Mapping Urban Informality and Splintering Infrastructure of Bengaluru in Simon Lamouret's *The Alcazar*

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Abstract

The article, at the intersection of literary urban studies and comics studies, seeks to address urban informality and infrastructural splintering in Bengaluru, as represented in Simon Lamouret's *The Alcazar*, a graphic novel that traces the lives of migrant workers at a construction site in Bengaluru. The text underscores the city's urban infrastructure as dialectical and discriminatory, rendering migrants socio-economically vulnerable. While scholarship on urban informality has grown in recent years, literature on how graphic novels represent the relationship between migrant labour, infrastructure, and informality in contemporary Indian cities remains scarce. Drawing theoretical insights from Ananya Roy's concept of informality, Henri Lefebvre's concept of social production of space, and Thierry Groensteen's work on comics form, the article explores the accelerating informalization of the city, revealing an urban condition in which migrant labour is simultaneously integrated and disintegrated within the city's urban form. It argues that the graphic novel foregrounds spatial unevenness while rendering visible the labour and everyday experiences of migrant workers. It further examines the comics form's interrogation of the informalities and splintering of cities like Bengaluru, highlighting migrant workers' right to urban life. The article contributes to broader discussions on urban informality, infrastructure, and spatial inequality in contemporary Indian cities, demonstrating how graphic narratives can critically engage with and visualize these urban realities.

Keywords: comics; infrastructure; migrant workers; informality; Bengaluru

Introduction

Over the last few decades, Bengaluru, the capital of the state of Karnataka, has emerged as one of the spectacular symbols of India's neoliberal urban transformation. Often described as India's Silicon Valley, the city embodies the contradictions of contemporary urbanization; accelerated technological growth coexists with informality and spatial inequality. The city's large number of technology parks, research facilities, and innovation centres, combined with a cosmopolitan workforce and booming start-up ecosystem, have made it a major hub for international tech investment. Bengaluru's rise to the status of a world-class city, for Michael Goldman, is mediated by the decentralization of the city's governmentality or what he calls "speculative urbanism"[1] that has redefined the art of governance, altered the relationship between the state and its citizens, and turned real estate into "the real state and vice versa" (577). In *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (2011), Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin observe that, in the current phase of neoliberal urbanism, continuous attempts are being made to "open up" existing non-capitalist land to private businesses for investment and development projects (6). As a result, the peripheral expansion of urban areas demonstrates how cities like Bengaluru are going "beyond the plan" (Benjamin 103), with open spaces being reorganized through lobbying, political connections, and planning logics. These developments explain how planning regulations are often overlooked or violated in the pursuit of visually spectacular cities. Alongside rapid urban and technological development, Bengaluru's construction and service sectors have relied heavily on migrant workers whose labour sustains urban growth while remaining largely invisible within narratives of development. At the same time, technological progress has also reduced the demand for labour in rural areas, prompting many

to migrate to the city in search of employment (Sridhar 2016), contributing to its expanding informal sector. While such rapid urban expansion has generated new forms of mobility and employment, they also intensify questions of access to infrastructure and the unequal distribution of urban resources. Such transformations turn Bengaluru into a compelling site for examining the relationship between urban planning, informality, and the everyday experiences of those whose labour underpins the city's development. It is within these tensions between visibility and invisibility, growth and exclusion, that Simon Lamouret's *The Alcazar* (2022) has sought to interrogate the social realities of the metropolis.

The Alcazar is a graphic novel that documents the lives of migrant workers at a construction site in Bengaluru. The text depicts migrant workers as trapped within discriminatory and precarious infrastructural networks, often forcing them into multiple informal sectors. Though fictionalized, the text maintains an understanding of the postcolonial Indian cities and their interactions with the informal sector. In addition to capturing the tensions and paradoxical settings of uneven infrastructure in Bengaluru, Lamouret's compelling images and visual tropes invite the reader to experience the people, events, and experiences depicted as real rather than made up. In this context, this article examines how Lamouret's comics present an incisive critique of the city's arbitrariness in terms of planning, infrastructure, and its treatment of migrants. It addresses the informalities in urban planning and conceptualizes the construction site as an informal space that fuels the city's visual-spatial growth by situating migrant labour within the intersecting frameworks of planning, informality, and governance. It demonstrates the visual techniques employed as a means of examining the unevenness in the city's spatial infrastructure. Cities require large-scale migrant labour for survival, enabling rural-to-urban migration in search of better livelihood opportunities. However, cities also develop a dialectical relationship with migrant labourers; they are indispensable to urban growth yet simultaneously rendered invisible.

Lamouret's text challenges these mechanisms of invisibility by foregrounding migrants' claims to the social spaces of the city. It highlights the infrastructural qualities of the comics form and argues that Lamouret's comics reveal the complex nexus among the state, real-estate, and urban informal actors, exposing the accelerating privatization and precarity of Bengaluru's urban infrastructure. These negotiations raise important questions about the city as a shared social space and underscore the relevance of Henri Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city in the context of aggressive neoliberal urbanization.

For this, the article draws upon Ananya Roy's theory of urban informality, Henri Lefebvre's concept of the social production of space, and Thierry Groensteen's theory of comics spatiality, to examine how urban informality is produced, experienced, and represented in *The Alcazar*. While Roy and Lefebvre provide the conceptual tools for analysing the material and social production of urban space, Groensteen offers a framework for understanding how these spatial processes are visualized through graphic narrative. The article begins with a discussion of informality in general and in the Indian context, followed by an examination of urban informality, planning, governance, and infrastructural unevenness in Bengaluru. It then analyses the graphic novel's representation of migration, labour, and urban precarity to demonstrate how migrant workers are rendered both indispensable to and marginalized within Bengaluru's urban infrastructure, while simultaneously asserting their right to the city.

Urban informality and graphic narratives in India

The discussion on urban informality must begin with the concept of the informal sector, which emerged in the early 1970s, with scholars such as W. Arthur Lewis and Keith Hart trying to comprehend the idea of informality. Hart distinguished the formal and informal sectors based on the sorts of employment, such as wage-earning or self-employment, and

opined that "informal activities encompass a wide-ranging scale, from marginal operations to large enterprises; whether their productivity is relatively high or low remains a question for empirical verification" (68). In 1972, The International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that the informal sector predominantly comprised the operations of petty-traders, street hawkers, and other groups that were "underemployed" on the streets of large cities (6). Though ILO's conceptualization gained initial popularity, two distinct opinions emerged later. One viewed informality as a marginalized sector; a transient symptom of underdevelopment characterized by the urban poor's survival activities. The other believed it to be tightly related to the formal sector and a crucial, long-term element of a contemporary economy (AlSayyad n.p.).

