Religion, urbanism and sustainable cities in South Asia

Citation:

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Introduction

Sustainable urbanisation with its implications for climate change and socio-economic well-being is of global concern, but the combined importance of four trends that involve religion and/or sustainable development is largely neglected in the urban policymaking across South Asia. One, since 2006, the human population in cities has overtaken that of the rural regions worldwide. The pace of urbanisation in South Asia is fraught with environmental, socio-political and health risks for people as climatic catastrophes, population explosion, the growing scale of informal and slum developments, high consumption, and volatile identity politics involving religion and space threaten to overwhelm equitable growth.

Two, the last decade has noted problems associated with modernist planning in developing countries that ‘have been imposed or borrowed from elsewhere’ (UN Habitat 2009: 9). The zoning methods introduced by the British, for instance, prioritised motorised vehicles in heavily populated cities of the Indian colony, now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This introduced a system of socio-spatial segregation unknown even in caste-based Indian society (UN Habitat 2009). Modernist planning tends to assume a ‘one-dimensional’ view of civil society, while in fact, civil society is ‘inspired more by religious movements’ in developing cities (UN Habitat 2009:7).

Three, there are problems specifically with neglecting religion in urban planning policies, leading to ‘flawed’ planning. In the West, many planning theorists have argued that urban policy’s lack of engagement with religion, spirituality and forms of the ‘non-rational’ (Sandercock 1998: 212) has created problems like marginalisation of particular groups, destruction of ecological resources and increased poverty. The neglect of religion in policy is similarly emerging as a problem in South Asian cities, as evidenced by increased ghettoisation and impoverishment of minority religious groups (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012; Sachar Commission Report 2006).

Fourth, South Asia is home to nations going through extraordinary instability and volatility as they determine nationhood and national identities. Religion defines nation-building in South Asia, and nation-building occurs in the cities.
The newest member of the South Asian community, Afghanistan for instance—similar to Myanmar—has embarked on a project of reconstructing its beleaguered state through its cities. Indeed the recent upheavals have caused an increased rate of urbanisation as rural citizens migrate outwards for employment and security (UN-Habitat 2014). The capital Kabul alone contains more than 50 per cent of the nation’s urban population (UN-Habitat 2014), a myriad mix of ethnicities and religions. It is ever more timely to foreground religion as a planning concern as national development becomes intimately intertwined with urban development.

The contributions in this volume address the idea that religion influences urbanisation and urban development in South Asian cities, and yet, religion’s role remains a blind spot in mainstream urban planning. The need for South Asia to develop planning policies that are truly attuned to the specific needs of its cities is acute, and for this, consideration of religion is vital. Hancock and Srinivas (2008: 620) note, ‘One of the persistently stubborn assumptions of so much of recent urban theory and policy seems to be that religion is external, incidental, or peripheral to the discussion of urban modernity or civic futures’. In particular, they note, this has most deeply impacted cities of Asia where the real and palpable influence on everyday urbanism has been treated as ‘object lessons in a failed modernity or a modernity arriving by detours and hesitations, carnivalesque imitations and unavoidable tragedies’ (620). Hancock and Srinivas (2008: 620) assert that these approaches have ‘unintentionally pathologized the study of modern religion’ but indeed the study of various dimensions of urbanisms as well. There is an urgent need for urban studies of South Asia to embrace the anthropological, sociological, and even the theological dimensions of religion to fully understand the cities of that region. Hancock and Srinivas (2008: 620) observe:

Despite the depth and richness of the material and textual archives of urban religiosity, works within urban studies [authors’ emphasis] focused on contemporary Asia and Africa, however, have been uneven in their self-conscious exploration of religion, particularly the ways in which it is imbricated [sic] with market economies, consumerism, migrations, mass media, informality or gentrification.

The planning and design of sustainable urban environments are by no means within the sole purview of urban planners and architects alone. This edited volume makes the plea that planning for sustainable urban development in South Asia must be regarded and approached as a multidisciplinary exercise. Conceptions and strategies for sustainability must necessarily comprise a range of world-views. In his work on excavating the ‘real’ elements that comprise Old Delhi’s sense of place, Indian anthropologist Ajay Gandhi (2011) emphasises the need for the ‘anthropologist’s gaze’ from below to replace – or at the least, complement – the ‘planner’s gaze from the top’. In his analysis of sustainable development for the cities of the South, Bolay (2011: 85) notes, ‘Each discipline, each
profession, must partake in the shared endeavour to make sense of territorial and social complexities’.

