



## City Consciousness from Colonial Calcutta in Bal Krishna Sama's *Mukunda Indira*

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### Abstract

**Background:** Bal Krishna Sama's *Mukunda Indira* (1937) scrutinizes the interplay between the urban modernity of colonial Calcutta and the formation of Mukunda's metropolitan consciousness. This paper focuses on Mukunda's psychological and cultural shift that profoundly contributes to Mukunda's emotional detachment from deep-rooted cultural heritage in the Indian metropolis of colonial Calcutta, which functions as a fractured space in stark contrast to Kathmandu which serves as a space for traditional sociocultural resistance.

**Methods:** This study draws on qualitative and analytical data pooled from primary texts, aligning with the concept of Georg Simmel's urban sociological theory, as discussed in *The Metropolis and the Mental Life* (1903), to provide a theoretical framework for comprehending Mukunda's emotional crisis, fragmented psyche, and rising consciousness.

**Result:** The study reveals that Mukunda's colonial experience in the Indian metropolis is examined through his psychological alienation, cultural and emotional dislocation, fragmentation, and over-stimulation, which aligns with Simmel's metropolitan type of individuality.

**Conclusion:** Sama's *Mukunda Indira* makes a critical engagement with the colonial modernity of Calcutta, which works not merely as a backdrop but as an ever-evolving and changing force shaping the ideological consciousness of the protagonist, rooted in the British colonial legacy and grounded in Simmel's urban sociological theory.

**Novelty:** The novelty of this article lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which foregrounds the city as an active force in shaping colonial subjectivity, providing new insights into Nepali literary criticism.

**Keywords:** city consciousness, colonial city, fractured self, crisis



## **Introduction**

Bal Krishna Sama's seminal play [\*Mukunda Indira\* \(1937\)](#) holds a significant place in the emergence of modern Nepali drama, offering a profound psychological portrait of Mukunda's confrontation with emotional love, loss, and urban alienation. Set against the backdrop of colonial Calcutta- a city becomes a space for economic progress, power, and cultural dislocation. The play [\*Mukunda Indira\* \(1937\)](#) explores not only the emotional detachment but also the psychological and cultural conflicts contributed by the colonial modernity of Calcutta in the conservative life of Kathmandu that Mukunda experiences.

This paper aims to explore how Calcutta's colonial modernity influences Kathmandu's traditional lifestyle and how Mukunda undergoes a psychological transformation, resulting in an identity crisis that detaches him emotionally from Indira and his family. Drawing critical insight from Simmel's seminal essay "[Metropolis and Mental Life](#)" (1997) as a theoretical tool, it highlights the shifting notion of Mukunda's consciousness leading to a fractured self and cultural dislocation in a colonial urban environment. This study explores *Mukunda Indira* and dramatizes the broken emotional bond between Mukunda and Indira, as well as the psychological impact of internalizing colonial modernity. Sama's portrayal of Mukunda in the metropolis of Calcutta presents a complex interrelationship between individual identity, emotional decline, and modernity.

### **Critical Insights on *Mukunda Indira***

[Sama's \*Mukunda Indira\* \(1937\)](#) has elicited several critical insights from Nepali literary scholarship and has been interpreted in different ways. This part discusses the critical contributions made by notable scholars who have worked on Sama's *Mukunda Indira*. Thus, reviewing past research enables us to identify gaps in the present research. This sheds light on the probable asset of our study, which lays the proper foundation for the conceptual framework. Scholars may encounter new interpretations of the text by reviewing the work of previous researchers.

Analyzing the play, [Rijal \(2024a\)](#) investigates existing Hindu patriarchal social values through a feminist and Socio-Political lens, exploring the position of women. He finds Indira a docile but virtuous woman. He highlights the impacts of patriarchy on women ([2024a, p. 7](#)). [Rijal \(2022\)](#) explores the lifestyle differences between the elite or feudal class and the underprivileged class. It unpacks the role of Indigenous people in mirroring social, cultural, and economic life during the 1930s. It delves into the theme of the domination of elites upon the ordinary individuals. The play's protagonist engages in much banter in the hybrid language, but Punacha's local dialect becomes the subject of laughter among the boys in Calcutta. This paper highlights the challenges faced by the indigenous community of Nepal, as represented by Punacha, during the Rana era ([2022, p. 45](#)).

