

THE BIG CITY / MAHANAGAR

Narendranath Mitra

(1963)

Story

Mahanagar tells the story of a modern, changing India, and a post-Independence India, by focusing on the fortunes of a single family in Calcutta. Arati and Subrata (wife and husband) have moved their family, including two children, three siblings and Subrata's parents from a small town in East Pakistan (as Bangladesh was then) to the 'big city.' They are a middle-class family. Subrata works in a bank and has a regular, if small, salary. The house is crowded, with its nine inhabitants, and there are the normal spats and tensions in any family. Grandfather is a little grumpy, and grandmother is a little censorious, but a gentle tone of harmony pervades. Subrata is not a domineering man. Rather, there are hints early on that he is somewhat passive and perhaps lacks initiative. Arati, his wife, is all smiles and affection toward everyone, even the waspish grandad.

The drama kicks off when Subrata drops a less than subtle hint that, maybe Arati should consider getting a job. Family finances are tight. Subrata can't seem to make ends meet. The children need new clothes for school, and he really should have repaired grandfather's glasses. Arati, however, is not interested, not because she doesn't want to help the family, but because she is shy and lacks confidence. Besides, respectable, married women don't work. But this is the big city, and Arati hears of other women like her who work in offices. Slowly, she begins to find the idea not just practical but intriguing. She and Subrata hunt through the adverts in the paper and find one that seems suitable. Excited but nervous, she goes for the interview, guided and coaxed by Subrata. She gets the job, which is selling vacuum cleaners house-to-house. She then meets Edith Simmons, an Anglo-Indian girl, who is doing the same job, and they become good friends. When Arati brings home her first pay cheque, Subrata is grateful and relieved. Now, his financial worries are over, but domestic ones begin.

Arati's long hours mean that she can no longer look after the children or her husband as before. On the other hand, Arati relishes the sense of responsibility and accomplishment that she experiences in her job. Mr Mukherjee, her boss, is very impressed with her work and promotes her to 'team leader.' Equally important, in terms of her changing status, she is also taught by Edith to wear lipstick. With the gender balance upset at home, Subrata begins to wish his wife stayed home. He convinces her to give up the job, but just as she is about to hand in her letter of resignation, he rushes to her office and stops her. He has lost his own job at the bank when a rush by depositors forces its closure. Arati stays in her job but later resigns in protest at the disrespect shown to her friend, Edith, because she is Anglo-Indian. When Arati explains to Subrata, he is not happy and the story ends as it began, except that Arati has tasted a new life in the big city.

Themes

The city As its title announces, *Mahanagar* is a story about 'the big city.' However, when this novella was first published in 1949, serialised in a Bengali weekly journal in Calcutta, it was titled *Abataranika* (*A Flight of Stairs*). Some critics prefer this title because, while it suggests a change, it is not clear whether it refers to 'going up,' as the heroine would like to believe, or 'going down', as her family and possibly her husband fear. (The story was expanded and retitled in 1963 because it was being made into a Bengali-language film by the internationally renowned film-maker Satyajit Ray.) When the family moves from a small town to Calcutta (something that Mitra's own family did), they enter a world that offers both opportunity and unhappiness. It is a world where middle-class, married women have lives beyond the home, where men can lose their jobs and where you might meet an Edith and a Mr Mukherjee. Only in the city do people go house-to-house selling vacuum cleaners. It is a world in which the Bengali language is not enough, and one must know English in order to succeed. This is

the brilliance of Mitra's story. It does not attempt a broad brush, sociological portrait of how the modern city is changing India. Instead, it uses an almost microscopic focus to pinpoint the joys and tensions that arise when people like Arati and Subrata move to places like Calcutta, New Delhi, Bombay or Madras. In this exquisite novel, the author seems to withhold judgement. Arati has been shown a new kind of life, but then it is withdrawn and the couple will have to live with her knowledge of something denied.

