# Conceptualizing In-Text "Kshetra": Postcolonial Allahabad's Cultural Geography in Neelum Saran Gour's Allahabad Aria and Invisible Ink

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# Abstract

Literary renditions of cities have always gravitated towards the spatial imagination and its ethical counterpart outside the textual space. This paper explores the multicultural geography of the North Indian city Allahabad (recently renamed *Prayagraj*) observed through Neelum Saran Gour's postcolonial narratives *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, projecting the narrative alignment of spatial aesthetics and cultural ethics. Interrogating the spatial dimensions of a "narrative world" within narrative theory (Ryan) and its interdisciplinary crossover with cultural geography (Sauer; Mitchell; Anderson et al.), the article seeks to examine Gour's literary city not simply as an objective homogeneous representation, but as a "kshetra" of spatio-cultural cosmos of lived traditions, memories, experiences and collective attitudes of its people, in the context of E. V. Ramakrishnan's theoretical reflections. The article proposes new possibilities of adapting the Indian concept "kshetra" to spatial literary studies; its aim is also to suggest a new source of knowledge about the city of Allahabad through a community introspection of "doing culture" in the texts, bringing into view people's shared experiences, beliefs, religious practices and traditions as offshoots of the postcolonial ethos. The article aims to re-contextualize the city's longstanding multicultural ethics in the contemporary times of crisis, which may affect a shift in the city's relevance: from regional concern to large-scale significance within ethnically diverse South Asian countries and beyond.

**Keywords:** "kshetra," cultural geography, Allahabad, multiculturalism, postcolonial.

## INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's assertion that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (22) has been the subject of scholarly interest since the 1980s, particularly within humanistic geography[1] and related fields of research. The "epoch of space" is a relatively recent subject of academic discourse in the discipline of geography. On the other hand, the aesthetic representation of space in literature, particularly through textual organization of the narrative, dates back to ancient times and was brilliantly applied in Plato's *Republic* and Saint Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*. The city of London in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, London and Paris in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, "Dublin" in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and "Wessex" in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* are further iconic instances of textual representation of space in literary works. In the Indian context, too, many prominent Indian English novels, such as *Twilight in Delhi*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, or *Madras on Rainy Days* demonstrate a fascination with literary geography and reflect its Indian perspective, even if it is mostly limited to the mention of metropolitan cities. However, certain aspects of realities and representations of Indian cities, situated beyond the established metropolitan urban culture, urgently need to be examined as extensions of postcolonial debates (King 389). Contemporary postcolonial Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour brings to light such overlooked realities of the North Indian city Allahabad[2] through her narratives *Allahabad Aria* (2015) and *Invisible Ink* (2015).

Neelum Saran Gour is an eminent Indian English author whose career spans over thirty years. She received the prestigious Hindu Literary Award for fiction in 2018. Gour was born and bred in Allahabad and her identity—in the personal, professional and artistic sense—is rooted in this city. The writer's visual and cultural sense of the city's geography has been reflected implicitly, and at times explicitly, in her fictional narratives for decades. Despite forming such an illustrious body of work, her spatial narratives have not received adequate scholarly attention. Recent research (Niven;

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[1] Humanistic Geography emerged in the 1970s as a subfield of geography. This discipline looks at human beings as central to geographical study, and examines the world and its locations through human experiences, feelings and geographical behaviours. Some of the greatest proponents of humanistic geography are Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Tim Cresswell.

[2] Allahabad is a North Indian city located beside the *Triveni-Sangam*, the confluence of three holy rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and mythical *Saraswati* in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. Recently the government of India has renamed the city "Prayagraj"; however, the article is consistent in calling the city Allahabad, since Neelum Saran Gour's narratives also use this name.

