

Imagining the Postmodern City: Urban Dystopia and Future

Anxieties in Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*

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Abstract

Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) presents a dystopian vision of Delhi shaped by water scarcity, ecological degradation and social fragmentation. While existing criticism has largely examined the graphic novel through the frameworks of climate fiction, environmental activism and water politics, the representation of the city as a postmodern dystopian space has received comparatively less attention. This paper explores how Banerjee constructs a futuristic urban landscape marked by uncertainty, disorder and the collapse of developmental ideals. Through a qualitative textual analysis of the graphic narrative, the study examines the intersections of urban dystopia, environmental crisis and postmodern anxieties. The paper argues that the fictional space of *Vikaspuri* functions as a critique of contemporary

urban development, exposing the contradictions embedded within narratives of progress and modernisation. Water scarcity becomes not only an ecological problem but also a symbol of social disintegration and political failure. Banerjee's use of visual satire, fragmented storytelling and speculative futurity enables a critical engagement with the challenges facing rapidly expanding metropolitan centres. By analysing the graphic novel within the broader contexts of postmodern urbanism and dystopian literature, the study demonstrates how *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* anticipates the social and environmental consequences of unchecked development. The paper contributes to emerging discussions on Indian graphic narratives and contemporary representations of urban futures.

Keywords: Urban Dystopia, Postmodernism, Graphic Narrative, Future Anxiety, Delhi, Sarnath Banerjee, Development, Environmental Crisis

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed growing scholarly interest in literary and visual representations of environmental uncertainty, urban transformation and speculative futures. As cities expand rapidly under the pressures of globalisation, technological advancement and population growth, literature increasingly reflects concerns regarding sustainability, resource scarcity and the changing nature of urban life. Dystopian narratives have emerged as an important medium through which writers and artists imagine the possible consequences of contemporary social, political and environmental trends. Rather than presenting distant fantasies, these narratives often extrapolate existing realities, exposing the vulnerabilities hidden beneath the promises of progress and development.

Within contemporary Indian literature, graphic narratives have become a significant site for exploring questions of identity, modernity and social change. The combination of visual and textual storytelling allows graphic novels to represent complex realities through innovative narrative techniques. Scholars such as Pramod K. Nayar have noted that Indian graphic

narratives frequently engage with issues of urbanisation, memory, politics and cultural transformation. By combining satire, visual symbolism and speculative imagination, graphic novels provide unique perspectives on the challenges confronting contemporary society.

Sarnath Banerjee occupies a distinctive position within this literary tradition. Recognised as one of India's pioneering graphic novelists, Banerjee frequently examines the contradictions of urban existence and the cultural consequences of modernisation. His works are characterised by humour, irony and experimental visual storytelling that challenge conventional perceptions of reality. In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), Banerjee imagines a future Delhi devastated by severe water shortages and ecological instability. Set against the backdrop of the so-called "Water Wars," the narrative depicts a city where neighbourhoods compete for access to dwindling resources and where ordinary life is shaped by environmental uncertainty.

The fictional landscape of Vikaspuri is particularly significant because it functions as more than a setting. The city itself becomes a central narrative force, reflecting the anxieties and contradictions of contemporary urban development. The term "Vikaspuri" evokes the idea of *vikas* or development, a concept frequently associated with modernisation, economic growth and technological progress. Yet Banerjee's narrative presents a strikingly different vision. Instead of prosperity and advancement, the city is characterised by infrastructural collapse, social fragmentation and ecological decline. The irony embedded within the city's name highlights the tensions between developmental aspirations and environmental realities.

Existing scholarship on *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* has primarily focused on ecological themes, climate fiction and environmental activism. Critics have examined the novel's engagement with water scarcity, environmental injustice and the politics of resource distribution. Such studies have made valuable contributions to understanding the ecological dimensions of the text. However, relatively less attention has been devoted to the novel's

representation of urban space and its engagement with postmodern conceptions of the future. The fragmented social order, absurd bureaucratic structures and unstable realities depicted in the narrative invite a broader examination of the city as a postmodern dystopian environment.