To this end, nine experts from a variety of disciplines ranging from anthropology, sociology, politics, women’s studies, sustainable development, religious studies and last but not the least – urban planning – come together in this edited volume to explore some critical questions related to religion, urbanism and sustainable cities in South Asia. How has religion physically and culturally structured and restructured urban spaces in South Asia? What do built artefacts of religion and the spaces that they organise tell us about how space is perceived, approached and utilised? How does religion privilege or control access to cityspaces in secular, multifaith postcolonial contexts in South Asia? How has religion differentially contributed to democratic and collective action in the Indian subcontinent? Aside from caste, are there other ways in which religion has contributed to socio-political inequalities in South Asian cities? How do these hierarchies determine how space is organised and utilised (Patel 2009)?

Two themes emerge in these chapters, often simultaneously, demonstrating the extent of the closely intricate relationships between the distinct forms and roles that religion takes on. Together, they also convey the case for religion to be factored in as a distinct planning concept, as it draws its forms and complexities from its anthropological conceptions. The first of these focus on urban histories and heritage with a focus on space, built form and living traditions. In order to pragmatically consider religion in policy without risking reductionism of this complex concept, the heritage discourse and the substantial body of work on heritage as a policy construct help to deconstruct religion as tangible and intangible heritage. This covers religion’s ‘physical, built, natural as well as its socio-cultural ritualistic and performative aspects, identities and values-based manifestations’ (Narayanan 2015: 4).

The second theme focuses on the role of religion in delineating identities and the impact on the types of informal development, marginalisation and violence. Informality is not regarded merely as the illegal or the unplanned, such as unauthorised shanty towns and slums, but as a product of formal planning itself. Indeed, an overwhelming proportion of the activities that occur within the ambit of informal growth in developing nations is legal (Neuwirth 2011) and plays a irreplaceable role in sustaining developing cities.

As a final note, we recognise that ‘South Asia’ itself is far from a stable concept, and for this reason, we have deliberately chosen to refer to a looser and more inclusive list of countries that may also be regarded as South Asian. The political bloc SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has a limited membership of eight countries, viz., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, since 2006, Afghanistan. However, the shared experience of British colonial urbanism and the geographical proximity of urban nodes and transport routes is a useful framework for comparisons, and for that reason, India’s other neighbours such as Myanmar may be safely and usefully regarded as South Asian, for the purposes of this study.
The city and religion in South Asia in the neoliberal age

More than two decades have passed since the demolition of the 500 year-old Babri Mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya city in north India on 6th December 1992. In the immediate aftermath of the destruction, repercussions were swift and equally violent in Dhaka and other major cities in Bangladesh where Hindu temples were burnt or broken, and minority communities were brutally persecuted. Through the story of the horrors faced by a Hindu family in her novel Lajja [Shame], exiled Bangladeshi feminist and writer Taslima Nasrin depicts how powerfully and intimately religion transcends national borders in South Asia, with the greatest intensity of consequences reserved for cities. Entire megapoles in South Asian nations go through complete upheaval as a result of religious fundamentalism in neighbouring countries. Interestingly, the events of 1992 are widely perceived to have had a more forceful and enduring impact than even the Partition holocaust of 1947. The Godhra carnage1 in Ahmedabad in 2002 shows how large and small cities across South Asia continue to experience shockwaves and tremors that disrupt communities, physical sites and structures, ecologies and equity. Religious fundamentalism has since disrupted urban life in Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Karachi, Lahore, Varanasi, Peshawar among others, creating cities that are more spatially fragmented than before on sectarian lines.

The early 1990s marked a significant turning point for the nations of South Asia, marked by the dovetailing two megatrends of increased urbanisation and neoliberalism in the region, with a greater assertion of religion in public and political life. In 1991, India started its lurch towards neoliberal growth. In a radical departure from its conservative economic and foreign policies, the Indian government dismantled several of the restrictive regimes to its economic structures, and liberalised the economy in favour and pursuit of neoliberal growth. Cities are the springboard upon which neoliberal growth occurs, and it was notably then, that urban development and planning became explicitly a national priority in India. Previously, individual states determined their own urban development and growth trajectories (Narayanan 2015). In 1992, India implemented a 'National Urban Policy' for the first time when it became clear that the national growth engine depended centrally on the organisational efficiency and capacity of its cities. National prosperity became linked to urban prosperity.