Tickell) reviewing Indian cities seen through the eyes of Indian English authors focused on the works of Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Aravind Adiga and Jeet Thayil, but remained silent about Gour's contribution to the literary reconstruction of the Indian city. One possible reason for this omission may be found in Gour's own assertion that a writer is "expected to do more than just write a good book," while this author is not keen to advertise "her own work ingeniously, travelling around pushing the latest book, sometimes even funding his or her own book events and also cultivating the media and networking ceaselessly" (Gour, "Silhouetting" 187). Such self-promotion neither suits Gour's artistic temperament nor is particularly accessible in the city-space to which she belongs. Her city is not one of the greatest metropolises of the country offering all kinds of advanced amenities and opportunities, but a city of ethnic heritage. The hegemonic domination of metropolitan urbanity and its technological progress in contemporary discourse means that reflections upon ethnic cities such as Allahabad are difficult to find in spatial literary studies in the Indian context.

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Over the centuries, Allahabad fascinated many western scholars representing diverse disciplines, including Bishop Heber, Mark Twain and Kama Maclean, who aimed to describe the city objectively, either in terms of its political history of colonialism or in relation to its Hindu religious associations. Within these objective representations of the city, many ethnic realities and experiences of insiders have been overlooked. Literature helps to decrypt such spatial ethos and the inhabitants' experiences, through which a postcolonial alternative knowledge of the city can be garnered. This study seeks to investigate these issues through the fictional lens of Neelum Saran Gour's *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, set in Allahabad in the postcolonial era of the twenty-first century. Interrogating the interdisciplinary crossover between narrative theory (Ryan) and cultural geography (Sauer; Mitchell; Anderson et al.), the article will use the theoretical framework of E. V. Ramakrishnan's reflections in order to examine Gour's literary city not simply as a fixed, homogeneous and objective representation, but as a spatialized cultural "kshetra" that brings into focus the experiences of its people. "Kshetra" is a native Indian concept that frequently blends elements and nuances beyond the semiotics of linguistics and invokes a space-specific "subliminal cultural cosmos of lived traditions, shared memories and collective attitudes and assumptions that inform the social imaginary of the people" (Ramakrishnan ix). This article proposes new possibilities of adapting the Indian concept of "kshetra" to spatial literary studies, and suggests that Gour's texts may serve as an alternative, postcolonial source of knowledge

about the city of Allahabad: through a community introspection of "doing culture," the texts incorporate the shared experiences, beliefs, religious practices and traditions of the city's inhabitants. Additionally, this paper attempts to extend the city's political significance by re-contextualizing its longstanding multicultural ethics in the contemporary times of crisis. This re-contextualization may hypothetically affect a shift in the city's relevance—from a regional singularity to a place of significance in the broader perspective of ethnically diverse South Asian countries and beyond.

## IN-TEXT "KSHETRA": GOUR'S "SPATIAL STORIES" AND ALLAHABAD'S CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Popularized by Michel de Certeau, the phrase "spatial stories" (115) refers to the unbreakable connection between narrative and space, since narratives "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories" (115). The spatial trajectory of a text is never linear, causal, or stable; it is always heterogeneous and located within the multifaceted realities of its culture (Schwyzer; Chedgzoy; McRae). The literary organization of a text facilitates an alignment of culture and space that enables us to rethink a number of connections between narrative theory and cultural geography. Neelum Saran Gour's "spatial stories" offer a rich archive of a city's culture. Additionally, it is necessary to clarify that, in the context of this essay, "culture" denotes a practice, a form of "doing" and also a "way of life" (Anderson et al. 3–5) performed through people's shared experiences, recurrent beliefs, religious practices, and traditions. Consequently, culture implicitly contributes to the construction of Allahabad's geography since "culture is spatial" (Mitchell 63).