In the Indian context, the discussion of urban informality started with the economic liberalization of the 1990s and the adoption of neoliberal economic policy. Despite some success, economic liberalization resulted in a general deterioration in living conditions, surplus labour force, urban migration, and economic instability. Such conditions brought about volatility in working conditions that often means individuals must move from one sector to another during the course of a single day. For example, an individual may work in the formal economy eight hours a day, but then spend the rest of his or her time living in informal housing, as is the case for many residents of Dharavi in Mumbai (Weinstein 2014). Scholars have studied informality from contrasting perspectives. While one framework conceptualizes informality in terms of crisis, the other considers it as "heroic entrepreneurship" (Roy 148). In his analysis of microenterprises and community initiatives in Mumbai, Arjun Appadurai's concept of "deep democracy" underscores how informality operates "from below" (34), empowering the urban poor to integrate themselves within the matrix of governmentality rather than being threatened by demolitions and displacement. In contrast, urban scholar Ananya Roy believes that informality is practised "from above" as a mechanism of deregulation, where "the law itself is rendered open-ended and subject to

multiple interpretations and interests […]" (80). She argues that informality is a constitutive feature of urban life, embedded within state practices, regulatory frameworks, and social relations, rather than being a condition of poverty or marginality. Whether practised "from below" or "from above", informality manifests itself in the everyday spatial practices of the city, such as precarious housing, uneven infrastructures, and informal economies. Negotiating these complex and often overlapping spatial realities requires forms of representation that can accommodate simultaneity, fragmentation, and multiple perspectives. Graphic narratives are effective in representing the spatial dimensions of migrant labour and urban informality. By situating migrant workers within the visual landscapes of construction sites, informal settlements, and rapidly transforming cityscapes, they reveal the interconnected processes through which informality is produced, experienced, and negotiated in the city.

Graphic narratives share a close relationship with cities in terms of historical, theoretical, and thematic concerns. In *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* (2010), Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling write, "From an historical point of view and against the backdrop of the modern age, comics are inseparably tied to the notion of the 'city'" (4), and the early comics strips bear testimony to comics' gradual urban turn. Cities, with their complex socio-economic infrastructures, have not only served as a setting but also fostered the medium's creation, publication, popularity, and even its formal properties. For Benjamin Fraser, cities are so integral to comics as a medium that aspects such as comics' subject matter, artistic form, and method of production are inextricably connected to the cities in which they are developed (7). These correlations have influenced the artists to represent both fictional and real cities in comics form, with the city appearing "as an important plot element, even an atmospheric, and symbolic protagonist, and suddenly became the focus of attention in many genres" (Ahrens & Meteling 5). This highlights the global proliferation of graphic narratives that interweave urban form and comics narrative to

reveal the spatial simultaneity of comics and city space. As an emerging genre, Indian graphic narratives have closely focused on contemporary modes of urbanization and concentrated on constituting "a rich archive, forcing an examination of history, culture, identity, place, pleasure, and community in South Asia" (Daiya 5). Their emergence resonates with postcolonial Indian writing in English, as these narratives, according to P. K. Nayar, are instances of "critical literacy" that "India *needs* to address contemporary concerns and provide a politically edged cultural critique" (8). Nayar's observation has a strong connection with Indian graphic narratives' engagement with Indian cities, which have undergone extensive economic and spatial reconfiguration since the onset of economic deregulation. For instance, works such as Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) and Sarnath Banerjee's *The Harappa Files* (2011), and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) have offered a persistent critique of contemporary urbanization and the values associated with it. Their engagement with cities and urban narratives often involves a politicized critique of the socio-cultural and political dynamics that shape Indian urban spaces. As Indian cities continue to expand both spatially and visually, graphic narratives provide a distinctive mode of representing their evolving urban landscapes. By foregrounding unequal spatial geographies and urban inequalities, graphic novels offer critical perspectives to examine the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of contemporary urban life.

Informality and Urban Planning in Bengaluru

Bengaluru's rapid development as a global IT powerhouse began in the 1990s, increasing the need for housing for middle and elite class urbanites and opening the path for private builders to encroach upon the city's open areas and outskirts (Heitzman 2004; Benjamin 2015). In these forms of "informality from above", the state itself functions as an informal entity, "continuous with formal systems of regulation", to facilitate high-value infrastructural

projects (Roy 2009, 84). Lamouret's comics extend this hypothesis to showcase how Bengaluru's neoliberal restructuring has made planning itself commodified, with an exchange value and the promise of a utopian environment. In *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bengaluru's Twentieth Century* (2005), Janaki Nair underscores "apartment complex" and the general disregard for legal consensus in construction sectors as the two distinct phenomena of Bengaluru's urbanization. She observes that these developments are entwined through forms of association and lobbying, to constitute Bengaluru's image through the ideology of planning. Following the massive influx of IT workers, Bengaluru's population growth has fluctuated, driving up the demand for housing and other infrastructural facilities. Vertical expansion has been on the rise as a result of intense corporate competitiveness over horizontal construction of buildings. Apartments with multiple stories were swiftly offered as wholesale goods to wealthy and middle-class buyers. The five-storied apartment Rafik, Salma, Mehboob, and the others were working on, takes shape after considering the aesthetic and material requirements of the clients, including their preference for marble for tiled floors and customized division of rooms. Such customization of building plans flounders the rationality of urban planning to develop space as "a complete product" (Lefebvre 334) that can be split, divided up, and sold as a consumable object to coveted customers. However, the state, instead of taking regulatory measures to curb such illegal and contingent planning, promotes the same either by endorsing private developers or overlooking these irregularities. Such commodification of urban planning, the text shows, not only fuels the city's real-estate market but also divides the city in terms of valued and non-valued spaces.