Anglo-Indians Mitra's story is unusual in that, unlike so many contemporaneous fiction, it does not direct its critical eye toward caste but rather toward the prejudice concerning Anglo-Indians. From the very beginning of British presence in India, from the mid-17th century onward, British officials, merchants, soldiers and adventurers have had children by Indian wives. That population came to be known as 'Anglo-Indian.' Shunned by large parts of both British and Indian society—neither fish nor fowl—the Anglo-Indians became a caste unto themselves, marrying each other and developing their own culture, cuisine and style of dress. After Independence, Anglo-Indians became even more despised by Indians, an unwanted legacy of colonialism and not part of Hindu or Muslim tradition. In *Mahanagar*, this negative view of Anglo-Indians is dramatised through the character of Edith Simmons. She is said to 'generously apply lipstick, to paint her nails and to wear skirts.' When Arati tells her husband about her new friend, he replies angrily, 'Be careful! Don't mingle with such girls.' Edith is, in fact, a sweet and innocent young woman, who befriends Arati because she realises that Arati is an ingénue and in need of coaching. Edith's home shows that she struggles economically, as well. When there is a mix-up in the accounting for sales money, Mr Mukherjee immediately blames Edith, and when Arati speaks up for her friend, he warns her that 'such girls are not to be trusted.' This is the prejudice in the big city. It is not the overt, sometimes brutal treatment of Untouchables in the village, but it can be just as vicious.

Characters

Arati Arati is the wife, mother and daughter-in-law in this joint-family household. She is the protagonist of the story in the sense that she is the person whose life changes and through whose eyes we experience the ups and downs of the family's fortunes.

Subrata Subrata, her husband, is a mild, if kind, man who works in a bank. Aside from his constant cigarette smoking and worrying about money problem, he does very little in the story.

Edith Edith, or Miss Simmons, is an Anglo-Indian young woman who works alongside Arati in selling vacuum-cleaners. She is unmarried and lives in a very cramped apartment with her mother.

Mr Mukherjee Mr Mukherjee is a pipe-smoking owner of the company and boss of Arati and Edith. He is a no-nonsense man who appears fair-minded and considerate, but shows an ugly streak of prejudice in his treatment of Edith.

Priyogopal Mazumdar Priyogopal Mazumdar is Subrata's father, who is retired and spends his time doing crossword puzzles. Although mostly inert, he controls the household and is sometimes irascible.

Sarojini Sarojini is Subrata's mother, who has a minor part to play. She is a typical Hindu wife, mother and mother-in-law, who looks after her husband and (grown-up) children, while reserving sharp criticisms for the daughter-in-law.

Arati (Loyal)

Character Arati, when we first meet her, is an ordinary, if loving, housewife. Not docile perhaps—she does tease her husband sometimes—but definitely not self-assertive. She is self-sacrificing, putting the considerable needs of her large household before any consideration of her own. She is especially good at keeping the cantankerous grandfather (her husband's father) happy by indulging him in his various whims. When Subrata (her husband) first broaches the idea of her finding a job, she acts as if such an idea is unimaginable. She is a shy person, who lacks confidence ('Who would employ me?' she asks bewildered) and any sense of a life beyond the home. Once the idea has been

planted, however, she begins to see that it might be exciting. In these descriptions of her mind opening up to new possibilities, Arati is like a young person about to cross the threshold into adulthood. Once he lands the job and begins to travel from door to door selling vacuum cleaners, she finds she loves it. She is making money, she has responsibility and she meets new people. Now, we see that this withdrawn, quiet woman is extremely capable of functioning in a business environment. She is charismatic, charming and pragmatic, and she is promoted to 'team leader.' Arati is also loyal, especially to her new friend, Edith, her Anglo-Indian colleague at work. Here we see how the city has changed Arati. When Edith is mistreated by their boss, Arati shows a previously unseen courage to stand up to him. Having achieved personal success in her job, however, Arati is assailed by guilt—she no longer has the time to play mother and wife as she used to. She tries to understand her husband's misgivings about her new life (even though it was he who first persuaded her to apply for a job), but she does not want to give it up. And, yet, she wants domestic harmony and does agree to resign.