The liaison between "culture" and "space" concretizes the foundation of a geographical framework, in which culture acts as agent and space as medium, resulting in a distinct "cultural geography" (Sauer). It offers a nuanced understanding not only of "how cultures are spread over space but also . . . how cultures make sense of space" (Crang 2). Beyond disciplinary gridlines, narratives are an effective means by which authors such as Gour strive to make sense of space not simply by drawing locations as settings or backdrops of action, referred to as "spatial frame" in narrative theory (Ryan). Rather, relying upon the agency of those spatial artistic representations, Gour's narratives culminate in the culturally sustained "production of space" in the Lefebvrian sense. Therefore, Gour's *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, texts set in postcolonial Allahabad, may bring

together narrative theory and cultural geography through the aesthetic of literary imagination that spatially organizes the narrative and constructs the cultural space. The text of *Allahabad Aria* includes a thematically diverse range of stories that share the common city-space of Allahabad and, within their simplicity, give a profound outlet to the essence of *Allahabadi* culture through the interplay between space and the characters. The narrative of *Invisible Ink* exhibits, as well as constructs, a similar kind of cultural city geography, adding temporality to the spatial dimension through the evolution of the spatial experiences of the main characters—Rekha, Amina, Leelavati—as well as a number of other characters.

In these spatial narratives, the driving idea of "process" between space and people bridges narrative theory and Allahabad's cultural geography. This "process" becomes effective through the textual arrangement of the plot—the actions and ideologies of the characters in different locations narratologically construct the "story space" (Ryan). In Gour's narratives, these places—zones of action—range from the "microgeography of the household" (Sanders 9) in Allahabad city to natural (*Triveni-Sangam*) and built (streets, shops, parks) public spaces. Such space-action duality in Gour's texts in turn transcends the tangible topography of the city, generating a "kshetra"[3] of its own, where individuals develop social and cultural values through their experiences. This implies that "kshetra" operates almost as a crossroad of various socio-cultural aspects, marking the identity of both people and space through cultural attributes of lived traditions (such as rituals, festivals and other events), shared experiences and attitudes.

Allahabad's "cultural cosmos" is often envisioned through the cultural tradition of *Kumbh mela*,[4] which takes place at the confluence of *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Saraswati* rivers and is a series of Hindu festivals involving shared performative rites such as *snan* (bathing rites), *asthi visarjan* (ash immersion in the *Triveni-Sangam*) and other rituals. Based on this festival's primarily religious function, Allahabad has often been explored as a sacred space reserved for Hindus (Bhardwaj), or even as a "faith-based

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[3] "*Kshetra*" is not equal to "region." As per Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai's *Sabdataravali*, "*kshetra*" denotes "fertile land, an abode of god or place of worship, the physical body, a place of work or place of origin" (700). For further details, see Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai.

[4] *Kumbh Mela* celebrations take place in a cycle, in four Indian holy cities: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nasik and Allahabad (Prayagraj). Allahabad is the only city that hosts the largest of the celebrations, called *Maha Kumbh*, organized every twelve years. The celebrations take place at the confluence of three sacred river *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati*. The *Maha Kumbh* is celebrated every twelve years, the *Ardha Kumbh*—every six years, and *Magh Mela* is the annual festival.

utopia" (Parida). The rich tradition of Hindu cultural practices—and their presence in public space—is rooted in the city's history. References to these practices can be found in *Rig Veda*, *Puranas* and in Indian epics that undoubtedly shaped the city's identity—the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. However, all of the above represents only one side of Allahabad's "cultural cosmos," which has been equally influenced by Islamic tradition ever since Mughal emperor Akbar founded the Mughal city Ilahabas in 1527. These two strands of tradition—the Hindu and Islamic cultures—were supplemented by a wave of western influences in the 18ᵗʰ century, when Allahabad became one of the premier cities of North India during the British Raj. In the geography of this city, the osmosis of Hindu, Islamic and British culture in postcolonial times forms a unique cultural cosmos." Gour's fictional alignments of time, place and action in her plots reflect this cultural blend, reproducing the "kshetra" in the texts.

