

Between Territory and Deterritorialization: Interrogating Indian Urban Spaces via Deleuzo- Guattarian Assemblages

Dr. Sugandha Agnihotri

Assistant Professor

Department of Languages

Integral University, Lucknow, U.P.

Phone No: 8299009956

Email ID- sugandhaagnihotri11@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Territory, Deterritorialization, Assemblage Theory, Deleuze, Field theory

Contradiction, complexity, and constant change are characteristics of Indian urban environments. It becomes more and more clear that no single paradigm can adequately capture the complex interactions between infrastructure, relocation, informality, preparing, and protest as one navigates the multi-layered reality of Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore. An appealing framework for understanding Indian urbanism is provided by the philosophical theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly their theory of assemblage and the related concepts of territorial expansion, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. The Deleuzo-Guattarian paradigm allows us to consider urban space as constantly changing constellations of interactions, activities, and fluxes rather than as permanent, confined entities. This article explores Indian urban environments as assemblages and looks at how the political and geographical texture of the city is co-constructed by territory and un-making.

Philosopher and urban theorist Manuel DeLanda has been trying to draw out of Gilles Deleuze's voluminous work a new "philosophy of society" for nearly three decades. Rather than applying Deleuze to social theory as a prolongation of the Marxist Foucauldian ideology/discourse critique tradition to examine contemporary "societies of control" as usual (Clough et al., 2007), DeLanda seeks to present logical and easy-to-understand concepts that allegedly settle some of the classic contradictions within social theory while being accessible to practicing social scientists who wish to explain all the possible manners in which historical and contemporary events take place. More, specifically, he advocates, explains, and universalizes one concept from Deleuze's large, enigmatic book on capitalism

and schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, 1988) that he feels breaks through physics, chemistry, biology, ecology, psychology, sociology, and history, as well as other disciplines. That is the assembly concept.

Actor-network theorists employ the term "assemblage" too, and as most ANTs, DeLanda follows a "flat ontology," which eschews the employment of hidden processes or deep structures, and a "generalized symmetry," which considers social, material, and symbolic components on an equal footing. He is thus sometimes named in addition to ANT and Deleuze himself as a driving force of the "new materialist" or "post-human" streams of recent social theory (see, for instance, Fox and Alldred, 2017), or he is considered one of the most important figures in the increasing popularity of the concept of assemblage for non-standard conceptualization and explanation in social, political, and regional ideas (e.g. Anderson et al., 2012; Conway, 2022; Elliot and Urry, 2010; Marcus and Saka, 2006; Venn, 2006; Thrift, 2008). In addition, DeLanda, as with some ANTs, has explicitly pitted his contribution against Pierre Bourdieu's. To further advance "assemblage theory," as he terms it, DeLanda has compared and contrasted his ideas with the foundational writings of leading sociologists, from Giddens and Tilly through Weber and Goffman. These are treated sympathetically in many cases, and the ideas they represent are translated into assemblage theory jargon. But the journey for Bourdieu is much more challenging. DeLanda ultimately abandons the concept of field (or social space) and the concept of habitus, while indicating certain seeming sites of harmony or conjunction.

This paper explores the multifaceted interplay of spatial organization and reconfiguration in the contemporary Indian city, conceptualized through the philosophical lens of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notions of territory, deterritorialization, and assemblage. Fundamentally, the essay tries to examine how Indian cities—marked by neoliberal urbanization, entrenched informality, and multi-layered socio-political histories—are locations of perpetual negotiation between tendencies that try to territorialize them (to code, regulate, and stabilize) and tendencies that deterritorialize them (to overturn, flow outside of, or re-maps). The use of the assemblage paradigm allows us to see urban India neither as a monolithic whole nor as a stable grid, but as a changing configuration of diverse elements—state agencies, private developers, migrant communities, infrastructural networks, informal economies, cultural practices, and movements of resistance—that come together and fall apart relative to each other.