This paper therefore, investigates how Banerjee constructs Vikaspuri as a postmodern dystopian city that embodies contemporary anxieties regarding development, environmental degradation and urban survival. Drawing upon concepts from postmodern theory and dystopian studies, the paper argues that the graphic novel presents a critical reimagining of the future city in which the promises of progress have given way to uncertainty, scarcity and social disintegration. Through its visual and textual strategies, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* challenges dominant narratives of development and compels readers to reconsider the ecological and social consequences of contemporary urban life.

Vikaspuri as a Postmodern City

One of the most striking aspects of Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* is its portrayal of the city as a fragmented, unstable urban space. Unlike traditional narratives of urban progress that celebrate development, infrastructure and technological advancement, Banerjee presents a city characterised by uncertainty, scarcity and social disintegration. The fictional Vikaspuri functions as a symbolic extension of contemporary Delhi, reflecting anxieties about the future of rapidly expanding metropolitan centres. Through satire, irony and speculative imagination, the graphic novel constructs a postmodern city in which conventional notions of order, stability and progress have lost their meaning.

The concept of the postmodern city is closely associated with fragmentation and the breakdown of grand narratives. Fredric Jameson argues that postmodern culture is marked by the erosion of coherent historical perspectives and the emergence of disjointed social realities. In such a context, cities become spaces where multiple and often contradictory experiences coexist. Banerjee's depiction of Vikaspuri reflects this condition. The city appears at once

familiar and unfamiliar, combining recognisable urban landscapes with futuristic, often absurd elements. Readers encounter a world that resembles contemporary Delhi while also presenting exaggerated manifestations of present-day concerns. This blending of reality and speculation produces a distinctly postmodern urban environment.

The central crisis around which the narrative revolves is water scarcity. Access to water has become the primary determinant of social organisation, political power and everyday survival. Neighbourhoods engage in conflicts over resources, and ordinary civic life is disrupted by the constant struggle for access to essential necessities. Water is no longer treated as a shared public resource but as a highly contested commodity. The transformation of a basic necessity into an object of competition reveals the fragility of urban civilisation and exposes the consequences of unchecked urban expansion.

Banerjee further develops the dystopian character of Vikaspuri through his portrayal of institutions and authority structures. Governmental systems appear ineffective, fragmented and often absurd. Rather than providing solutions to environmental challenges, institutions seem incapable of managing the crisis. This failure of governance contributes to the atmosphere of uncertainty that permeates the narrative. The city functions without a stable centre of authority, reflecting a postmodern condition in which traditional structures of power have lost their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The graphic novel also challenges the developmental discourse that frequently dominates discussions of urban growth in contemporary India. The very name “Vikaspuri” carries significant symbolic weight. Derived from the Hindi word *vikas*, meaning development or progress, the name evokes the promises associated with modernisation and economic growth. Yet Banerjee’s city stands in direct contrast to these expectations. The urban future imagined in the narrative is not one of prosperity and technological achievement but of ecological degradation and social fragmentation. The irony embedded within the title

highlights the gap between developmental aspirations and lived realities. In doing so, Banerjee questions the assumption that economic growth alone can ensure social well-being and environmental sustainability.

Another important feature of the postmodern city is the blurring of boundaries between reality and imagination. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is useful in understanding this aspect of the narrative. Hyperreality refers to situations in which representations become more influential than reality itself, producing worlds that appear simultaneously authentic and artificial. In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, the distinction between plausible future scenarios and satirical exaggeration is deliberately blurred. The bizarre events and eccentric characters that populate the narrative contribute to a sense of unreality while remaining closely connected to contemporary social concerns. This ambiguity encourages readers to reflect on the extent to which present realities may already contain the seeds of future dystopian developments.

The graphic novel's visual structure reinforces the city's fragmented nature. Unlike conventional prose narratives, graphic storytelling allows Banerjee to combine textual and visual elements to highlight discontinuity and complexity. Panels often juxtapose different perspectives, locations and events, creating a sense of movement through an urban landscape that lacks coherence and stability. The reader experiences the city as a series of interconnected fragments rather than as a unified whole. This formal strategy mirrors the social and environmental fragmentation depicted within the narrative itself.