Activities In the first half of the story, Arati spends all her time managing the large extended family. Ever though she has help from the grandmother, Arati is kept very busy looking after two children, three siblings, her husband and her in-laws. If she has friends in the outside world, we never see them. After she gets her job as a door-to-door saleslady, however, she becomes a different person. She goes to cafes with colleagues from work, and she visits the home of her best friend, Edith. At work, away from the critical eyes of her husband, she also spends time putting on lipstick and make-up. On her job, she becomes the leader of her group, which means that she plans the day, assigning different neighbourhoods to members of her team.

Illustrative moments

Shy The dramatic effect of *The Big City* is powerful only because of the change it stimulates in a shy housewife. And Arati is very shy, lacking in self-confidence and content to stay in the home. An excellent illustration of her weak sense of self occurs after she has, reluctantly, agreed to look for work. Her husband has persuaded her, and together they have scoured the newspapers for adverts. Having found one that looks 'respectable,' Arati sits down at the dining table in order to sign the application form that her husband has filled in for her. She looks at the form as if it were something alien (which it is to her) and looks back at her husband, who nods to her in encouragement. Then she picks up the pen and holds it awkwardly because it is not something she does every day—she has only a basic education and has no need to write anything in her household chores. She looks back at the form and begins to sign her name, but then she stops. She has to ask her husband, hovering over her shoulder, whether their family name is spelled in English with an 'j' or a 'z' (either Majumdar or Mazumdar, both of which are common). It is a moment that reveals all her hesitation and lack of confidence.

Confident Arati changes from this shy, house-bound wife into a confident, successful salesperson. It doesn't happen overnight, of course, and we watch the process slowly evolve over time. But one bold illustration of her step-by-step gaining of self-assurance comes in a scene at work. Arati and Edith are on their morning coffee break, and they meet in the ladies bathroom, where they are getting ready to go out on the streets to sell their machines. Arati watches Edith put on her lipstick with fascination, a bit of awe mixed with confusion. How exactly do you do it? When Edith suggests that she try, Arati laughs nervously and shakes her head. Edith, perceptive enough to realise that Arati really does want to try, persists and succeeds. Arati takes the strange tube of red paste and, a little unsteadily, rolls it over her lips. Then, with Edith giving instructions, she rolls her lips together to smooth the colour down. Finally, she looks at herself in the mirror and breaks out in a wide smile. She has crossed a threshold, and will not be the same person again.

Brave Arati's new sense of herself enables her to be more assertive at work, to take the initiative and to articulate plans and ideas, all of which her boss, Mr Mukherjee appreciates. On one occasion, however, Mr Mukherjee would rather that his new employee had not found her voice. Arati's self-confidence manifests itself in a brave defence of her colleague, Edith. The problem is that Mr Mukherjee has found a discrepancy in the reports that Arati's team have turned in to him one day. The total amount of money given to him by the team is less than what it should be from the number of machines sold. He calls in Edith and accuses her of theft. Edith leaves in tears and runs into Arati, who forces the story from her. Then, Arati knocks on the boss's door and is greeted by a smiling Mr

Mukherjee, who is happy to welcome his star employee, the charming and sweet Mrs Mazumdar. This time, however, Mrs Mazumdar does not take a seat. She remains standing and delivers a scathing attack on his failure to show respect to her friend, Edith. He tries to explain, but Arati is not convinced. She will no longer work for a man who is so backward and mean-spirited as to mistreat someone just because she is Anglo-Indian.