India’s liberalisation of its economy and the reshifting of its focus on its cities set the precedent for the refocussing of the national gaze from the villages to the cities throughout the Indian subcontinent, followed by an exponential urban population explosion. UN-Habitat’s (2012: 25) The State of the World’s Cities report notes that the yearly population rise in just six developing cities – four of which are in South Asia, viz. New Delhi and Mumbai (India), Karachi (Pakistan) and Dhaka (Bangladesh) – exceeds the entire per annum population growth of Europe. The speed and scale of urbanisation in India in particular is unprecedented almost anywhere in the world. By 2030, nearly 600 million Indians will live in cities where 70 per cent of the nation’s employment and GDP will be generated (McKinsey Global Institute 2010).
and Nigeria) will contribute to 37 per cent of the total urban population between 2014 and 2050 (United Nations 2014).

The future of the urban scale in South Asia is quite simply staggering. Some of the largest megacities and the highest numbers of million-plus cities will be located in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; indeed, with the exception of Sri Lanka, all South Asian nations report a rapid escalation of the size and numbers of their cities (United Nations 2014). More than 50 per cent of Pakistan’s total population is expected to be urban by 2030 (Haider and Haider 2006). Even Nepal, one of the least urbanised nations in South Asia forecasts vital urban trends. At 6.6 per cent, Nepal’s rate of urbanisation is the highest in the Indian subcontinent, and the Kathmandu Valley metropolitan region is the fastest growing in South Asia (UN-Habitat Nepal 2012). The face of such urban growth is almost consistently poor. In Dhaka, over 70 per cent of the population are poor and are squeezed into less than 20 per cent of the surface area of the megacity (Davis 2006: 95). Nearly 70 per cent of Indian urban citizens live in slums on about $1.80 a day (McKinsey Global Institute 2010).

During this time of rapid urban growth in recent decades, religion sat uneasily – but definitively – at the table reconfiguring urban spaces, and urbanisms or the ways of relating peoples and places. That urbanisation in South Asia was accompanied by a resurgence of sectarianism, and the greater visibility of religion in public spaces and debate should be entirely unsurprising; in her study of politics of growth and religious violence in Sri Lanka, Bulankulame (2013) notes that neoliberal development, especially in developing nations almost always occurs at the intersection of religion and devastating violence.

However communalism is not the only issue that makes the need for studies bringing religion and urban together in South Asia compelling. Indeed religion exerts a palpable influence on the very character and sense of South Asian cityscapes itself. Religion is a critical element that distinguishes place and sense of place in Indian cities, impacting urban design but also the relationship of the multifaith community with place (Narayanan 2015). Urban anthropologist Steven Parish (1997: 453) for instance documents the sheer diversity of Hindu religious built form, rituals, actions, values and belief systems that constitute the everyday in Bhaktapur city in Nepal and writes, ‘The city is part what the Hindu pantheon makes it. Urban space, form, and action are shaped, known and experienced in terms of religious meanings’. If religion does not actually make the South Asian city, it certainly has a heavy-handed influence. Demonstrating the ways in which religion in both iconic and everyday forms is a planning concern in Jaipur city, I have argued that ‘urban planning must be informed by anthropological language and concepts to stay close to the grounded realities of Indian urbanism, as it is people and their built environment that is being planned’ (Narayanan 2015: 15).

Religion also collides with, and shapes several of the most significant of modernities in South Asia such as citizenship (Ring 2006), tourism (Bandyopadhyay et al. 2008), urban development and planning (Narayanan 2015) and even the growth of informal spaces (Roy 2005; Davis 2006). South Asian urban modernity has, in several ways, assumed similar forms as modern growth in cities
elsewhere – gentrification and ghettoisation, fortification and gated communal spaces; the growth of industrialised and manufacturing spaces alongside squatter settlements (Hancock and Srinivas 2008). However in each of these spaces, religion is a palpable force in the formation of an indigenous modernity (Hosagrahar 2005). Hancock and Srinivas (2008: 620) write, ‘Far from withering away, religious spaces and practices have acquired heightened visibility in these settings’.