Humour and satire also play an important role in Banerjee's representation of urban life. Although the novel addresses serious issues such as ecological collapse and resource scarcity, it frequently employs irony and absurdity to expose the contradictions of contemporary society. The exaggerated situations presented in the narrative invite laughter while simultaneously provoking critical reflection. Through satire, Banerjee reveals the

irrationality that often underlies supposedly rational systems of development and governance. The result is a dystopian vision that is both entertaining and deeply unsettling.

Ultimately, Vikaspuri emerges as a city shaped by uncertainty rather than progress. The narrative suggests that urban futures cannot be understood solely through technological innovation or economic indicators. Instead, they are profoundly influenced by environmental conditions, political decisions and social relationships. By presenting a city in which these elements have become unstable, Banerjee offers a powerful critique of contemporary developmental paradigms. Vikaspuri is therefore not merely a fictional location but a symbolic representation of the anxieties surrounding the future of urban civilisation itself. Through its postmodern aesthetic and dystopian imagination, the graphic novel challenges readers to reconsider the meanings of development, progress and urban modernity in an age of increasing ecological vulnerability.

Urban Dystopia, Environmental Breakdown and Future Anxiety

A defining feature of dystopian literature is its ability to project contemporary social and environmental concerns into an imagined future. In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, Sarnath Banerjee constructs a future Delhi shaped by ecological degradation, resource scarcity, and increasing social instability. Although the narrative is set in a speculative future, the crises represented in the graphic novel are firmly rooted in present-day realities. The text demonstrates how environmental problems, when left unaddressed, can transform urban spaces into sites of conflict, insecurity and uncertainty. Through its depiction of water shortages, environmental decline and civic fragmentation, the novel presents a compelling vision of urban dystopia that resonates strongly with contemporary ecological anxieties.

The most visible manifestation of dystopia in the narrative is the severe water shortage. Water functions not merely as a natural resource but as the central organising principle of social and political life. Access to water determines power relations, shapes community interactions

and influences the survival of entire neighbourhoods. The so-called “Water Wars” that form the backdrop of the narrative illustrate the extent to which environmental scarcity can destabilise urban society. Rather than fostering cooperation, the resource shortage intensifies competition and conflict among communities. In this respect, Banerjee's work reflects broader concerns regarding the future availability of water in rapidly urbanising regions.

Critics have observed that the graphic novel foregrounds environmental crisis as a consequence of unsustainable developmental practices. Gupta (2018) argues that *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* operates as a form of climate fiction that draws attention to environmental degradation through the interaction of visual and textual narratives. The novel encourages readers to recognise the long-term consequences of ecological neglect and to question dominant assumptions regarding development and progress. By projecting current environmental trends into a dystopian future, Banerjee transforms ecological concerns into an urgent social and political issue (Gupta, 2018).

The environmental crisis represented in the novel also reflects what Rob Nixon (2011) describes as “slow violence.” According to Nixon, environmental destruction often occurs gradually and remains invisible until its effects become severe. Unlike sudden catastrophes that attract immediate attention, slow violence unfolds over extended periods and disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Banerjee’s depiction of water scarcity corresponds closely with this concept. The dystopian conditions of *Vikaspuri* do not emerge from a single dramatic event; rather, they result from years of environmental exploitation, resource mismanagement and unsustainable urban expansion. The narrative therefore, highlights the cumulative effects of ecological neglect and demonstrates how environmental damage eventually becomes embedded within everyday life.

The relationship between environmental breakdown and social inequality constitutes another significant aspect of the novel. Access to resources is unevenly distributed, creating

divisions between different communities and social groups. Environmental crises do not affect all citizens equally; instead, existing inequalities are intensified under conditions of scarcity. This observation aligns with Madan's (2018) analysis of the novel, which emphasises the intersections between environmental injustice and resource politics. The struggle for water becomes a struggle for power, revealing the unequal structures that govern access to essential resources. Through this representation, Banerjee demonstrates that ecological crises are both social and political.

The narrative's dystopian atmosphere is further reinforced by the pervasive sense of uncertainty about the future. Future anxiety emerges as a recurring theme throughout the graphic novel. Citizens inhabit a world in which stability can no longer be taken for granted and where environmental conditions constantly threaten everyday existence. The future appears unpredictable and precarious rather than progressive and hopeful. Such anxieties reflect wider contemporary concerns about climate change, environmental degradation and the sustainability of modern urban life. The narrative suggests that fears regarding ecological collapse are not limited to scientific discourse but have become embedded within cultural imagination and collective consciousness.