The text's representation of the expanded cityscape highlights the frequent violation of legal and planning regulations, as these construction sites frequently "sprang up like a mushroom" following informal agreements (Lamouret 2022). When the policemen inform the site's owner that large trucks cannot enter the city after 7 a.m., he buys "an extra hour"

through bribes. These mechanisms that allow bypassing formal and legal procedures are presumably state-sponsored and, thus, practised "from above". They explain the well-established nexus between the government and real estate agents in the neoliberal restructuring of the city. The text also demonstrates the elites' seeming camaraderie while they disregard established norms for financial gain. The building owner's declaration on page 97, "And I will do as Mr. Johnson pleases!", exemplifies the politics of capital endorsement by both parties. Mr Johnson is one of the clients that the owner serves. Ali, the site engineer, is surprised by the owner's suggestion to divide an existing living room to accommodate a second room, yet Mr Johnson's joy at such a suggestion illustrates the capital's control over space through outside-the-plan architectural interventions. Mr Johnson responds, "This way, I'll have two living rooms, buy one get one free". Mr Johnson's enthusiastic acceptance of the modified design illustrates how informal architectural interventions can enhance both the market value and the social prestige associated with urban property. The alteration is valued not because it conforms to planning regulations, but because it offers additional space and a sense of exclusivity, demonstrating how elite actors can mobilize informality to secure both material and symbolic advantages. This underscores a broader form of urban informality that extends beyond labour relations to encompass the negotiation and circumvention of planning regulations. As Roy argues, informality is not confined to marginalized populations only but is often mobilized by powerful actors to secure spatial and economic advantages. Mr Johnson's ability to obtain an unauthorized modification points to a "differentiation within informality" (149), where elite actors benefit from regulatory flexibility that is rarely available to the urban poor.

The informalities of urban planning in Bengaluru can also be underscored through the bypassing metaphor that Lamouret has suggested by depicting the flyover in the middle of the city (Figure 1). The flyover is designed to serve the IT world by bypassing the congested city

below. It occupies a dominant position above the city, directing the viewer's gaze toward elevated routes of mobility while simultaneously obscuring the everyday spaces inhabited by workers and residents below. The contrast between the streamlined infrastructure above and the crowded urban landscape beneath visually reinforces a hierarchy of movement and access, where certain populations are prioritized while others remain marginalized. The image (Figure 1), thus, transforms the flyover into a metaphor for a mode of urban development that privileges speed, connectivity, and capital over the needs of those who sustain the city through their

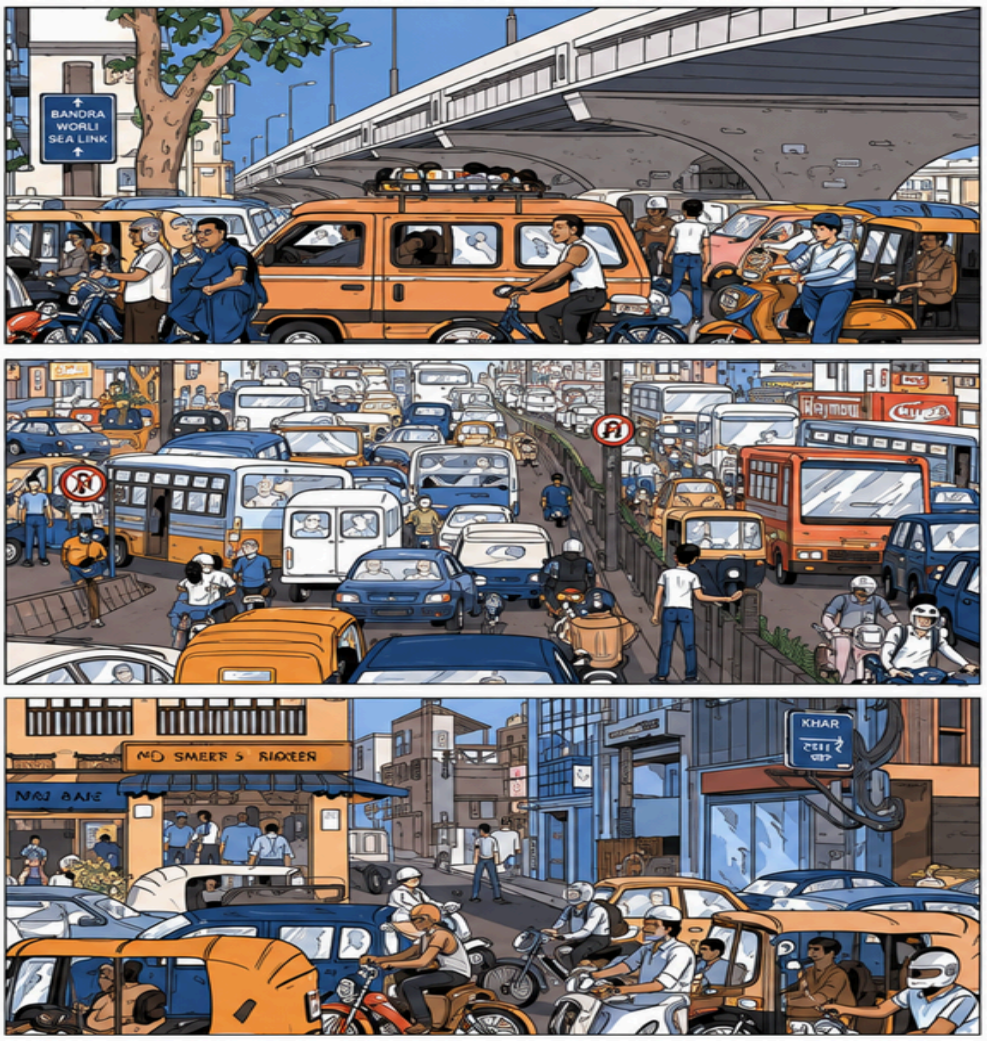

Figure 1. Flyover as the bypassing metaphor, Lamouret 2022

labour. Flyovers, however, not merely bypass the material environment of the city, but also the functional logic of urban planning. These projects are often promoted by numerous coalitions of public and private players, who use private funding to advance their political prestige and economic ambitions (Benjamin 2000). In cities, these projects reinforce informality and inequality at the level of basic urban amenities by promoting discriminatory and arbitrary spatial practices in the production and distribution of services. The metaphor shows how, for migrant labourers in the city, like Mehboob and the others, the city has bypassed what is rightfully theirs to cater to the needs of the upper-middle class, who live in gated enclaves and nurture a cold or even hostile attitude towards the migrants.

