It was the first time that the cult of Rāma—and with it, Hinduism at large—was presented within such a comprehensive project as a universal faith, open to all, even the most sinful barbarians—repeatedly (and creatively) described with a plethora of pejorative terms (as in *Rām'carit'mānas*, II.251.2): *kuṣīla*, *kucālī*, *kumati*, *kujātī* (“crooked, wicked, evil-minded, low-born”). Building on Tul'sīdās' vision, and adding to the elements highlighting the universality of the cult of Rāma, the establishment and dissemination of public representations of the *Rāma-kathā*—the so-called *Rāma-līlā*, which local traditions attribute to Tul'sī himself (Hein 1972: 105–125) or to his disciple Megha Bhagat—introduced elements of sensorial and emotional impact that contributed to further elaboration and circulation of Tul'sī's version of

the narrative. *This* specific form of experience—the text as ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’ (Kapur 1990: 9)—rather than representing a contradiction with the core features of narrative as such, only emphasizes its communicative aspect—a theme which still represents “a curiously neglected area in narratological reflection” (Rigney 1992: 267).

As previously mentioned, the universal character of *Rāma-rājya*, so vividly emphasized in Tul’sī poem, highly contributed to a ‘reification’ of both the mythical accounts on Rāma and the literary archetype of Ayodhyā. Myth was once more turned into ‘historical past’—to be recalled and used by new actors on the religious and political scene—while Rāma’s epical advancing through the wilderness of jungles, rivers and mountains was given a geographical reality. Several momentous dynamics were produced thereof, often of dramatic social and cultural impact: from the radical activities of the powerful Rāmānandī sect in northern India up until the beginning of the 20th century (Pinch 1996), to the communitarian riots of 1992 in contemporary Ayodhyā (Pollock 1993; Bernbeck and Pollock 1996)—which testify once more to the ubiquitous and metamorphic nature of this narrative. Particularly significant instances of its evolution are also to be found in Gandhi’s political speeches. As it might be expected, nationalist narratives about the city emphasized the need for a shift from the colonial regime, both in theorization and in urban practices. Before Independence, a noteworthy contribution to the debate was delivered by Gandhi who, while addressing the audience on the occasion of the last day of his stay in Bangalore, in August 1927, on the one hand expressed his deep admiration for the government of the then ruler Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, and on the other warmly invited the citizens to dedicate themselves to the programs of hand-spinning, cattle protection, and abolition of untouchability. As he significantly remarked, the two things together—i.e. the good rule of the Mahārāja and the commitment of people—would “make Mysore [the State to which belonged the city of Bangalore] a real model State so as to entitle it to be called *Ramarajya*” (Gandhi 1969: 417). The tale of Bangalore as an ideal city, and its affiliation with the Ayodhyā archetype, were further articulated in the last

words of his speech: “More is expected of those who give much. I have found so much good in this State that I almost fancy that if you and the Maharaja together will it, you can make this State *Ramarajya*” (*ibid.*). In these words we find once more echoes of the developments in Sāketa at the time of the Gupta empire, since both Gandhi’s vision and the Guptas’ ambitions were based on the same process of ‘reification’ of myth as function of policies of modernity. Gandhi’s narration was in fact strictly functional to his own political strategy, to which the identity of Bangalore was explicitly subordinated, as it had been the case with Sāketa. In this regard, it may be observed that these dynamics reveal more than specific aspects of the relation between political power and cultural narratives. In fact, they seem to be better understood through specific investigation on “how subjects are discursively constructed within relations of power and how such constructions allow the possibility of radical change” (Oswell 2006: 73).

IV.

When we shift to the set of narratives represented by the sedimentation of stories, reports, outlines, plans, images etc. that have been progressively elaborated with regard to the city of Bengaluru—which under the British Raj became ‘Bangalore’, only to officially retrieve its former name in November 2014, after several years of debate—once more we stumble upon a legend about a chieftain, a plough and a walled enclosure. Folklore and local history set the origin of the city in the year 1537 and ascribe it to Kempe Gowda, ruler of the nearby Yelahanka feudatory state:

Four milk white bullocks stood harnessed to four decorated ploughs, and at the royal command off they went, driven by young men, furrowing the ground in the four directions up to the limits marked. The routes traversed by those four ploughs became the nucleus of the new town’s four main streets. [...] A strong mud fort, reckoned impregnable in those days, erected around the new township, guarded the country round about. (Hasan 1970: 14)

Yet, walls were not there to mark the identity of the city, since, as it has been observed, the gates which “the British troops broke through two and a half centuries later were moments in the unfolding of this significant event which Kempe Gowda very likely did not foresee growing like an organism as much as being another seed in an open field” (Mathur and da Cunha 2008: 27–28). This agricultural chieftain, who struggled to build his urban dominion in order to gather and defend what at the time represented the most important asset—population—might in fact have envisioned other developments for his city than “the walled entity that is ascribed to him by British surveyors who drew it as such for the first time in 1791 when Lord Cornwallis’s army captured it” (Mathur and da Cunha 2008: 27).