This in-text "kshetra" is largely constructed through the cultural experiences of characters within the various "locales" of Allahabad (narrative settings). In the process of interacting and participating in collective cultural practices of the city, Gour's characters shape their own understanding of the city, as well as the city itself. Their intersubjective realities within the textual "kshetra" simultaneously decode the existing values of the city and generate new evolving spatial meanings and codes. This process enables the characters to "construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions, and environments. In short, they construct geographies" (Anderson and Gale 4) of meanings across the city of Allahabad. In the construction of Allahabad's cultural geography through the characters' negotiations of space and action, culture in Gour's "spatial stories" becomes a continuous process, in which acts of imagination and performance make Allahabad a "practiced place" (de Certeau 117). In such a "practiced place," the characters engage in "doing" culture (Shurmer-Smith). The entire network of characters' "doing" culture within Gour's textual "kshetra" constructs inter-subjective spatial realities. Such textual realities of Allahabad's "cultural geography" transcend the paucity of homogeneous objective representation. Moreover, the inter-subjective cultural "doing" in Gour's texts offers scope for community introspection within the city of Allahabad.

## A "DOING" CULTURE: A SUSTAINED COMMUNITY INTROSPECTION

From the 1980s onwards, the "new cultural geography" has been extensively applied to social and political concerns. It primarily defines and constructs spatial meaning through the effective medium of culture in social or political

contexts (Duncan; Jackson). Cultural geography merges strand of social geography with cultural interpretations and the narrative, as well as the construction of a "counterfactual world" consisting of characters' beliefs, speculations and experiences (Ryan), focusing on these intersections to demonstrate how spatially oriented literary texts "build and inform diverse social and aesthetic realities" (Selby and Peterson 1). The textual "kshetra" of Gour's narratives as conceptualized in the previous section is loaded with such social realities within the cultural geography of Allahabad. The efficacy of such geographic realities in both *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink* relies primarily on the subjective, as well as collective experiences of the characters. Their practices and actions inside the city construct the meaning of "culture," in the present context in terms of its "doing" sense. It includes values, beliefs and shared commitment, conceptualizing a way of life broadly attuned to their community consciousness as *Allahabadi*.[5]

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A "community" is defined as a religion-based group with shared needs, goals, values, beliefs and activities; but sometimes, the ethos of a community, within and beyond religion, connects people through geography (McMillan and Chavis; Nasar and Julian). Such a collective consciousness is visible at a microscopic level among the neighbours sharing everyday experiences, or at special occasions organized in built or natural public spaces, while attending or performing religious rituals, practices and so on. Marking the distinctness of a spatial culture, such performative "cultural geography" of Allahabad formulates the base of Gour's textual "kshetra." It is primarily invoked through the subjective realities of the characters as they experience the city and, therefore, offers a new ground for community introspection.

In *Invisible Ink*, the primary projection of this shared culture is visible in the characters' lifestyle in their residential plot "Bulbul Kothi." Here, the families of two friends, Rekha and Amina, representing different religious backgrounds (Hindu and Muslim respectively) share more than their colony and dwelling in a denotative sense; they share the experiences of each other's religious rituals and practices. It is Amina who is invited to partake in the Hindu religious ritual of "kanya bhoj"[6] to become a manifestation of goddess Durga in Rekha's family: "[W]e (Amina and Rekha) were both goddesses that day" (*Invisible Ink* 28). Even the idols of Lord Krishna for the prayer room of Rekha's family in "Bulbul Kothi" were handcrafted by neighbour Shakheel Mustafa during his "roza"[7] time. The

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[5]  Residents of Allahabad are called "Allahabadi" or "Illahabadi" in native language.

[6]  On the eighth and ninth days of the goddess Durga's festival, a Hindu ritual is celebrated: minor girls are worshipped as manifestations of the Goddess Durga. During the ritual, the girls are given offerings of food, which is known as "kanya bhoj."