Migrants in the Metropolis

Urban migration often binds people into neo-bondage[2] and unstable employment (Bhagat 2020). Numerous studies have also pointed to the formal sector's informalization as a key factor driving urban migration across the nation (Mishra 2016; Samaddar 2020a; Bhagat 2017). Despite allowing migrants like Rafik and others easy entrance and remittance to be transferred to their rural destinations, the informal market—characterized by poor wages, transitory jobs, and extended working hours—also places them on the urban margins. The marginalization is compounded by the suspicion and hostility they encounter from native populations—an animosity that is not confined to elites but extends across social groups, as evident in the recent treatment of Bengali-speaking migrants in parts of North India (Chakraborty 2025). According to Deepak K Mishra (2016), inadequate city design and governance frequently displace poor migrant workers by privatizing urban services. They are placed in slum areas and face hostility from the privileged sections of the city. In this context, Ranabir Samaddar writes, "Cities have always been with us but with infrastructural growth, the world of cities has now produced the urban in which migrant labour continues to be a

hidden, subaltern figure" (2020a, 527). The text counters such attempts to obscure the figure of the migrant as Lamouret seems to imply that, despite being rendered invisible, migrants are essential to the growth and development of cities, perhaps even more so in the neoliberal period of accelerating urbanization.

In cities, unskilled labourers like Mehboob work across several informal sectors, including factory, building and road construction, with a major concentration on tasks that do not require any special training. Meanwhile, the skilled ones enrol themselves in private sector professions like software companies. After relocating to Bengaluru, Rafik, Salma, and Mehboob are now engaged as construction labourers. Spaces such as construction sites operate as hierarchized spaces, employing a range of workers concurrently, including builders, engineers, contractors, and managers. The construction site is also a crucial space of urban informality, as it brings together informal labour arrangements, temporary housing, and uncertain access to welfare and civic amenities within a single spatial framework. In *The Alcazar*, the site functions as a liminal zone between the formal city imagined by planners and the informal practices that sustain its construction. While the completed building is intended to serve affluent residents, the workers responsible for its construction remain confined to makeshift shelters and precarious living conditions. The site, thus, embodies the splintered nature of Bengaluru's urban infrastructure, where world-class development and socio-spatial exclusion coexist within the same urban landscape. Such a stratified arrangement renders the unskilled workers vulnerable to exploitation. Instead of favouring local workers from the city and migrants from other parts of Karnataka, construction businesses in Bengaluru often hire workers from other states since they work "harder" (Premchander et al. 112). Despite having laws to protect the interests of migrant workers, Lamouret shows how they are still vulnerable to wage disparity, gender discrimination, unhygienic environments, and physical and mental instability. For instance, in one episode,

Trinna withholds Mehboob's wages, underscoring the workers' dependence on contractors and their limited ability to challenge exploitative labour practices. They also continue to be largely uninformed of the welfare measures by local governments because of their continuous mobility. Furthermore, unequal migration patterns often cause unequal spatial geographies, accelerating urban informality and abruptly transforming cities like Bengaluru into a large metropolis, lacking adequate infrastructure (Sridhar & Reddy 2011).

In the last few decades, cities in the Global South have experienced a significant splintering of urban infrastructure from integrated to unbundled (Graham & Marvin 2011), whereby spaces and services have become highly competitive, discriminatory, and target-centric. In the context of Bengaluru, Kala S Sridhar et al. (2013) identify certain "pull" and "push" factors as important variables of mass migration[3]. Since policy discussions in India have often treated distress-driven rural-to-urban migration as a challenge to be mitigated, initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)[4] have sought to create rural employment opportunities that reduce the compulsion to migrate (Rajan & M. 2020). While such measures provide livelihood support, they can also shift attention away from the rights, welfare, and living conditions of migrant workers within urban policy debates. However, when cities grow quickly, they need more affordable labour, and migrants become an easy source of informal labour, who take on precarious jobs and can be easily manipulated. The experiences of Mehboob, Salma, and Rafik illustrate how migrant workers are compelled to labour in hazardous and unhealthy conditions, often in the absence of adequate safety measures and workplace protections. The precarity and invisibility of their labour within urban policy and public discourse raise important questions of representation.

Lamouret's text further depicts certain middle-class and elite residents perceiving migrant workers as outsiders whose presence threatens established notions of urban order and

belonging. Such representations foreground the class-based anxieties and exclusionary attitudes that often shape the social experiences of migrant labourers in the city. The neighbours accuse Rafik for simply playing cricket on the street or having a drink at night and threaten to contact the police, "Since you people moved in here, all you do is create a ruckus! I forbid you to play next time to my house! Bloody noisemakers! Next time I'll directly call the cops!" (Lamouret 38). Despite Salma's initial resentment, Mehboob's family is moved from the roadside hut to a makeshift tent that is enclosed on all four sides by blue sheets, since the sight of the tent might irritate the residents. The migrants also understand that they are seen as outsiders and troublemakers, who illegally encroached on the city's elite territoriality. Yet, their presence has a dialectical significance for the city's growth, as Mehboob says, "If they were to fire every worker who drinks, this city would remain a wasteland" (Lamouret 111). Lamouret's comics, thus, depict migrants as postcolonial urban outcasts who are denied equal citizenship and remain in a state of flux regarding their identity and socioeconomic status. On page 133, Lamouret depicts a conversation between Mehboob and Ali, during which Ali is moved by Mehboob's generosity and expresses his dissatisfaction with working at the site. The visual-verbal structure of the page demonstrates how comics can accommodate two different narrative tracks simultaneously. During the conversation, Ali says, "People are crazy, Mehboob", in response to Mehboob's question about how some individuals can be so ostentatious that they would construct an extra room inside their living room for dressing up. The last panel of the page visually conveys Mehboob's captivity within the structural grids of the building through the gridded structure of the layout. The layout reinforces the metaphor of entanglement and helplessness, as Mehboob is imprisoned within the walls and tightly woven bamboo staves.

The narrative further illustrates the complex phenomenon of postcolonial migrant labour as a malleable resource for capital accumulation, simultaneously integrated into and excluded

from the urban form. Urban economy's persistent reliance on informal migrant labour makes the neoliberal city's reorganization imperative. To explain how migrant labour is exploited at construction sites and transformed into "transit labour", Samaddar (2020b) places migrant labour at the intersection of infrastructure and logistics. The mason, Trinna, for instance, works on several construction sites at once and shows up at the job site just as Mehboob and the others are about to finish their work. Samaddar writes, "Migrant labour is the vanishing mediator in this neo-liberal metamorphosis […]. The infrastructural transformation […] is not possible without migrant labour, and yet infrastructural transformation requires migrant labour to be invisible, dispensable, but ready at hand" (2020b, 115–116). Such contradictory perceptions of migrants in urban areas highlight the widespread acts of violence, discrimination, and hostility these people encounter regularly.