This emphasis on

multiplicity disrupts orthodox interpretations of the city based on formal planning and infrastructural determinism, and instead brings to the fore the micropolitical resistances, affective intensities, social imaginaries, and infrastructural contingencies that live Indian urban life.

The paper begins by defining Deleuze and Guattari's key conceptual apparatus. "Territory" is understood not purely as bounded land, but as a process of establishing order, assigning functions, producing identities, and creating controlled space. Territorialization in urban contexts manifests through zoning laws, gated communities, beautification drives, surveillance infrastructures, and master plans. The emergence of smart cities in India—where urban infrastructure and municipal government meet digital technologies—illustrates contemporary territorialization, as IT corridors and sensor grids map areas of safety, data-gathering, and homologated "citizenship." In contrast to this, "deterritorialization" refers to the dismantling or displacement of existing territories; it is the flow, creative diffusion, or subversion of structures. In Indian cities, these processes are manifest in the spread of informal settlements that appear on and around gated enclaves, the lively street vending activity that challenges pedestrian norms, and the spontaneous cultural festivals that constitute temporary public spheres. Assemblages are therefore hybrid, contingent networks or formations of territorializing and deterritorializing forces.

Shifting from theory to situated study, the essay analyzes three urban phenomenon in Indian mega-cities—slum settlements in Mumbai, infrastructure mega-projects in Delhi, and gated residential enclaves in Bangalore—to map out assemblage dynamics. In Mumbai, the Dharavi slum is an example of a potent deterritorializing force: it exists in direct defiance of formal zoning and typologies, providing housing and livelihoods for hundreds of thousands. Dharavi is not only an informal collection of constructed buildings but also of economic processes (recycling, small industry, services), social networks, and cultural practices. Dharavi, however, is also threatened by territorialization through redevelopment schemes, eviction campaigns, and real estate demands. This process generates a layered, disputed space where residents activate legal instruments (RTI, public interest litigation) and media discourses to deterritorialize state efforts at erasure. Thus, assemblages make visible the multiplicity of actors and scales—from local organizations to global capital—that constitute urban form. In Delhi, gigantic infrastructural assemblages—metro lines, elevated highways, biometric security corridors—attempt to write smooth, continuous flows of capital and mobility. These are exemplary of territorializing

logics: the designed spatial order of urban mobility, economic productivity, and surveillance but each corridor is disrupted by deterritorializing effects: hawkers encroach on pavements, migrant workers occupy nearby squatter colonies, and urbanites appropriate underused bridges for impromptu meets and street entertainment. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) and city officials try to hegemonize the corridors, but the assemblage paradigm makes visible their porosity, multiplicity, and invasion. In Bangalore gated subdivisions and IT parks express a cosmopolitan middle-class dream. Their walls, fences, security installations, manicured lawns, and rigorous services make micro-territories that insulate inhabitants, circumscribe privilege, and generate cleansed enclaves. At the same time, though, these gated ensembles are based upon deterritorialized labor—domestic staff, gardeners, security personnel—who service these spaces but live outside them, frequently in outlying localities. Their invisible social networks, forms of mobility, and collective life constitute a parallel spatial assemblage that evades gate and plan logics.

These micro-cases are woven together in the assemblage framework to contend that Indian urban spaces are not solely territorialized nor fervently deterritorialized but instead are located in areas of precarious balances. Assemblages appear as neither fully determinate nor unfettered; they are contingent on placed practices and resistances. For example, Bengaluru's BTS metro corridor has created real estate speculation and official development, but vendors have interpolated its hustle and bustle with street trade; however upon evictions, the assemblage reorganizes, splintering into surrounding lanes. This repeated pattern underscores the rhizomatic philosophy of Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblages—non-hierarchical, webbed, and in constant remix. Nancy Fraser's concept of spatial justice is appealed to in order to note how territorialization tends to create socio-spatial segregation—by class, caste, religion—while deterritorialization may disrupt or consolidate such inequalities based on the power dynamics between actors. A Deleuzo-Guattarian interpretation enables us to recognize assemblages in Indian cities as circuits of exclusion and inclusion, appropriation and subversion, mobility and stasis.