As previously suggested, urban narratives, when structured as an ‘a posteriori urban myth’, are always full of elusions and ascriptions, inclusions and exclusions that—quoting Trachtenberg’s remarks on contemporary historiography—are “to be understood in essentially political terms” (Trachtenberg 1998). Divergences between the original nature of specific urban elements of Bengaluru and the narratives that were later elaborated, are particularly evident with reference to a typical institution of the city’s landscape (and of its pre-colonial economic and productive framework) such as the *tota*. The *totas* of Bengaluru were originally the places where agriculture was most intimately connected with urban life, testifying once more to the persistence of the civilizational pattern described in *Rāmāyaṇa* and based on the twin development of city and ‘modern’ agricultural techniques. Significantly, the same pattern informs also the great part of old large cities in the world, where “no locale was more than a short walk from the countryside”, and “in all but the most compact parts of ancient cities, some spaces within the settlement likely were used for agricultural production” (Cowgill 2004: 539). The agricultural dimension of Bengaluru is in fact attested not only by the mentioned tales about its origin, but also by the original architectural and infrastructural layout of the urban area, interspersed with prominent elements of a complex irrigation system which, though having undergone radical changes and

alterations during the centuries, still represent significant features of the urban life and landscape. This notwithstanding, the term *tota* has usually been translated as ‘garden’ and, ironically enough, it is to this approximate translation that Bengaluru owes the origin and the development of its ‘Garden City’ narrative that, especially in the twentieth century, has been fed by an astonishing amount of reports and documents, essays and fictional works, and mass media communications. However, scholars who have debated the topic consider that this definition only “rarely refers to the substantial part of the city that was given over to the cultivation of fruits, flowers, and vegetables, right up until the 1960s” (Nair 2002: 1224). Rather, it should be put in relation with “the compounds and gardens in which private residences or public buildings were set” (*ibid.*). Yet if the garden, etymologically as well, is in fact an ‘enclosure’, and then something ‘private’ (also in the sense of being ‘bereft of’), the *tota* was basically an agricultural area *open* to operations, interventions, and experimentations.

Both *totas* and water reservoirs in Bengaluru had functions which were specifically intended for this kind of traditional urban-agricultural culture, and which, out of this context, defy any strict conceptualization. It is largely for this reason that in the course of time—through the succession of diverse political powers—attempts have been made to variously translate them into ‘modern’ discourses that could better suit the policies progressively elaborated and implemented. We know for instance that when “the British defeated Tipu Sultan of Mysore in the Battle of Bangalore in 1791, the rural aspect of the location was its defining feature” (De 2008: XV). A few years later, after the final victory over Tipu, when Francis Buchanan was invited to investigate and report the state of things in the lands of the Sultan, he defined the *tota* as a closed garden, and classified it into four quite rigid categories, according to its production. Yet, as it has been noted, when he firstly visited the Sultan ‘gardens’ in Bengaluru, these “did not just elude Buchanan’s categories of the *tota*; they eluded his scheme of cultivated grounds” (Mathur and da Cunha 2008: 24). During the 19th-century and well into the 20th, even though the urban

‘gardens’ continued to represent areas of both agricultural entrepreneurship and botanical knowledge, British narratives tended to present the *tota* as primarily a place of leisure and retreat, if not as “a purely European pleasure-ground” (*ibid.*: 25). And since narratives are always there in any process of identity creation, we can assume that strengthening the ‘rhetoric of beauty’ did not mean only bending local practices to colonial aspirations, but also, perhaps primarily, planning a new identity for the colonized city.