Gendered migration and labour constitute another significant concern in the text, as exemplified by Salma, Mehboob's wife. She is viewed as her husband's helper, who works both at home and on the construction site. Women like Salma perform unpaid activities like cleaning and maintaining inventories at these sites. These tasks are seen as natural for women, and the several difficulties they encounter because of their gender identity—a phenomenon Nivedita Jayaram et al. termed "gendered burden" (96)—are normalized. As the woman's body and mind suffer physically, emotionally, and intellectually, the neoliberal city expands. Along with cooking and making special arrangements for celebrations, Salma lifts and carries things at the site, the most typical task given to women at construction sites. In this context, R. B. Bhagat writes, "Migration has taken women from the sphere of traditional gender relations in rural areas to a new patriarchal set-up" (2017, 36), where the boundary between workspace and living space has been blurred. Highlighting the distinctive forms of patriarchal dominance that migrant women are subjected to, in comparison to middle-class and upper-class women of the metropolis, Salma dismantles the illusion of gender-neutral

migration. Entangled in the nexus of labour, patriarchy, and the neoliberal city, Salma focuses the spotlight on women's living and working conditions in big cities, surpassing the debates surrounding gender binaries. In this context, Lamouret remarked:

> She was restless […] But I don't know the amount of load that female takes and even when she was pregnant she worked till the sixth month of her pregnancy […]. She had a lot of dignity and a lot of pride—even more than all the men […] she's got a charisma that is impossible to describe and that I failed in representing that in the book. Salma is too big to fit in this book […] it was difficult to unlock Salma, but she was very much worth it and Salma is the reason that I have her coming back in the epilogue. She's the one who brings the reader back to the city from the countryside—something I wanted to show very simply just with visuals. (Sarkar & Bhattacharya 164–65)

The page (Figure 2) not only visualizes Salma's traumatic memory of a previous miscarriage and her anxiety about the future, but also foregrounds the embodied costs of migrant precarity. Her trauma emerges from the insecure conditions of healthcare that characterize informal urban life. By linking personal suffering to broader structures of urban inequality, the graphic novel reveals how the social reproduction of migrant labour is sustained through forms of vulnerability that remain largely invisible within dominant narratives. The page 86–87 (Figure 2) highlights the precariousness and futility of their life in the cities they build, by representing their emotionally charged conversation in the technopolis. Seasoned readers will notice the subtle compositional adjustments Lamouret made to enhance the scene's powerful emotional appeal. Here, the reading pace has been slowed down to encourage the reader to stay on the page a little longer. By significantly altering the panel size, so that the vertical gutters[5] are no longer perfectly aligned, variations on the conventional regular grid

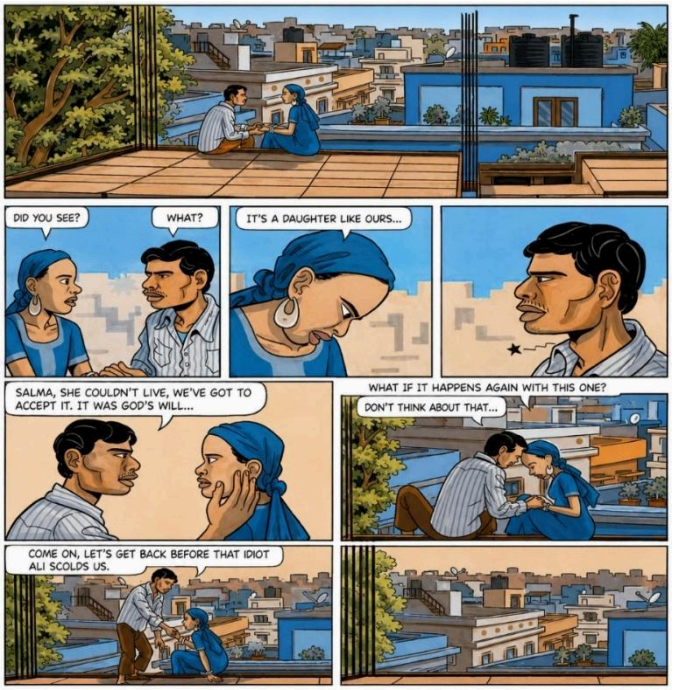

Figure 2. Traumatic recurrence in technopolis, Lamouret, 2022, 87

help to avoid the narrative's customary rigidity and boredom. The inter-panel gutter of the page translates the recurrence of Salma's prior traumatic experiences, which brings attention to the two panels of the third tier once more due to the visual focalization[6] it embeds into the scene. These compositional effects highlight that without the verbal enunciations, the visual register of the page alone would have been adequate to convey the intended message.

In cities, the informational mode of development is characterized by a dualism that places the migrant labour at the nexus of capitalism, technological advancement, and urban redevelopment. The dualism comprises the information-based formal economy and the downgraded labour-based informal sector (Castells 1991). Following Castells, scholars have examined Bengaluru's transformation from a garden city to a thriving technopolis (Srinivas 2001; Heitzman 2004; Nair 2005), to highlight private investments and increased civic engagement in state, society, and city affairs. These observations reinforce the well-established thesis of the informalization of urban space. Rafik's subsequent job as an

Ola cab driver further strengthens the reorganization of migrant labour as flexible and ready at hand. Such jobs are representative of the accelerating penetration of global corporations and app-based services that exploit the informal labour market for their survival. Since the under-construction building eventually emerges as a gated community with security guards, modern private amenities, and high-speed fibre optics, it becomes a valued space of elite consumption, in contrast to the non-valued spaces of the city. The building embodies the material manifestation of upper-middle-class aspirations for urban development in Bengaluru.

Informality and the comics form

One of the visual devices Lamouret uses to critique the phenomena of the apartment complex and urban informality is the frequent usage of the double-spread page throughout the comics. A double-spread page refers to the use of both sides of the page simultaneously for narrative and aesthetic purposes. The page (Figure 3) serves as a pregnant visual zone, where pillars, bricks, and other construction materials interact with the movement of people in the site, as the edifice rises stack by stack. The double-spread page provides a global view that must be "traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered" (Groensteen 19) for a "moment-to-moment" (McCloud 70) understanding of the concurrent actions taking place at the site. The layout's structure also reminds one of what Catherine Labio called the "architectural unconscious of the comics page" in evoking "the meme of home...", by mirroring the structural architecture of the places from which they belong. Its architectural structure transforms the layout "into an identifiable and measurable space" (317), invoking the long-evoked structural analogy between comics and architecture (Groensteen 2007; Labio 2015). The under-construction building imitates the verticality and general architecture of the building in the background, to underscore how the spatial architecture of the comics page can subvert the informal and illegal practices underpinning urban planning.