[Onta \(1997\)](#) argues that Mukunda, the play's protagonist, forgets his duty towards his family and the nation after he transfers to Kolkata to study. The colonial city impresses him enough to stay his whole life in Calcutta. The paper further clarifies that "Balkrishna Sama's



*Mukunda Indira* carries the pedagogical spirit of the time, i.e., the 1930s and 1940s" ([Rijal, 2025a, p. 6](#)), in which the central character, Mukunda, is influenced by colonial lifestyles rather than the life tied to sociocultural bonds. The article appeals to the preservation of cultural values, transcending the boundary of selfishness and emphasizing the importance of ethics and morality. Adding to the idea, [Rijal \(2024b\)](#) notes that Modern theatre in Nepal began at the Durbar High School premises. *Mukunda Indira*, written by Balkrishna Sama in 1939, is regarded as the first modern play. It was performed at Durbar High School in Ranipokhari, Kathmandu, and is considered the beginning of the modern era in Nepali theatre ([2024, p. 194](#)).

[Guragain \(2022\)](#) offers new insights into the play, noting that it mirrors the religious beliefs of Nepalese society, as reflected in the title, which features the hero and heroine and celebrates the triumph of religion over sin. The research explores how religion shapes our moral character and leads to a satisfied life, fostering cooperation and trust among human beings. She reflects that *Mukunda Indira* is a social drama that reflects Hindu beliefs. Moreover, this play urges every reader to follow religion. [Karki \(2001\)](#) notes that Sama's *Mukunda Indira* has made a profound contribution to the Nepali dramatic field. Through a detailed analysis of the characters, his study highlights that the play employs standard dialogues and is rich in philosophy, art, and sentiment, with characters taking center stage. [Mottin \(2009\)](#) presents his critical views towards Sama's *Mukunda Indira* and informs that *Mukunda Indira* is the first play written and directed by its author. This paper reveals that Pradhan has compared *Mukunda Indira*'s poetry with fine arts and often declares that Sama is one of the most brilliant and vibrant artists in his experience ([Karki, 2001, p. 2](#)).

[Davis \(2014\)](#) investigates how plays such as *Mukunda Indira* (1937) feature young men in women's roles, a trend initiated by Sama, who was the first to write and stage plays based on real human characters and social themes. *Mukunda Indira* is considered the first modern Nepali drama that turns away from the preponderance of strictly Hindu themes. Sama's drama also explores individual tensions among the characters. [Bhattarai \(2017\)](#) discloses that *Mukunda Indira* is a comedy in which Mukunda, the protagonist of the play, goes to Calcutta for treatment and education, enjoys living, forgetting his wife and family, tries to cheat Indira and spends time and money on wine and prostitutes but ultimately returns to Nepal and reunites with his wife ([Bhattarai, 2017, p. 80](#)). [Baral \(1974\)](#) explores *Mukunda Indira* as the first play by Sama to be staged in Kathmandu. The research suggests that initially, it aims to show only to the audience from Rana Prime Minister, but later on, even the public watches the ticket. The study highlights that *Mukunda Indira* is a "domestic comedy" ([1974, p. 192](#)), which emphasizes the social realities of the time and the prevailing sense of nationalism. Working with *Mukunda Indira*, a critic, Tana Sharma, as referenced in [Karki \(2001\)](#), critiques *Mukunda Indira* and its salient features. She reveals that Sama has incorporated all the attributes of comedy into his *Mukunda Indira*, in which love is the predominant subject. [Liu \(2016\)](#) examines the play and reveals that *Mukunda Indira* is considered the first modern Nepali dream, in which Sama portrays the predicaments of an individual character in conflict with



society and within their own psyche. The study reveals that Sama cast young men in women's roles in the play, which has earned him the reputation as the father of Nepali modern drama.