[7]  "Roza" refers to the Muslim religious custom of fasting during *Ramadan*; fast is kept for a month, from sunrise to sunset.

inmates of the colony also help one another to carry out their respective religious practices. Rekha's mother Leelavati's making of "sootpheni for Mehru Apa's sehri"[8] and "gram-flour pakowries and chaat and sweet things for Mehru Apa's evening iftar" (*Invisible Ink* 108) while fasting for Lord Shiva in the same month underpins the ethos of a geographically connected community, since all its members see their shared space as "our Bulbul Kothi"—"our lane" (*Invisible Ink* 6). The existence of this spatial consciousness shared by a multicultural community is also evident in *Allahabad Aria*, particularly when a Muslim vegetable vender, Imtiaz, recites Urdu poetry and all the listeners, irrespective of their religion, willfully view themselves as members of the *Allahabadi* community, saying "Trust us Ilahabadis" (141).

The projection of a spatial community in the narrative is not limited to the city's residential areas and the interactions between neighbours. Gour's textual arrangement of the plot, characters and their actions echoes the introspective scope for community life both in the built and natural public spaces of the city. As a result of their shared experiences, the neighbours develop respect for each other's religious practices and endorse the same in "doing." Rekha and her friend Amina love visiting the Ghazi Mian's shrine in Secundara, Allahabad, and even make a "chadar (coverlet) offering" (*Invisible Ink* 4), which is primarily a Muslim ritual. Natural spaces in the city form a vital part of the spatial consciousness shared by the community. One such natural site is the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*, or the confluence of rivers in Allahabad, a place of rich shared heritage and traditions dating back to the antiquity. In the context of Ryan's narrative theory, the "story space," or plot, reaches totality with "story world," engaging "the reader's imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge" (798). Here, cultural awareness is deeply ingrained in the geographical riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*, Allahabad's most significant natural area. According to Hindu mythology, it is the holiest place, as its water is believed to carry "amrit," a nectar that has the miraculous power to cleanse earthly sins. Therefore, bathing, or "snan," in the convergence of rivers is a celebrated Hindu practice. Beyond the factual description of the Hindu sacred rite of bathing in the *Sangam*, the textual "kshetra" of Gour suggests an introspective community consciousness shared by the people of Allahabad, as "some Ilahabad Mussalmans do take dip in the Ganga on holy bathing days" (*Invisible Ink* 189).

Those who engage in the "bathing" tradition may not share the same religious beliefs, but the act functions as part of their community

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8    "Sehri" are meals eaten by Muslims before dawn prior to fasting during *Ramadan*; they are followed by "Iftar" after the sunset.

consciousness as *Allahabadi*. The people of the city share experiences of cultural practices such as "bathing" irrespective of religious divisions, which generates a geographically oriented "we"—a sense of belonging. For this very reason, Mr. Triloki from *Allahabad Aria* can easily identify the bathing practice as an element of the city's culture and asserts that it is significant "for us, Allahabadis" (Gour 69). This "us" denotes all the people of Allahabad regardless of their religion. This rich blend of Hindu-Muslim practices within the city's geography is not at all a contemporary phenomenon. Its presence is evident in stories such as the popular account of the Mughal Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar's previous incarnation as a Hindu Brahmin in Allahabad. According to popular belief, his name was Mukund Brahmachari; he accidentally swallowed a cow's hair, which is an act strictly prohibited by Hindu religion. To cleanse this earthly sin, he sacrificed his life by jumping from the indestructible Banyan tree (Akshay Vat) into the holy water of *Triveni-Sangam*. After reincarnation he became Akbar, a Muslim who "came to this city (Allahabad), [and] recognized the place where he used to live. He recognized the tree he's jumped from and decided to build his fort around the tree" (*Invisible Ink* 63–64). The city's culture consists of shared historical values and symbols. But it also relies on "doing," or manifesting, those ideals in practice. Therefore, the "doing culture" links the people to a place by means of sharing a deep sense of spatial community, which demonstrates how cultural practices work within society. The textual construction of "kshetra" in Gour's narratives envisions the culture of *Allahabadi* community not just as a utopian construct expressed in purely aesthetic terms. Rather, it operates in an introspective way, illuminating the postcolonial cultural knowledge of Allahabad city through the experiences of insiders and by forming a community in the political sense, offering the possibility of a re-contextualization of the city's longstanding multicultural dynamics in times of crisis.