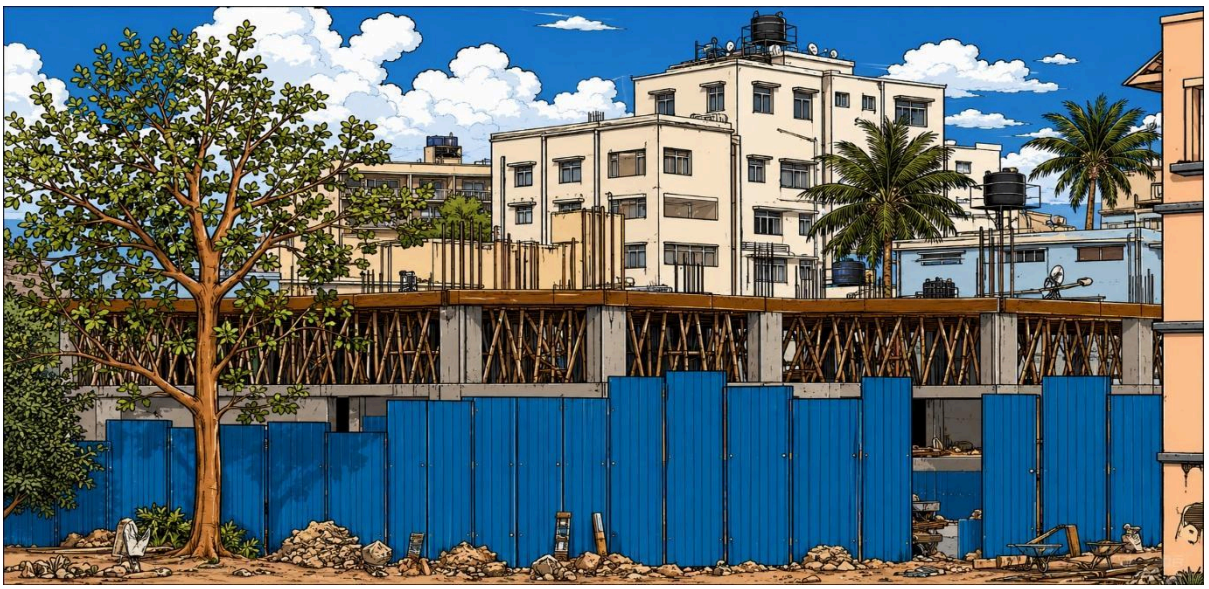

Figure 3. Double-spread page, Lamouret, 2022, 88-89

According to Lefebvre, images are deceptive since they cannot reveal the errors related to space but, instead, reinforce them. He asks, "Can images of this kind really be expected to expose errors concerning space? Hardly. Where there is error or illusion, the image is more likely to secrete it and reinforce it than to reveal it" (96–97). The logic of visualization, Michael Gardiner suggests, creates an opaque transparency; a condition in which the act of "seeing" appears to render the world legible while concealing the social and material processes that underpin it. In the process, space becomes a "produced" entity and not a work of art. Thus, Lefebvre continues, "We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images. Sight and seeing […] have turned into a trap […]" (75–76). Nowhere is the visual dimension of Lefebvre's social space more apparent than at the construction site, where the building emerges as a dominant conceived space shaped by the visions of planners and architects. Lamouret reflects this process through the spatial architecture of the comics page, using grids, gutters, and gaps to parallel the material infrastructure of the building under construction. The architecture of the building and the architecture of the page layout are both assemblages of corresponding infrastructural

elements: pillars, plans, and designs in the case of the former and gridding, gutter, and frame in the latter. Their parallelism implies a comparison between reading comics and building a structure. Reading comics has been compared to looking at a building by scholars, including Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, and Ivan Brunetti, with the parallel architectural façades having a distinctive pattern of spatial arrangement (Kuhlman 2020). Despite the successive panels being separated by gutters or visible boundaries, Lamouret's drawings show the intersection of the planners' abstractly imagined space, the migrant's spatial practices or perceived space, and the symbolic lived space. However, the spatial triad it constructs is not homogeneous, but characterized by tensions in which lived spaces are subordinated to the conceptually abstracted spaces of material infrastructure.

For instance, page 52 (Figure 4) draws attention to both the spatial architecture of comics and the drawn architecture of the building, with the former displaying an affinity towards the methods, strategies, and aesthetics of the latter. The page demonstrates the power of visual narratives in showcasing the multidimensionality of the comics form and the diversity of contemporary urban forms. Comics subject the images of which they are composed to several kinds of relations (Groensteen 2007). The visual structure of the page emphasizes the verticality of the panels, gutter, and hyperframe[7]. In addition to the structural synergy of the first and third tiers, the page's structure makes the reader's eye move up, down, and across the page. Although differences exist between architectural drawing and drawn images in comics (Fraser 2019), Lamouret here relies on architectural imagination to visualize the depth of individual panels. For instance, the two vertical panels of the second tier allow the reader to look through and beyond the panels, simulating what an architect could see through her/his sketched design. The page, in general, adopts a top-down approach from atop a building pillar to the ground pillar and underscores the spatio-temporal

architecture of comics to depict the creation of one of the most powerful neoliberal urban forms—buildings.