Like *totas*, the tanks or reservoirs of Bengaluru are objects which elude re-conceptualization outside the original context within which they have been created. They can be assumed to represent an urban element perhaps even more characteristic than the *totas*, at least for the fact that “alone among the major cities of India, Bangalore is not on the banks of a river or seashore. Since being founded in the 16th century, its residents had constructed reservoirs on small streams taking off from the ridge. These tanks or *keres*, as the reservoirs are called in Kannada, were the lifeline of Bangalore” (Singh 2008: 56–57). Well before being known as Garden City, Bengaluru was in fact

known as Kalyananagara, the city of lakes or *kalyanis*. The city has a ridge and valley topography; its lakes are basically irrigated tanks to catch rainwater. Like prehistoric towns, Bangalore grew around ponds and tanks which were then connected by channels or *karanjis*, which also watered the orchards and gardens of the city, even till the 1960s. The tank irrigation system itself is considered unique to south India. (Pushpamala 2008: pp. 200–201)

Yet these *keres* or *kalyanis* were not fixed elements of the urban landscape: depending on the quantity and the seasonal cycles of rain, water often receded from them, leaving room for other activities, such as silt harvesting or plant cultivation, and other functions, such as fairs and festivities. Thus, “sometimes for more than a year, tanks did not appear anywhere like the *tota* that Buchanan would expect to see. Yet, they were points of emergence of a *tota*, a landscape that could not be restricted to a defined use anymore that it could be confined to the space of a map” (Mathur and da Cunha 2008: 27).

V.

During the first decades of the 20th century the *keres* of Bengaluru began to lose their function, mainly due to the piping of water from nearby rivers, and were progressively abandoned and/or converted to other uses, thus triggering the process of degradation of their environs which reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless the rhetoric of beauty was subsumed by independent India, initially to cater for the needs and the aspirations of the newly created institutions and later on to support the speculations of local and global capitalism. It was also paralleled by another narrative inherited from the colonial regime and converted to national paradigm: that of urban planning and public architecture as a means to carve out a new and distinct identity for the Indian nation. Bangalore was a city particularly fit for that, since unlike colonial metropolises such as Bombay, Madras or New Delhi—as Nehru himself emphasized (Hasan 1970: 220)—it had an Indian origin. In addition to this, it had remained, albeit only formally, under the rule of an Indian monarch until Independence and—what perhaps counted the most—it still had a relatively small size that allowed architectural integrations to be more and more rapidly visible. An interesting example of the set of values and discourses that guided the urban development of Bengaluru in those years is represented by the construction (1952–1956) of the new House of Legislature, the well-known Vidhana Soudha. Under the personal instructions of the then Chief Minister of Mysore State Hanumathaiya, its plan grew from an utilitarian two-storied building—perhaps with a touch of American style—to a grandiose and ostentatious structure whose unsaid function was to put an end to “an experience of colonialism as humiliation, rather than as domination or oppression” (Nair 2002: 1211). Criticizing its kitschy mixture of “architectural styles including Mysorean, Rajasthani and a touch of European [...] the cognoscenti raised their noses and high-brow objections, about its lack of aesthetic purity. But the populace loved it” (Colaco 2003: 48–49). Even today, “bus loads of tourists from the entire state halt here to look on in awe,

to be photographed on its stone front stairway” (*ibid.*: 49). The States Reorganisation Act of 1956, that unified Kannada speaking territories, added to the same dynamics of promoting Bengaluru as model city. A few years later, a popular song from the movie *Mane katti nodu* (‘Building a house’, significantly subtitled *Idu Bengalurina kathe*, ‘This is the story of Bengaluru’) presented the city as a Kannada national achievement—building on emotional dynamics not too different from those set in motion by the *Rāma-līlā* representations. In the words of C.V. Shivashankar, the lyricist and director of the film: “‘We wanted people in distant Berar or Karwar, who could not travel this far, to see their capital on screen and feel proud. [...]’ The song projects the city as having three identities: as a beautiful city of gardens, as a city with a potential for economic and industrial growth, and as a centre of Kannada culture.” (Shivashankar 2008: 37–38):

[...] those hubs of industry and commerce
Listening to the melodious Kannada songs,
In the lap of lovely gardens,
Look how the city of Bengaluru has grown. (*ibid.*: 38)

The tumultuous growth of the city that started from the 1960s was in fact mainly propelled by a sustained flow of immigration both from other parts of the state and from other states. Within this scenery, the rhetoric of beauty acquired the function of attracting immigrants from both the higher and the lower social strata—a dynamic which is still at work today and that often translates into increasing inequalities:

As the number of American-style gated communities rises, so do the number of slums which provide services to those communities. Increasing economic disparities have brought the city to a low boiling point. (Singh 2008: 59)