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## ALLAHABAD'S LIVING TRADITIONS: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF MULTICULTURALISM

Apart from collective attitudes shared by a community, "lived traditions" are important tools for the "cultural cosmos" of "kshetra" as discussed in E. V. Ramakrishnan's conceptual framework. The textual arrangement of spatial events within Gour's narrative space does not objectively represent the "lived traditions" of Allahabad, but the textual "kshetra" manifests the alternative realities of the city's "lived traditions" by referring to subjective experiences. The most enchanting and remarkable "lived tradition" of Allahabad is *Kumbh mela*, observed at the confluence of *Ganga*, *Yamuna*,

and *Saraswati*. For centuries, this "lived tradition" has fascinated both Indians and foreigners. The American author Mark Twain was captivated by this cultural tradition, noting that "[i]t is wonderful . . . No matter what the impulse is; the act borne of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold white" (qtd. in Gupta 58). Quite understandably, as a western visitor to the *mela*, i.e. cultural fair, he did not grasp its essence, but was mesmerized by the incredible charm of a spiritual experience shared by all the visitors, pilgrims, businessmen and common people. Within and beyond religious faith, this tradition has become a vital part of the city's (and more broadly—India's) cultural identity, drawing millions of pilgrims and visitors from all over the country and the world to the *Sangam*. Acknowledging its impact, in 2017 UNESCO placed this tradition on its list of practices representing the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

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Moreover, as a sacred religious gathering, this cultural tradition may preserve the heritage of the city, but it is also a "lived tradition" of communal assimilation reaching beyond religious dichotomies that infuses the geography of Allahabad with its multicultural ethos. Utilizing the geographical area of the confluence of rivers, the *mela* serves as a basis for constructing the cultural geography of the city and the in-text "kshetra" of Gour's *Invisible Ink* and *Allahabad Aria*, reconstructing the obscured multicultural reality of "lived tradition" through the characters' actions. In the story "Family Album," included in *Allahabad Aria*, Mr. Triloki (a Hindu by religion) finds himself in the *mela* primarily for a business purpose, whereas his friend Jameson, an English photographer, is interested in its visual potential: he aims to capture the vastness of *Kumbh mela* sprawling "across acres and acres as far as the eye can see" (63). The presence of the "crowds of plodding pilgrims, its ash-smeared, chillum-smoking ascetics" (*Allahabad Aria* 66) in this "lived tradition" is one side of the picture; on the other hand, this tradition has contributed to the city's cultural heterogeneity that draws "millions of people-milling, jostling crowds wearing every conceivable Indian costume, speaking every conceivable language" (66).

Within and beyond the sacred reasons, the wide range of traditions brings members of the community close to one another by integrating cultures. In *Invisible Ink*, both Rekha and Amina thoroughly enjoy the *mela* despite their different religions; they cherish it for enlivening their friendship from adolescence into adulthood. Their personal experiences visualize the cultural osmosis of Indian ritualistic conventions blended with western technical advancements in this "lived tradition" of the city: "There are computerized horoscope plottings and new-age meditation gadgetry. Also Disneyland Mickeys and Jurassic Park dinosaurs. And sadhus[9] in saffron

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[9]  "Sadhus" are Hindu ascetics.

with matted locks and ash-smeared faces striding past with laptops slung on their shoulders" (*Invisible Ink* 190). The composite, multicultural ethics of Allahabad merge Hindus, Muslims and Europeans into a cosmopolitan social fabric through "lived traditions." The transcendental values of these traditions rise above the petty earthly binaries of "self" and "other," "orient" and "occident," and, perhaps more importantly, above the "global" and "local." For this very reason Gour's character Mr. Triloki addresses Jameson as a "local," noticing his interest in the bathing rite of *Kumbh mela* and observing "to us you're a local" (*Allahabad Aria* 70), thereby accepting Jameson as a member and an insider of *Allahabadi* culture.