### **Metropolitan Mindset in *Mukunda Indira***

This study employs an urban sociological perspective, grounded in Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, to explore the psychological as well as sociocultural impacts of colonial modernity in Calcutta and Mukunda's city consciousness in Sama's play *Mukunda Indira* (1937). The theorist lays the groundwork for constructing a strong framework for viewing the urban setting and exploring how individual ideology is altered in cities due to modernity. [Simmel \(1964\)](#) considers that urban space promotes heterogeneity, in which urban individuals are detached from traditional, conservative ideologies and remain emotionally fragmented, morally decayed, and develop a "blasé attitude" ([1964, p. 414](#)) as a protective mechanism against the overwhelming stimuli of city life.

This mechanism becomes visible in Mukunda's evolving consciousness when he navigates the colonial city of Calcutta. [Govil \(2003\)](#) observes, "Asserting that the fast-paced rhythms of the modern city imbue its citizenry with a psychology that is equivalent to the task of handling the constant barrage of urban stimuli" ([2003, p. 80](#)). [Simmel \(1964\)](#) notes that individuals in the urban space become "reserved to the metropolis" ([1964, p. 413](#)) and cultivate intellectual and rational attitudes to be safe from sensory overload. Mukunda's emotional connection with Indira shatters due to the influence of Urban's com-modified relations. This leads to the form of 'Blasé attitude,' the most influential concept in Simmel's urban sociological theory, which refers to a psychological state among city dwellers that arises due to continuous stimuli in an urban setting.

A kind of detachment from emotional bondage. This fosters intellect and reasoning power. To this, [Simmel \(1964\)](#) argues that "intellectuality is thus seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life" ([1964, p. 411](#)). The constant pressures of the urban environment impact the individual psyche by generating consciousness guided by rationality and individuality. [Simmel \(1964\)](#) further adds, "nowhere feels as lonely as in the metropolitan crowd" ([1964, p. 418](#)). So, individuals in the urban space live in complete freedom, but at the same time, they lack emotional affection as Mukunda undergoes this experience. Their relationship is not based on intimacy and affection but on economy and logic, which becomes fragile.

In the same line of argument, [Wirth \(2015\)](#) explores the notion that "Urban citizens are dependent upon more people for their satisfactions of their life needs than are rural people" and engage with 'a greater number of organized groups.' In contrast, they become "less dependent upon particular persons" ([2015, p. 118](#)), indicating a shift toward impersonal relations. Such a fractured nature of urban life signals a functional relationship rather than individuality. In a similar vein, [Simmel \(1964\)](#) adds, "Individuals liberated from historical bonds now wished to distinguish themselves from one another" ([1964, p. 423](#)). Urbanites try to stand out for their individuality in the group, and they celebrate impersonal feelings. The urban environment increases social hierarchy and differentiation; as [Wirth \(2015\)](#) notes, "the greater the number



of individuals participating in the process of interaction, the greater is the potential differentiation between them" (2015, p. 118). There is a higher possibility of developing an impersonal relationship. They prefer logic in every business instead of feelings and sentiments. They become autonomous but feel emotionally dislocated and detached from their cultural identity. Thus, Simmel's idea of urban modernity promotes an understanding of Mukunda's metropolitan consciousness.

### **Fractured Self in Fractured City**

Sama's *Mukunda Indira* (1937) delves into the issue of not only a fractured relationship between Mukunda and his wife, Indira but also into the fractured metropolitan landscape that influences the psychological and emotional states of its citizens. In Calcutta, Mukunda enjoys liberty, forgetting his responsibilities towards family and love when Rupnarayan speaks, "Is that my weakness to send him to Calcutta for education or the great weakness is to love the children who never love and show sympathy in return" (1937, p. 5). Thus contributing to disrupting identity. For Mukunda, the city serves as the site of both possibility and cultural dislocation. His intellectual awakening, psychological shift, cultural conflicts, and alienation, brought about by colonial modernity in the urban space, are the results of Calcutta's fractured spatiality.