Evidently, the same process of growth had the effect of rapidly worsening the urban environment: “After Independence, the two municipalities of Bangalore merged into a fast growing metropolis. It acknowledged no restraint [,] neither the notional green belt declared by the Corporation, nor restrictions on the conversion of agricultural

land into urban land” (Colaco 2003: 52). Ironically enough, the urban elements most affected by the degradation were exactly those around which the narrative of ‘Garden City’ had developed, i.e. the *tota* and the tank. Since until the 1960s, as we have already observed, around one tenth of the city surface was covered by *totas*, it was only natural that the pressure of the new actors would converge towards the areas still free from building activities. The greatest part of the *totas* were thus either turned into buildable land (or simply built), or annexed to private compounds—which soon led to their final ‘gardenization’. As regards the water bodies, it can be argued that their shifting nature highly contributed to make them an ideal target for the multiplicity of actors on the scene of urban planning. Due also to the fact that, during the years of most intense demographic pressure on urban inner areas, several tanks, reduced to marshy lands, had become places for precarious habitations and slums, a vast process of reclamation was brought about starting from the 1980s. Its aftermath was the conversion of the former tank surfaces either into construction sites or—when the ideology of beauty succeeded—into leisure spots, as it is today demonstrated “by the semantic shift from ‘tank’ to ‘lake,’ indicating the transformation of a water body from being a working entity to an aspect of the picturesque landscape” (Nair 2002: 1224).

In other cases yet, the ideology of beauty added to the pressures of the builders lobbies, which emphasized the image of Bengaluru as Garden City exclusively for marketing purposes and for the ‘*valeur ajoutée paysagère*’ of the urban green areas and water bodies (Varrel 2008: 19). Around the turn of the century, many attempts at building large real estate complexes on tank surfaces were thence undertaken. However, not a few of them have been blockaded by the intervention of citizens’ groups that were “socially well identified” and that mobilised precisely in order to protect, and capitalise on, the identity of Garden City (*ibid.*: 23). These new actors further elaborated the existing narratives on Bengaluru, adding to them their share of middle class claims and aspirations, yet basically missing to contest, or critically reflect on them. In 2012, a crisis in waste disposal and management menaced

to transform Garden City into Garbage City—not only in mass media perception but also in the experience of millions of citizens. It was then that the municipality of Bengaluru finally began, among other matters, to contribute to the diffusion of a short movie on waste recycling (produced ten years earlier by a non-profit organization). Interestingly, the film was based on a pilot project aimed at developing the capacities of waste sweepers and handlers in Bengaluru. Set in a residential area inhabited by high middle-class families, it contains

a double dimension, both environmental and social: it is about waste segregation but also about empowering solid waste workers. It builds on this important social aspect of waste management in the context of India, whereby a better relationship between urban residents and waste workers, or at least a better communication, would be likely to improve the whole system. (Lutringer 2015: 282–283)

Ironically, yet not surprisingly, the narrative of beauty seems thus to be strengthened (and further elaborated) by contemporary urban social-environmental activism—that could be expected instead to strive to turn it down. All this demonstrates once more, if needed, both the resilience and the complexity of such a cultural construction. The ploughs that according to the foundation myths of Bengaluru, had marked the routes and the trajectories of the original urban area—signifying that the city owed its origin to the integration of urban infrastructures and agricultural activities—are perhaps forgotten once and for all.

VI.

In order to better conceptualize nature and functions of the urban narratives illustrated above, we may apply here the definition of ‘a posteriori narrative-myth’ proposed by Iris Aravot (1995) with reference to the metropolises of New York and Tel Aviv:

‘a posteriori’ because the explanatory/directive narrative appears, both logically and chronologically, after the creation of the city itself, and ‘narrative-myth’ because, as with the myths created in antiquity, it interweaves a motivated set of values with an imaginative/conceptual order imposed on established facts and processes. (1995: 81)

Analytical tools for investigating urban narrative-myths are supplied by contemporary narratological scholarship. In this regard, we may observe how, though representing an area of cultural production whose nature was already debated by Latin rhetoricians, narrative has been recognized as object of scientific knowledge only after Barthes and other structuralist critics established its specificity, that transcends cultures and contexts (Barthes 1981; Todorov 1965; Genette 1966, 1969, 1972). Since then, a lot of theoretical work has been produced, that has led—as it could be expected—to the emergence of ‘narratology’ as a school of literary criticism of growing importance and—as Ann Rigney acutely observes—to “an increasing recognition of the ubiquity of narrative *within* any culture, in discursive practices as diverse as theology, historiography, economics, legal practice, political speech-making, everyday conversation and philosophy” (1992: 263–264, italics in the original). Discussion about the limits of this enlarged form of ‘narrativity’ has followed, yet the majority of the latest contributions on the subject have focused on the ‘creative’ or ‘constructive’ aspect of narrative, seen as a discourse, i.e. the output of a process that intrinsically involves the active (and determinative) participation of the narrator. Consequences are not of small amount:

If ninety percent of what economists do is ‘storytelling,’ as McCloskey (1990: 9) observes, “then it becomes urgent for us to know what precisely it is that they ‘do’—and hence what they may also choose not to do—when they compose their stories. And the same holds true for other inveterate narrators: historians, lawyers, politicians, and journalists. (*Ibid.*: 266)

As a matter of fact, the emphasis that the recent narratological scholarship puts on the communicative aspect of narration (*ibid.*: 267) allows us to analyse urban narratives eminently in political terms—or within relations of power—and to legitimize the use of narrative materials for historical research—an issue that the present contribution precisely aims at illustrating. To this we can add that Indian cities seem particularly prone to investigation through narrative, due both to the abundance of narrative materials about the origins and

the development of urban centres from ancient to medieval times—which often contrasts with the relative scarceness of purely ‘historical’ data—and to the tendency to elaborate modern and contemporary narrative-myths through popular and wide-ranging media such as cinema and television. As regards historical research, we may in fact agree with the arguments advanced by Narendar Pani, when he observes that historical events do not (and should not) represent the limits of research. While writing about revisiting Bengaluru’s history, and quoting Vico’s remarks on the need to go beyond mere historical facts, he points out that

history too could be written through insights into the motivations for actions of the past. And the main source of these insights was to look directly at what men created in order to communicate to each other. The artefacts, the works of art, the words and the institutions are more likely to help us understand the motivations for historical actions than merely a collection of historical facts. (Pani 2010: 9)

Urban reality is always larger than the sum of the scientific or pseudoscientific representations which are provided by single disciplines, in that they “fail to grasp the actual authenticity of the urban place. It might be said that they fail to come to terms with the genius loci of the city” (Aravot 1995: 79). Even general theorization about terms such as ‘city’, ‘urban society’ and ‘urbanization’ must be considered still partial and inadequate (Cowgill 2004: 526). The same applies to specific disciplines such as anthropology, where city has been largely undertheorized, mainly because anthropologists have been more concerned with everyday urban processes (Low 1996: 383). Deficiency of theorization—which means lack of the conceptual frame that may explore complexities and explain contradictions—determines the impossibility of “understanding the changing postindustrial, advanced capitalist, postmodern moment in which we live” (*ibid.*).

Assuming narrative as a heuristic tool for the study of Indian cities, we can thus realize how rich our methodological repertoire may become if we allow this ‘ubiquitous’ conception of narration

to be integrated in it. Two major consequences would at least result from this process. The first relates to the availability of a huge quantity of data deriving from original sources. Narrations and stories represent a treasure trove of information that may become available to almost *any* discipline investigating human society and its development, provided that an adequate ‘translation’ be made of the conventions, codes, embellishments, and figures that are typical of ‘storytelling’—as we may call it. In addition to it, asserting the ubiquity of narrative and emphasizing its ‘constructive’ aspect is tantamount to establishing a ‘horizontal’ relation between the conventional categories of ‘fictional’ and ‘scientific’ works, which de facto makes easier transiting practices and data between the two areas. To quote a literary instance: this can also help bridging the two opposite ways of describing a city which are illustrated by Marco Polo to Kublai Kan in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 1974: 9)—and which we could term as ‘analytical’ vs. ‘experiential’; or ‘objective’ vs. ‘subjective’. In any case, the authorization to do that comes from the core of anthropological research: as Lévi-Strauss puts it in his celebrated *Tristes tropiques*: “Ce n’est donc pas de façon métaphorique qu’on a le droit de comparer—comme on l’a si souvent fait—une ville à une symphonie ou à un poème; *ce sont des objects de meme nature*” (2002: 138, italics added).

The second of the two consequences previously mentioned regards furtherance of theorization on narrative itself. I hypothesize that this aim may be achieved through a sort of bottom-up process, triggered by the practice of customarily exploring narrative to draw data and information from it. My research experiences have led me to believe not only that *any* narrative—or *any* storytelling, from sacred texts to pure entertainment—holds vital relations with the network of values and practices which structure the society that produces it and which are selectively communicated by the narrator(s); but also that it can—I would say intrinsically—give back *structured information* about those values and those practices. It is precisely this quality of ‘restoring’ structured information that may shed more light on the inherent nature of narration and lead to further theorization both on its creative

dynamics and its created products. Practice of exploration of narration in a context of open communication with other disciplines may undoubtedly facilitate this process.

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