Constructed by the characters' beliefs, practices and experiences, Gour's in-text "kshetra" retains Allahabad's internal "lived traditions" and enables readers to navigate through both the intra and extra-textual realities of the city's multicultural ethos. As an ethnic South-Asian city, Allahabad is built upon a mosaic of socio-cultural pluralities and heterogeneity. It has evolved over centuries through a continuous flow of assimilation and adaptation of varied cultural influences coming with subsequent Mughal and European invasions. As a result of this process, the composite culture of Allahabad and its true spirit are largely based on the strands of both *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* (a poetic Awadhi phrase that describes the distinctive, syncretic fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures) and *Vasudheiva Kutumbakam* (a notion, according to which the entire universe is a family). Reflection on this multicultural blend within the geography of Allahabad through Gour's textual "kshetra" is decidedly political, particularly since the city's name was changed to "Prayagraj" in 2018. "Prayag" was the city's ancient name according to ancient Hindu scriptures, and "Prayagraj" means "the king of devotion" in Hindu mythology. Today, many government officials argue that the rich Hindu traditions and culture were ignored when in 1575 "Prayag" was renamed "Ilahabas" by the Mughal emperor Akbar, and then renamed again "Allahabad." Therefore, the latest name change can be perhaps seen as an attempt to rejuvenate the ancient Hindu traditions. No culture is ever static or fixed; cultures evolve in a processual manner. Allahabad's multicultural blending over the centuries exemplifies that process and becomes an integral component of the identity of the city.

According to Christopher Tilley, place names are of "vital significance because they act so as to transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced" (18). Therefore, "Allahabad" is not merely a name, but a social, historical and cultural emotion of its people, constructed largely upon the ethics of multiculturalism. Being an *Allahabadi* (inhabitant of Allahabad) herself, Gour experiences these emotions as attuned to the city's name.

The author expressed her attachment to the name "Allahabad" after the official name of the city was changed to "Prayagraj." As she stated in an interview,

> The present regime has changed its name to Prayagraj, but the city I live in—and thousands like me—is Allahabad. That stands for a certain cultural construct that has grown over centuries, and that resides in our consciousness—an inclusive temper, a dash of Western cosmopolitanism leavening our traditional but open Hinduism and a correspondingly open Islam, a spontaneous osmosis of cultures ever operating between the three. ("Silhouetting" 181)

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Gour touches upon this unique multicultural blend of the city in her texts *Allahabad Aria* and *Invisible Ink*, both of which reconstruct the "cultural geography" of the city. Her reconstruction becomes implicitly political, since it re-contextualizes the cultural heterogeneity of the city in contemporary times of need. It is primarily relevant to the city in question, but its relevance extends beyond postcolonial South Asian countries.

## CONCLUSION

Collating a range of interdisciplinary approaches within the field of spatial literary studies, the article reflects on the agency of a work of fiction as an artistic form as much as on its representational and reflective power. The paper decodes the production of in-text "kshetra" in Neelum Saran Gour's narratives in the context of Allahabad's performative "cultural geography." It bridges the gap between factual geographical descriptions and flights of the writer's imagination, producing an alternative, postcolonial source of knowledge about the city of Allahabad through the intersubjective realities of the characters. The textual "kshetra" allows readers to pursue a certain kind of "local" knowledge and sharpen their political perceptions of the spatio-cultural conundrums of Allahabad by re-contextualizing the city's longstanding syncretic multiculturalism as a way of life in contemporary times of crisis. Moreover, Gour's textual representation not only offers regionally specific cultural knowledge. The author constructs a counterfactual narrative universe that transcends its regional context and connects to the large-scale, globalized world. Implicitly suggesting ways to sustain cultural heterogeneity, her narratives strive for the ethics of collective identity, where autonomy and respect for others can go hand in hand. This in turn offers a new opportunity for community introspection in terms of collective behaviour in everyday life, particularly at times of crisis, on a local and global scale.

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