The study then shifts to question the agency of affect, sensorial experience, and mundane practice in constituting urban assemblages. How does the urban ambiance of a busy market, a train station, or a festival ground deterritorialize the spatial norms of power? What affects—the fear of displacement, the yearning for belonging, the euphoria of communal rites—intensify territorial forms

and break down others? Here ethnographic accounts play a key role, illustrating how a single hawker cart mobilizes space on a footpath, rerouting pedestrian flows and challenging corporatized footpath beautifications. Similarly, nighttime music performances in Delhi's Lodhi Gardens deterritorialize neutral state spaces, producing affective assemblages that spatialize dissent. These sensorial intensities are not peripheral; they constitute the vital medium through which urban territorialization is contested and remade.

The paper also addresses the temporal aspect of assemblages. Urban changes tend to include short-term practices—pop-up markets, flash mobs, anti-eviction demonstrations, art events—that deterritorialize urban issues while mega-projects such as airport development and Metro lines reterritorialize them over decades. This rivalry between temporary practices and long-lasting institutions indicates how time is involved in spatial politics. For example, Delhi's bhangra-inspired flash mobs once disrupted the carefully curated "cultural heritage" corridor near India Gate; for a moment, state-sanctioned civic space was deterritorialized. Yet shortly after, officials responded with revised permitting norms and increased policing—another reterritorializing assemblage. Similarly, Mumbai's Western Express Highway has grown as a site of infrastructural territorialization, but periodic protests by environmentalists and slum dwellers—against expansion or tree-felling—temporarily deterritorialize its symbolic authority.

A Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective points to issues of power not as being centered in locatable sources (the state, capital, communities), but as being spread across assemblages. Power flows; it is not owned. The violent displacement of the homeless during "clean-city" operations in Pune or Ahmedabad is not merely state repression; it comes through assemblages of police, civil society, media discourses, private foundations, corporate sponsors, urban middle-class fears, and migrant vulnerabilities. Deterritorialization for this one assemblage for instance, the clearance of slums turns into territorialization of that one (for instance, gated visions of cleanliness or global ambition). The lens of assemblage places emphasis on the co-implication of actors—even though these actors are acting from different interests—in creating spatial effects.

The last aspect of the essay takes up ethical and political stakes: how assemblage thinking could inform more equitable and inclusive urban futures. If we see urban spaces as being produced by intermingled assemblages, then intervention must strive to enhance deterritorializing abilities of marginalized collectives instead of reinforcing the

homogenizing order of master plans. Policymakers and civil society can utilize the subversive power of affective urban practices—celebrations, street art, community markets—to rework territorial logics around equity and solidarity. Assemblage-influenced architects and urban planners may suggest open public spaces, incremental housing, modularized infrastructure, and adaptive reuse of public space. Activist coalitions between slum dwellers' groups, hawkers' associations, environmental activists, digital hackers—may deploy assemblage thinking to create what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as "lines of flight" that recompose power relations within the city. The concept of the city is an event, not an object; it becomes something that happens, rather than something that exists. Urban justice is not a noun but a verb.

Finally, the exploration of Indian urban spaces through Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblages uncovers the dynamic dance of deterritorialization and territorialization. These terms shed light on how Indian urbanity is constantly in motion—decomposed, reassembled, overcoded; never completely planned, never completely anarchic. The assemblage mode of thought allows us to see the city as a rhythmic choreography of diverse forces—social, economic, infrastructural, affective—that generate space through practice. It places center stage the ability of the marginal and the mundane to deterritorialize hegemony, while also recognizing the insidious force of capital-state regimes to reterritorialize at scale. Through this dialectic, academics, practitioners, and activists can better grasp and frame the potentialities of Indian urban futures—open, resilient, just, and responsive to the creative multiplicities that increasingly inhabit them.

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