Taking a clue from the original text, Calcutta holds all the features of fractured space where modernity and Indigenous cultures often collide and shape the identity of marginalized groups?" (1937, p. 99). "Have pity upon the innocent" (1937, p. 99). Mukunda undergoes, particularly women who are sold into the capital market for sexual exploitation. Simmel (1964) argues that urban modernity fosters an "intensification of nervous stimulation" (1964, p. 411). This feature of over-stimulation leads an individual into a blasé attitude. Again, Mukunda is observed as a blasé subject when his letters become mechanical, and he ceases communication with his kith and kin, even ignoring the letter sent by his father with Bahbadev, asking and appealing to him to return to his birthplace.

Extreme excitement leads him to form a blasé attitude. Mukunda's emotional loss and downfall can be observed when he says, "This Mukunda neither has the wife, the father, the mother, the country nor his family, friends and relatives" (1937, p. 29), indicating that his psychology has shifted into the colonial culture. Mukunda ignores everything about his family, even his newlywed wife, Indira. He finds pleasure and satisfaction in the colonial urban space of Calcutta. For a long time, he has not returned home. When Bhabadev requests him to retire to his home where Indira is waiting for him in despair, he raises his eyebrow and says, "What a foolish Indira! Does she still live in our house?" (1937, p. 31). The response seems unusual in the sense that Mukunda has already erased Indira from his memory and heart and supposes that she might go somewhere leaving the house.

In Sama's *Mukunda Indira*, Mukunda displays his weakened emotional attachment. While returning to Nepal, he says, "I might forget to myself, but how can I forget such a colorful world" (1937, p. 39), and when he returns to Kathmandu in disguise, Indira says, "How courageously all Ravans speak when Ram is away" (1937, p. 92). These voices suggest that





Mukunda has changed due to the impact of modernity on Calcutta. Sama's Mukunda experiences Simmel's concept of urban life as a "blasé attitude" (1964, p. 414) to protect himself from sensory overload. In this sense, Mukunda's modern urban consciousness closely aligns with Simmel's investigation of the city, which views it as both a platform for progress and a source of psychological downfall or ruin. *Mukunda Indira* (1937) reveals the conflicts between urban colonial modernity and Kathmandu's traditional culture, which invites tensions regarding the long-rooted sociocultural ideology and psychology of contemporary society. Mukunda, the protagonist, is a boy from a feudal society in Kathmandu who goes to Calcutta to pursue his academic career and better employment. However, there, he becomes immersed in the indulgent lifestyle of colonial Calcutta and forgets his native land when Rupnarayan says, "he does not meet anyone who has gone from here" (1937, p. 6). His evolving modern consciousness forces him to forget his roots of cultural identity, family responsibilities, love, and devotion towards the motherland. Mukunda's confrontation with the city's overstimulation breaks his connection with the conservative ideology of Kathmandu.

The colonial Calcutta is presented as a fragmented city, not only spatially but also psychologically, as it is divided into Colonial quarters for the Britishers and Indian neighborhoods and between modern consciousness and traditional beliefs. At that very moment, it signals Mukunda's fragmented consciousness, which develops what Simmel (1964) calls a matter-of-fact attitude" that often "makes one lose the more personal and emotional relationships" (1964, p. 411). Mukunda forgets all his intimacies and love for Indira and tries just to deceive her, saying, "You are a criminal. I come and capture you to go down" (1937, p. 95), implying that he has been corrupted due to the colonial modernity of Calcutta. Mukunda's education and learning of English place him within the boundaries of modernity, but he never receives complete privileges, indicating his subordinate status (1937, p. 5). This reflects Mukunda's detachment from his cultural identity.