This future anxiety is closely connected to the failure of developmental promises. Modern urbanisation is often associated with technological advancement, economic growth and improved living standards. However, Banerjee's fictional city exposes the limitations of this narrative. Despite the apparent expansion of urban infrastructure, the city remains unable to ensure environmental sustainability or social well-being. The contrast between the ideal of development and the reality of ecological decline creates a powerful sense of disillusionment. As David Harvey (2000) observes, contemporary urban development frequently produces uneven outcomes, generating new forms of exclusion and vulnerability even as it promises progress. Banerjee's dystopian future reflects precisely these contradictions.

The novel's graphic form significantly enhances its representation of environmental breakdown and urban anxiety. Visual imagery enables readers to witness the direct physical consequences of ecological degradation. The interaction between words and images creates a multidimensional narrative experience that intensifies the emotional impact of the dystopian setting. Scott McCloud (1993) argues that graphic narratives possess unique capacities for representing complex social realities through visual juxtaposition and symbolic imagery. In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, these formal features contribute to the construction of an urban environment characterised by fragmentation, instability and ecological uncertainty.

Moreover, the novel avoids presenting environmental catastrophe as a distant or unimaginable possibility. Instead, the future depicted in the narrative appears disturbingly close to the present. Many of the conditions represented in *Vikaspuri*—water shortages, environmental pollution, population pressures and infrastructural strain—already exist in various forms within contemporary cities. This proximity between present reality and future dystopia enhances the novel's critical force. Readers are encouraged to recognise that the dystopian future is not entirely fictional but emerges from tendencies already visible within contemporary urban society.

Ultimately, Banerjee's representation of environmental breakdown extends beyond ecological commentary. The novel demonstrates how environmental crises reshape social relationships, political structures and cultural perceptions of the future. Water scarcity becomes a symbol of broader anxieties concerning survival, justice and urban sustainability. Through its dystopian vision, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* challenges optimistic narratives of progress and compels readers to confront the environmental consequences of contemporary development. In doing so, the graphic novel establishes itself as a significant contribution to contemporary discussions of urban futures, ecological vulnerability and environmental responsibility.

Future Anxiety and the Failure of Development

One of the most significant concerns explored in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* is the growing anxiety surrounding the future of urban civilisation. The graphic novel presents a world in which the promises of development have failed to produce security, equality or environmental sustainability. Instead of offering solutions to social and ecological challenges, the developmental model represented in the narrative appears to generate new forms of instability and uncertainty. Through its dystopian vision of Delhi, Banerjee questions dominant assumptions about progress and compels readers to reconsider the long-term consequences of contemporary patterns of urban growth.

The idea of development occupies a central position in modern political and economic discourse. Development is frequently associated with technological advancement, infrastructural expansion and economic prosperity. Governments, corporations and policymakers often present development as a pathway towards a better future. However, postmodern theorists have highlighted the limitations of such grand narratives. Lyotard (1984) argues that postmodern society is characterised by scepticism towards universal narratives that claim to provide comprehensive explanations of social progress. In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, this scepticism becomes particularly evident. The city bears the name “Vikaspuri,” which literally evokes the notion of development, yet the reality depicted within the narrative stands in sharp contrast to the optimistic implications of that term. The irony embedded in the title itself signals Banerjee’s critique of developmental ideology.

The dystopian condition of Vikaspuri suggests that economic and technological advancement alone cannot guarantee human well-being. Despite the apparent growth of urban infrastructure, citizens continue to face environmental degradation, resource scarcity and social fragmentation. The future city is marked not by prosperity but by crisis. Such a representation challenges the assumption that development necessarily leads to social progress. As Harvey

(2000) observes, contemporary urbanisation often produces uneven outcomes, creating new forms of inequality and exclusion even as it promotes economic growth. Banerjee's narrative reflects this contradiction by portraying a city where development coexists with ecological decline and civic instability.