Subrata (Self-pitying)

Character Subrata, who is Arati's husband, is a moody, somewhat introverted but basically kind person. As a typical bank clerk, he is portrayed as a grey-man, a person without much colour or distinction. He is certainly not a jolly fellow, but then we realise that he is the sole wage-earner for a joint-family of nine. No wonder he looks a little morose when he comes home in the late afternoon, after a predictable day of filing papers and reports, and then fighting the crowds to get a bus back home. Once inside the house, he does show affection to his children and parents, and is on good terms with his wife. He is far from the authoritarian male figure found in many pieces of Indian fiction (and films). But perhaps this is also his weakness—a slightly diffident quality, lacking spark and initiative. Beneath his nonchalant surface, however, we have occasion to glimpse a proud man, who may not appear to have much self-respect, but who feels the erosion of his bread-winner status when his wife begins to bring home more money than he does. That is when he shows his pettiness, his small-minded prejudice and his underlying lack of confidence.

Activities At work, Subrata files papers and checks signatures, hardly an inspiring task for seven hours a day. He rides a sweaty and crammed bus both to and from work. At home, he smokes cigarettes, plays with his children and tries to humour his grumpy father. He has few vices, but even fewer pleasures, it seems.

Illustrative moments

Affectionate Despite Subrata's lack of energy and initiative, he is a kind and loving father. This quality never wavers in the story. Even when he faces financial troubles, he has warm words for this son and daughter, plays with them and is concerned with their schooling and general welfare. A good example of this characteristic comes early on in the story, when he has encouraged his wife to apply for a job and is helping her to fill on the application form. With his two children watching on, she asks whether to use a 'j' or a 'z' in spelling a word, and he says, 'Use "z", you know the first letter in... (here he pauses to make sure the children are listening)... in "zoo."' At this, the son asks, 'Who's going to the zoo?' Subrata picks him up, gives him a kiss and replies, 'We are! Tomorrow!' It is a fleeting moment, not particularly dramatic or eye-catching, and yet it tells us a great deal about Subrata. While helping his wife to fill out a job application form, he has enough awareness to know what his children want and enough quick wit to turn a spelling question into a family outing.

Self-pitying The darker side of Subrata's personality, his tendency to moan and feel inadequate, is also quite strong and often defeats his affectionate side. A powerful illustration of this self-pitying element in his character occurs when his wife, Arati, has secured her job and is bringing home a sizable weekly salary. The scene is inside their house in the early evening, when Subrata and the rest of the family have eaten their meal and are waiting for Arati to come home. The children are doing their homework, while Subrata gazes out the window smoking one of his many cigarettes. Suddenly, Arati bursts into the house, carrying several large packages. With only a perfunctory 'hello' to him, she gathers the children together and tells them she has brought them special gifts. Subrata watches silently, still smoking, as the children are delighted with their new toys. Unable to bear his irrelevance, he turns back to the open window and tries to shut out their cries of pleasure. He was never a grand success, anyway, never a hero, but he did at least maintain a little self-respect through the knowledge that the family depended on him. That crutch has now been knocked out from underneath him.

Humiliated Things go from bad to worse when Subrata loses his clerk's job at the bank—a rush on accounts by depositors causes it to go out of business. Even his wife's salary is not enough, and he is forced to search for extra funds. The situation is particularly acute when his elderly father needs new glasses. Subrata had already promised to buy him a new pair but has put it off (one of many examples of his passivity). His father's day is made by doing the crossword puzzle, and without his

glasses that's not possible. When his father reminds him, yet again, that he had promised to buy him a new pair, Subrata promises again. His father suggests that Subrata ask Arati for the money, that is, if he has no cash himself. 'No, father,' Subrata snaps back at him. 'That won't be necessary.' Then Subrata goes to find an old school friend, a wealthy business man. The author describes his humiliation when he actually has to ask for a loan ('a loan, that's all, just a loan'), which he has no means of paying back. The creases on his face, the sluggish way he moves his body, his cracked voice—all of it illustrates a defeated man.