Mukunda's awakening signals how metropolises remap the self-making individuals who negotiate between cultural heritages and the rationality of urban modernity. When he speaks English, saying "good afternoon" (1937, p. 37), he embodies this perfectly, yet he finds himself in a marginalized status that he cannot resist. This concept aligns with Simmel's (1964) idea that a metropolitan individual is "a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers" (1964, p. 422). This reflects Mukunda's process of detaching himself from his culture in order to adapt to the city's social fabric. When he returns to Kathmandu, he seems different from before, as he exhibits an emotional breakdown and suspicion towards Indira, which reflects the psychological effects of modern urban life, according to Simmel. Mukunda becomes increasingly skeptical of Indira, unable to trust her loyalty. He demands evidence based on logic, signaling his cold rationality, which is reflected in his words: "Do you still love such Mukunda now?" (1937, p. 63).

In the city, for Simmel, individual relationships become weak and fleeting when Simmel (1964) says, "The individuals also gain a specific individuality" (1964, p. 417). Each individual tries to stand out as a unique figure and possesses a different type of personality,



which aligns with the play when Mukunda remarks, "Nine hundred ninety-nine BC" (1937, p. 38), speaking fluent English but realizing his marginal position. Simmel (1964) says that "personal relationship is assessed based on economy and calculation" (1964, p. 412), which indicates that emotional relationship is calculable and quantitative as Mukunda says, "Can't I know that much.....checked the eyes of all nymphs by counting" (1937, p. 72). Due to rational social relations, city dwellers often prefer logic or reason over deep emotional bonds, which can lead to "Cultural displacement and Social Discrimination" (1937, p. 8), resulting in fractured individual identity. As Simmel (1964) remarks, "The metropolis has always been the seat of the money economy" (1964, p. 411), where human relationship is much impersonal and rationalized, and individuals discourse based on certain responsibilities and roles rather than personal relations. He claims that the "modern mind has become more and more calculating" (1964, p. 412) as people use rationality in response to stimuli rather than emotions.

Human qualities like honesty, loyalty, and faithfulness are exchanged and reduced to quantitative values. Mukunda values material outlook over affection and emotional insights, where objective spirit dominates subjective sentiments. The more he becomes embedded in the urban structure, the more he becomes paralyzed from a moral and emotional standpoint. The moment when Bhavadev asks him if there is anything like a fair just when they return to Kathmandu, Mukunda speaks, "How can I know this? Everything is new to me, everyone is new, even my own body" (1937, p. 47). The answer primarily suggests that Mukunda is caught between modernity and tradition, and he appears detached from his emotional connection to Kathmandu's life. Mukunda's growing skepticism over Indira and his application of rationality to test her loyalty reflects an urban rational ideology that weakens his emotional ties to Indira. He becomes a tragic figure of modern alienation due to his fractured identity produced by the colonial modernity of Calcutta.

Mukunda's temporary relationship with people in the city and emotional distance from Kathmandu shapes his fractured identity as Rup Narayan discloses, "I heard that he has shifted into next location" (1937, p. 6), which aligns with Simmel's insights of metropolis that it brings "fleeting existence" (1964, p. 424). For Simmel, individuals in the metropolis have ephemeral or transient relations with one another, and such bonds are exchanged within an economy that does not last long. Mukunda has been the product of British colonization, and he constantly searches for individuality, freedom, and transformation, detaching himself from Kathmandu's emotional and cultural bond. However, he does not find his true self. Here, Mukunda emphasizes evidence and material appearance rather than emotional insights. Mukunda seems indifferent to his wife and family when he asks, "Whether or not Indira is still a virgin or has lost her chastity?" (1937, p. 30). The above line suggests that Mukunda, deeply engrossed with the rationality of the metropolis, wishes to test Indira's innocent love, which he cannot accept from the heart without evidence. It shows that the city promotes a fractured relationship and commodifies emotional bonds. He visits bars, prostitutes, and theaters to enjoy and forgets "wife, home, country and Indira's devotion" (1937, p. 59). This indicates his emotional fall and the rise of urban consciousness, yet he becomes the marginalized subject.