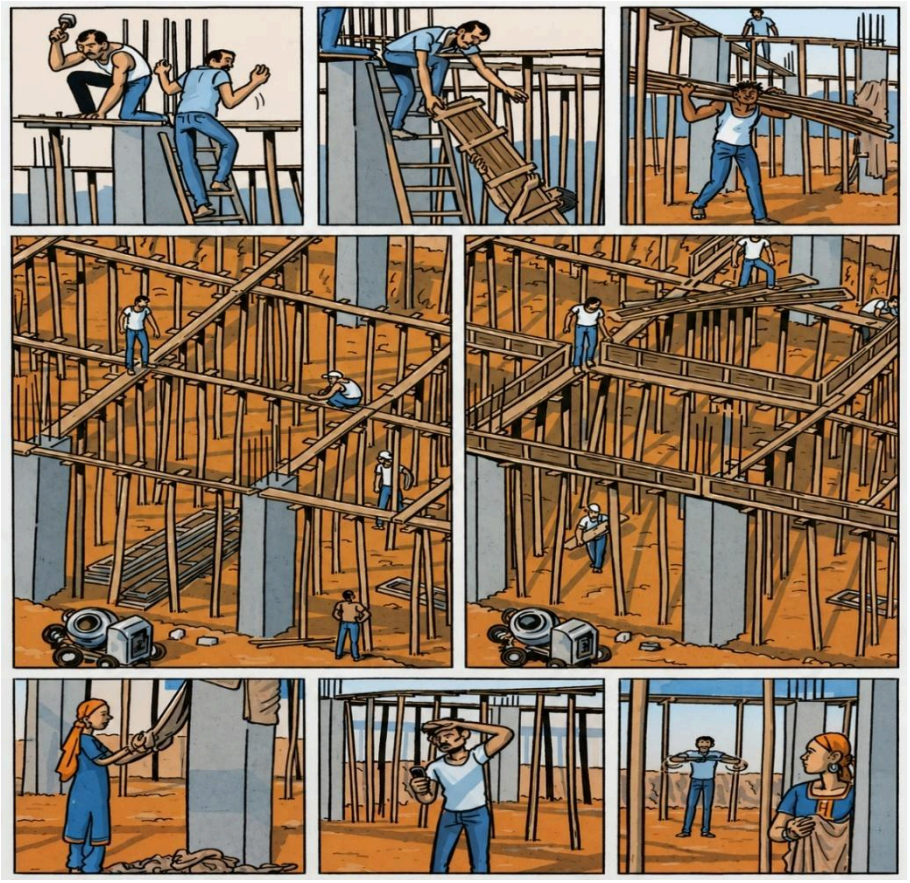

Figure 4. The construction site as an informal space, Lamouret, 2022, 52

The image of the extended cityscape (Figure 5) on the flip side of the cover page represents the boom in the construction sector and the subsequent requirement for both skilled and unskilled labourers on these construction sites. As a perigraphic element[8], the image presents a simultaneous view of the several migrant groups working and living in the site. While the page provides a glimpse of their daily activities, it also obscures the building's interior by exploiting the non-visualized space (Lefèvre 2009). The layout conceals the migrants' living space as much as it reveals it. Apart from highlighting the physicality and materiality of the book, the image further draws attention to itself as an example of what Philippe Marion

called “graphic enunciation”, which records any change in the graphic line, trace, unusual colours, types of

Figure 5. View of the extended cityscape, Lamouret, 2022

foregrounding and backgrounding in the image field, or changes in any other visual and graphic design to refer to the subjectivity of the source of narration (Baetens 2001; Mikkonen 2017). In its use of colour, the page is graphically distinct from the rest of the work and explains how readers experience several reciprocities while engaging with agency-mediated enunciations.

Does this imply that visuals merely serve to conceal spatial unevenness and maintain existing hierarchies? According to Lefebvre, there is an escape route when the artist attempts to go beyond “the limits of the image” to reach a “truth and a reality” (97). Reading sequential images becomes a “physical and dynamic act” that enables viewers/readers to project themselves into a physical object and inhabit imaginary spaces that are partly of their own making. Images in comics, despite being projected on a two-dimensional surface, are three-dimensional and invite the reader to make “only connections” (Dittmer & Latham 436)

among the dispersed panels on the page. In the process, the panel frames serve as the metaphorical pillars of the hyperframe and the image, in general, demonstrates a "deeper structural synergy between architectural space and the comics page as a system for the articulation of time and space (of spaces-moments)" (Arana 29). Figure 5 highlights the visual production of space as a mechanism shaped by planning practices and bourgeois ideology, where visual representation and spatial organization converge to facilitate the expansion of the metropolis.