Edith (Sweet)

Character The character of Edith Simmons is one the reasons that this story has earned it a secure place in the history of Indian literature. She is young and unmarried, living with her mother in a run-down apartment in the centre of Calcutta. But the most important element of her character is her background: she is Anglo-Indian. Half-caste, as one of the Indians in the story puts it. Or 'chi-chi' [lit. 'dirty'], as another says, which is an ethnic slur directed at Anglo-Indians. Edith fits the Indian stereotype of the Anglo-Indian (at least in the mid-20th century). She wears skirts (not saris), she wears a lot of lipstick and she paints her nails. Her Bengali is not very cultured and her English is a little slangy, too. She doesn't fit in, except among her own people, who were fairly numerous in Calcutta. They lived in their own neighbourhoods, married their own kind and cooked their own food. But Edith does not carry a chip on her shoulder. She is a lively, optimistic young woman, who works hard at her job and looks after her aging mother. She appears somewhat care-free, unburdened by the worries that weigh so heavily on other workers in the big city. She has a sweet personality, gentle and soft-spoken. But, as her boss learns to his disadvantage, she also has an inner strength and a pride in herself. She is not confrontational, but she will stand up for herself when necessary.

Activities As a young woman without much money, Edith goes to and from work on a bus. At work, she is disciplined and punctual, does not cut corners and is polite to everyone. She does not spend much time with her co-workers, although once or twice she entertains them with stories about customers. At home, she is a carer, looking after her ailing mother and giving special attention to a pet parrot that she keeps in a cage.

Illustrative moments

Sweet There is no better word than 'sweet' to describe Edith's personality. She smiles, she wishes harm to no one and she harbours no ill feelings, no grudges or complaints. A touching illustration of this open-hearted characteristic occurs when we first meet her. Arati has just arrived on the morning of her first day at the office. She enters the large building and stands confused, looking at the wide stairs. Edith swings through the glass doors and passes her, but then she looks back, realising that this Bengali woman, so primly dressed, with her hair demurely drawn back in a tight bun, must be a newcomer. 'Can I help you?' Edith asks Arati. When Arati can only manage a smile (her English is not very good, and she is shy in any case), Edith sizes up the situation and takes her in hand. 'Come with me. You're the new girl, aren't you?' Arati smiles again, relieved, and puts herself in the safekeeping of this unfamiliar person (Arati has never had an Anglo-Indian friend). Edith gently guides her to the office, shows her where to hang her coat, where the bathroom is and where the canteen is located. This is all done with a minimum of speech—neither one speaks the other's language well—but Arati feels no fear because she sees at once that Edith is a kind-hearted person.

Self-respect Sweet Edith keeps to herself most of the time at work. As an Anglo-Indian, she is regarded with suspicion, at best, and unexpressed hatred, at worst. Her withdrawn nature, however, belies an inner strength and self-respect. This quality is demonstrated in a scene near the end of the story, when Edith is blamed for a discrepancy in the sales figures for her (and Arati's) group. Mr Mukherjee, the usually even-tempered boss, summons her to his office, where he sits in a commanding position behind a large desk. He puts his pipe to one side and, without actually saying so, accuses her of stealing the money. At this point, Edith, who has been patiently listening to his account of what happened, simply says, 'You have absolutely no evidence that I have taken the money. And I resent your assumption that I have. I tell you without hesitation that I did not take it. And if that is not good enough, if you think you cannot trust an Anglo-Indian, then I will not work for you ever again.'

Vulnerable This demonstration of self-will is followed immediately by a revelation of her vulnerability. She has steeled herself to speak with such clear and defiant words to her boss, but the encounter leaves her shaking and almost in tears. She quickly retreats to the ladies bathroom, where she finds Arati. Unable to hide her distress, Edith pours out the story to her friend and then lets herself be embraced by her. Here we realise how little purchase she has on life. She has no one, save an aging mother. And now, quite possibly, depending on what Mr Mukherjee does, she has no job. But she does have Arati. There is a certain symmetry in their relationship. Just as Edith helped a trembling Arati on her first day, Arati, now a confident employee, is there to comfort a badly shaken Edith.