Simmel critiques urban life and its tendency to make individuals feel alienated from deep emotional attachments. Mukunda's alienation starts from his sense of cultural dislocation. His identity is blended. He is a Nepali subject in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. He does not entirely belong to either of the countries. His marginal state gives a sense of alienation. Mukunda's consciousness is shaped in such a way that he becomes much more rigid toward his original culture, forgets his love and care for Indira, and ignores his father's letters due to his adaptation to colonial modernity. As Bhabhadev says, "He was not like this when I met him three years ago" ([1937, p. 5](#)), indicating that Mukunda has shifted his emotions and lacked affection.

Sama employs Bhabhadev's remarks to connect Mukunda's emotional modification, similar to Simmel's theorization of urban life. Another evidence of Mukunda's cultural estrangement is noticeable when he forgets his language and indulges in drinks and alcohol as Bhabha speaks, "Puna, Mukunda has carelessly sacrificed his own language. He has bought dress and poison cheaply by giving language" ([1937, p. 24](#)), showing his emerging consciousness of urban modernity. He is aloof from family and love. He almost forgets his wife and parents when he says, "Oh! Are they Father, Mother, and Indira? What a surprise! Is it?" ([1937, p. 49](#)).

Mukunda has been detached and alienated from his family and the roots of his cultural identity, showing his fractured life. For Simmel, the urban environment attracts every individual to acquire a fragmented identity. Mukunda reveals such fragmentation when he finds himself culturally dislocated. Connecting the idea, Mukunda says, "My spirit lives separately being fractured or if the body dies having pain, I am the spirit, and I have salvation forever" ([1937, p. 29](#)). Mukunda's sense of self is fragmented due to urban modernity that promotes individualism. Modernity has made people more individualized but also more automatized.

When Bhabhadev asks "if there are prostitutes and wines in the metropolis of Calcutta" ([1937, p. 29](#)), indicating the fractured social life of the poor, women, and marginalized individuals in the city. Mukunda responds, "I am not with them, grandfather, they come to me. Nobody can intervene my liberty" ([1937, p. 29](#)), suggesting that urban locations foster individual autonomy rather than affective emotion. Calcutta is portrayed as a fractured space; however, Mukunda quests for self-development but loses his emotional bond due to the intellectual awakening triggered by British colonialism. In the play, colonial modernity has such a profound influence on Mukunda that he does not wish to return to his motherland.

He loses his sense of patriotism and rejects intimacy with his family, relatives, and nation. When Bhabha asks him to return to Nepal, he reacts, "I don't go to Nepal. Do you also live here?" ([1937, p. 32](#)). Mukunda does not accept Indira's love as truth but asks for verification, reflecting the dilemma caused by the colonial metropolis signals his fragmented status. He develops a distinct rational consciousness, which makes him skeptical and emotionally detached from Indira. In this vein, he says, "I haven't got married yet" ([1937, pp. 89-90](#)). This line implies that Mukunda uses rationality to test Indira's loyalty, innocence, and chastity and demands some evidence. He becomes emotionally distant from her when he says,





"I betray you" ([1937, p. 95](#)). His feelings for Indira are rationalized. His desires, social stratification, and education all contribute to the development of his rational thinking.

### **Conclusion**

The study sheds light on colonial urban consciousness and the deep-rooted traditional cultural identities that persist. It also explores how *Mukunda Indira* pinpoints the notions of psychological transformation and emotional breakdown, impacted by the colonial modernity of fractured space, through the experiences of Mukunda's intellectual awakening and urban consciousness in South Asian Cities like Calcutta. This study reveals rationalization, overstimulation, a blasé attitude, and alienation are developed in Mukunda through his exposure in Calcutta. It shows how the urban environment separates individuals from their traditional cultural practices and contributes to the development of cold relations among relatives, emotional detachment, and growing suspicion among loyal citizens. The paper finds Calcutta not only as a space for individual autonomy and liberation but also as a Metropolis with colonized ideology that supports dismantling identity and fracturing emotional connection through the representation of Mukunda. Through this study, Sama's work not only relocates the urban-based study of literature but also lays a solid foundation for literary research that may encompass entire South Asian Cities and literature in the days to come.

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