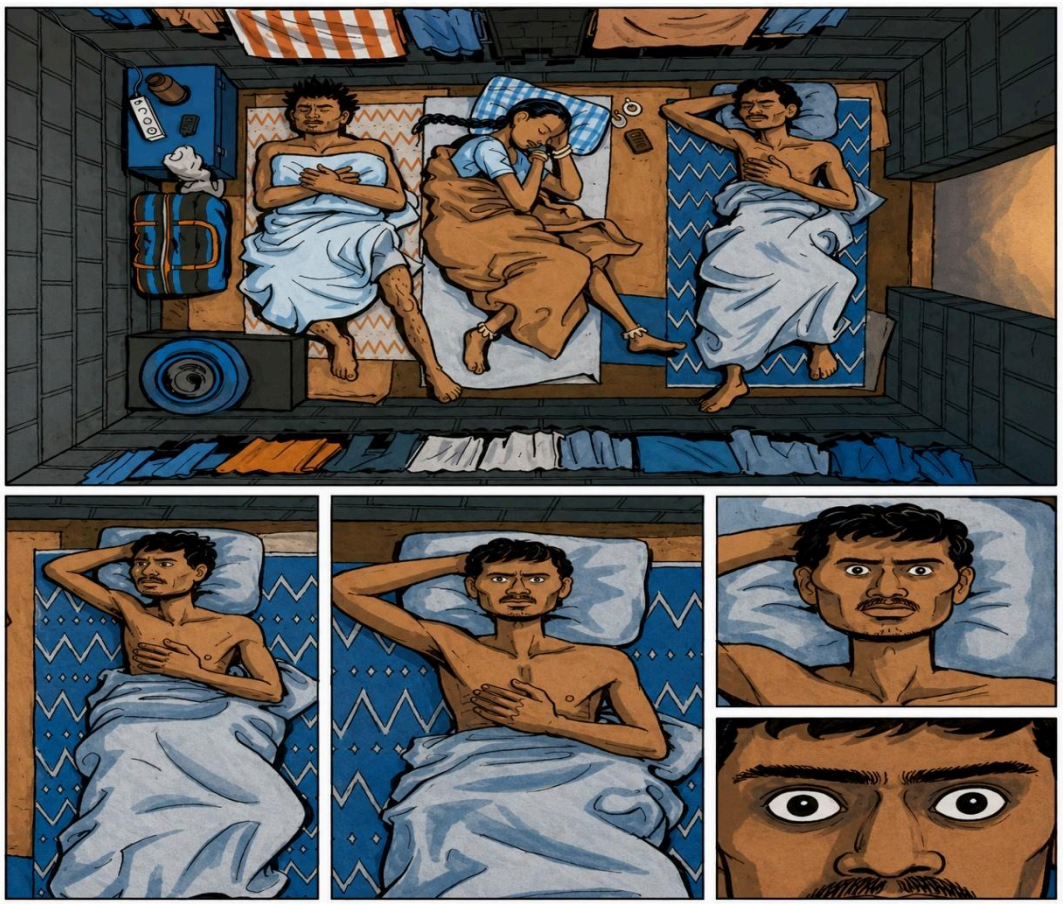

Figure 6. Mehboob's confrontation with the reader, Lamouret, 2022, 50

In a series of close-up shots of Mehboob's face (Figure 6), Lamouret has tried to underscore the experience migrant labourers encounter while working in big cities. On page 50, Mehboob's face appears to be burdened by the anxiety of debt, due wages, and Salma's pregnancy. His eyes are fixed on the viewer/reader whose eye serves as the camera. Full

frontal close-up panel designs, another visual trope that recurs frequently in the comics, foster an "intimacy and emotion, and empathy" (Murthy 210) with the characters. While Mehboob's direct gaze at the reader is unnerving and unusual in European comics, Lamouret purposefully structured the mise-en-scène to confront the reader with his characters. In this context, he remarked, " […] it's also a way of saying "you don't want to see us, but look at us […]. Once you step into the small tents where they live, you're very close, face-to-face. So maybe it's an attempt to recreate that closeness that the space itself creates" (Murthy 210).

Conclusion

Following the aggressive penetration of neoliberal urban policies, spatial inequality has been woven so deeply into the fabric of cities like Bengaluru that informality has emerged as a way of life for both the elite and the disenfranchised. While it has rendered the disenfranchised precarious and invisible in terms of their existence, the elites capitalize informality to access premium and customized urban facilities, often at the cost of the disenfranchised. Highlighting migrant labour as an integral part of urban infrastructural development, the comics raise crucial questions on how informal sectors exploit migrant labour for surplus value. The comics also underscore how migrant workers survive in the city in an unhygienic and hostile environment, where their mere presence is frowned upon. Despite knowing their secondary status in the city, Mehboob and Salma return to a different construction site, even after having departed from the city. Regardless of how much they detest one another, the comics seem to suggest, the city needs the migrants as much as the migrants need the city for their survival. Lamouret's comics, thus, critique both the cyclical nature of migrant labour and the city's treatment of the migrants. Furthermore, in highlighting the manipulation of migrant labour, the comics also call for the execution of legislation about

workers' security at the workplace, wage discrepancy, excessive working hours, and other forms of exploitation that are gender-sensitive.

The article further underscores the visual metaphors and techniques Lamouret employs to reveal narratives of discrimination and spatial unevenness in cities like Bengaluru. The narrative function of these visual metaphors highlights how the comics form can dismantle traditional discourses of infrastructural development and image-obsessed urbanism to underscore the violation of regularities involving multiple players. Spectacular images of high-rise apartments not merely reveal the illusory power such buildings exert on potential customers, but also enable the reader to realize the surveillance mechanism they entail through the materialization of abstract spatial power. The rise of such gated communities in Bengaluru, the text seems to suggest, will result in the formation of highly regularized private spaces. The city, as a result, will cease to exist as a shared space of liveability. The infrastructural qualities of Lamouret's comics that the article highlights intervene against such abstract spatial power to foreground the city as a space of play, encounter, and rupture. In other words, the comics foreground Lefebvre's call for the right to the city for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

With the recent COVID-19 virus outbreak in 2020, cities like Bengaluru encountered a reverse migration, with the migrants returning to their rural destinations from the metropolis. This had a significant negative impact on both the urban elites and the working class. It revealed new taxonomies and spatialities of informal migrant labour. Cities that lost their informal workforce resource suffered significant setbacks in terms of infrastructure services. Builders who had already received payments from customers were anxious to complete stalled projects. Thus, once the pandemic somewhat subsided, migrant workers were even flown back to Bengaluru from various parts of the country by both the state and private parties (Peter 2020). This underscores the extent to which informal labour and

infrastructure sustain the everyday functioning of cities such as Bengaluru. Lamouret's comics, therefore, urge a reassessment of policies and discourses to safeguard migrant workers' rights to urban life and integration into cities, cautioning that without informal migrant labour, cities will eventually disintegrate.

Notes

1. It is a mode of urban development that reshapes cities to attract investment, real-estate capital, and global finance. Rather than focusing on residents' needs, states facilitate large-scale infrastructure and real-estate projects by converting rural and peri-urban land into profitable urban property. As a result, residents become vulnerable to dispossession and face the constant risk of land acquisition and loss of livelihoods. By turning land into a speculative asset, it creates anxiety among residents through the threat of dispossession, social insecurity, and the disruption of existing livelihoods and communities.
2. In migration and labour studies, neo-bondage refers to contemporary forms of labour dependency in which workers are not legally bonded but are constrained by debt, contractors, recruitment networks, lack of mobility, or economic necessity. As a result, they have limited freedom to change employers or working conditions, even though they are formally "free" labourers.
3. Although push and pull forces account for 19% and 54% of migration, respectively, they have a significant impact on people's decisions to migrate. Men are driven out of rural areas by a lack of non-agricultural jobs, family size, or insufficient income, whereas women are typically influenced by a pull factor—marriage, employment possibilities, or higher predicted income.

4. MGNREGA is a social welfare law in India, passed in 2005, that guarantees every rural household with adult members willing to undertake unskilled manual labour at least 100 days of wage employment per financial year.
5. Gutter is the space between two panels. Rather than being an empty space, gutter is a site of closure where readers actively bridge narrative gaps, transforming discrete images into a coherent spatial and temporal sequence.
6. It refers to the filtering of narrative events through a character's or narrator's subjective perspective. It reveals how events are perceived, felt, and interpreted, using both visual and verbal elements to represent consciousness and experience.
7. In comics, hyperframe is the aligned exterior outline of the panels on a page, encompassing all panels and their spatial arrangement. It provides the organizational structure that governs how readers navigate and interpret the relationships between panels.
8. Baetens and Lefèvre refer to the supplemental material in comics, such as the cover page, front matter, and other elements, as perigraphy rather than paratext. A comic's perigraphic elements create three effects: the identification or recognition effect, the seduction effect, and the enigma effect.

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