Future anxiety in the novel is also linked to the uncertainty generated by environmental change. The inhabitants of Vikaspuri live in a world where access to essential resources can no longer be taken for granted. Everyday existence is shaped by insecurity and unpredictability. This atmosphere of uncertainty reflects broader global concerns regarding climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion. The future appears increasingly fragile, and confidence in institutions' ability to manage environmental challenges has diminished. Consequently, the novel presents anxiety not as an individual psychological condition but as a collective social experience arising from ecological vulnerability.

Banerjee further emphasises the inadequacy of developmental paradigms through his depiction of governance and public institutions. Throughout the narrative, institutional structures appear fragmented, inefficient and incapable of responding effectively to environmental crises. Rather than functioning as mechanisms of stability and protection, they contribute to confusion and disorder. The inability of institutions to address resource scarcity undermines public confidence and reinforces the sense of uncertainty that characterises the dystopian city. This representation reflects contemporary concerns about governments' capacity to manage increasingly complex environmental and urban challenges.

The graphic novel also highlights the commodification of natural resources within modern urban society. Water, which traditionally functions as a shared public necessity, becomes an object of competition, control and economic value. The transformation of a basic resource into a commodity illustrates the extent to which market-oriented approaches have penetrated everyday life. Scholars of environmental humanities have frequently argued that the

commodification of nature contributes to ecological degradation by prioritising economic interests over sustainability (Nixon, 2011). Banerjee's narrative visualises this process by showing how resource scarcity generates conflict and intensifies social divisions. The future city becomes a space where economic logic supersedes collective responsibility, resulting in heightened insecurity and social fragmentation.

Another important dimension of future anxiety in the novel is the erosion of confidence in collective futures. Modern developmental discourse often assumes that societies move towards greater prosperity and stability. In contrast, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* presents a future characterised by uncertainty and decline. The narrative does not offer a clear vision of recovery or redemption. Instead, it exposes the fragility of systems that appear stable in the present. This absence of certainty distinguishes the novel from traditional narratives of progress and aligns it with postmodern concerns regarding instability, contingency and unpredictability. The future remains open, but it is an openness marked by apprehension rather than optimism.

The graphic novel's visual form reinforces this atmosphere of uncertainty. Fragmented sequences, shifting perspectives and satirical imagery contribute to a sense of instability that mirrors the social conditions represented within the narrative. As McCloud (1993) observes, graphic narratives possess unique capacities to represent multiple realities simultaneously through the interaction of text and image. Banerjee employs these possibilities to create a cityscape that appears both familiar and disorienting. The visual fragmentation of the narrative reflects the fragmentation of the social world itself, thereby strengthening the novel's critique of developmental modernity.

Ultimately, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* presents a powerful critique of the belief that development inevitably produces a better future. By depicting a city shaped by environmental crisis, resource conflict and institutional failure, Banerjee reveals the contradictions embedded within dominant narratives of progress. The novel suggests that futures built upon

unsustainable forms of development are likely to generate anxiety rather than security. Through its dystopian imagination, the text encourages readers to question established assumptions about growth, modernisation and urban success. In doing so, it transforms the future from a site of expectation into a space of critical reflection, compelling contemporary society to confront the environmental and social consequences of its developmental choices.

Conclusion

Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* presents a dystopian vision of urban life that challenges conventional ideas of development, progress and modernity. Through its depiction of a future Delhi affected by water scarcity, environmental degradation and social fragmentation, the graphic novel exposes the vulnerabilities hidden within contemporary developmental practices. The fictional city of Vikaspuri functions as a postmodern urban space where ecological crisis, institutional failure and resource conflicts disrupt the promise of a secure and prosperous future. The analysis has shown that Banerjee uses dystopian imagination to highlight the environmental and social consequences of unsustainable urban growth. Water scarcity emerges not only as an ecological concern but also as a symbol of inequality, instability and collective anxiety. The novel further demonstrates how environmental crises reshape everyday life and challenge existing structures of governance and social order. Through its combination of visual satire, fragmented narrative techniques and speculative futurity, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* offers a critical reflection on the future of rapidly urbanising societies. By questioning dominant narratives of development and exposing their contradictions, Banerjee encourages readers to reconsider the relationships among urban expansion, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. Ultimately, the graphic novel serves as a cautionary tale, warning against neglecting ecological concerns in the pursuit of progress, while emphasising the need for more sustainable and inclusive visions of the urban future.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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