The 1990s also heralded the start of a third megatrend in South Asia – the increasing cooption of ‘sustainable development’ as a national development agenda. Along with concerns for poverty alleviation, renewable energies and ecological concerns, one of the most significant locus for conceptualising and implementing sustainable development has been in the cities. However development policymaking in the region has generally continued to rely on Euro-centric conceptions of sustainable development that emphasise the ecological dimensions of development (Patra 2009). While this is undoubtedly central to sustainable development, the risks that such approaches can lead to ‘environmental racism’ or ‘environmental elitism’ by disregarding the interests of the poor are real (Martinez-Alier 2002: 11), by strengthening existing social and political inequalities and/or creating new ones (Agyeman and McEntee 2012). ‘Justice’ must hence underpin approaches to sustainable urbanism (Agyeman and McEntee 2012), and the factors that determine justice are vital to the achievement of sustainable urban development itself. Harvey (1994: 53) emphasises the need ‘to re-elaborate upon what it takes to create the values and institutions of a reasonably just society’. The consideration of religion, we suggest in this volume, is indispensable to the conception and development of sustainable, equitable cities in South Asia.

Religion, urbanism and sustainable cities: making the connections

Agenda for environmental and social development have generally been designed for areas outside of the city; however since the 1990s, there has been strong consensus that sustainable city planning has to be actively integrated in a global sustainability view, since cities arguably ‘shape the world’ (Newman and Kenworthy 1999: 6). In fact, Yanarella and Levine (1992) even propose that all other sustainability strategies should centrally revolve around designing and constructing sustainable cities. Beatley and Manning (1997) support this view. They write (1997: 56): ‘Any sustainability strategy that is truly comprehensive requires concern about the condition and status of cities – whether older cities, inner cities or inner-ring suburbs’. In particular, they stress, ‘the environmental agenda of sustainability must go hand in hand with a strong cities or urban agenda’ (Beatley and Manning 1997: 56). The importance of the urban green agenda was evident in the Secretary-General’s address to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992: ‘If sustainable development does not start in the cities, it will not go – cities have got to lead the way’ (Brugmann 1996, in McGranahan et al. 2001: 9). This growing concern with city sustainability was prefigured in the Brundtland Commission
report (1987: 279), which had noted that the new millennium would be the ‘cen-
tury of the “urban revolution”’.

More than two decades have passed since the acknowledgement of the indis-
putable role of cities in strategising and implementing sustainable development,
and during this time, the centre stage of urbanisation has also decisively shifted
to the rapidly urbanising, sprawling concentrations of the South. As South Asian
cities experience historically unprecedented growth, as compared to the erstwhile
focus on the development of its regions and villages, the focus on their sustain-
able development has also never been as urgent. Some of the greatest challenges
for urban sustainable development are undoubtedly in the ecologically degraded
cities of the Indian subcontinent where economic growth – without which social
justice cannot be achieved – is a highly delicate and complicated task. South
Asian cities are particularly vulnerable to two kinds of poverties identified by
Stephens (2000: 101): ‘physical poverties’ such as food deprivation, water depre-
viation, land deprivation, inadequate or no access to health and sanitation, lack
of shelter and transport poverty; as well as other standards of poverty, such as
‘poverty of opportunity’, which denies the poor employment and education, all
vital to lift current and future generations out of endemic vulnerability. Haas’s
(2009: 7) concerns for the sustainability of the cities of the new millennium are
possibly most resonant for the exploding cities and conurbations of South Asia:

... [a] challenge that will shape the outcome of our cities is experienced
through the waves of exploding population growth, transformation of net-
works, and economic disparity and prosperity that carry consequences for
both the environment and the long-term social well-being of inhabitants.

The challenges for planning sustainable cities in South Asia are additionally
vastly compounded by the sheer areal scale of the sites. In the Indian subconti-
nent, urban growth extends not merely to cities by any means, but ultimately, to
the geographical nation-state itself through the industrialisation and/or commer-
cialisation of its conurbations (Haas 2009). In the most populous South Asian
nations like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the urban development authorities
are responsible for not just the metropolitan areas of the city, but also the district
and the region surrounding the city which can include smaller towns and cit-
ties, peri-urban and rural precincts. They are, in a sense, administrators of what
Patrick Geddes terms ‘conurbations’ in his book Cities in Evolution: large urban
regions that have developed through the merging of several kinds of urban spaces
as well as population growth. Urbanisation is hardly a spatially bounded phe-
nomenon by any means, but in South Asia, it now commonly occurs through the
growth of conurbations, or the extended region surrounding megacities or other
significant and usually large cities, which includes other smaller cities, towns and
even peri-urban villages.

This areal mass now forms large continuous urban areas, and may be planned,
but more often than not as in South Asia, is entirely unplanned. Rawalpindi and
Islamabad cities in Pakistan for instance no longer remain distinct. They have
merged completely into one gigantic city through growth of the populations as well as the physical sprawl of both cities, though they ostensibly are governed under two planning authorities. In fact, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which have particularly high population densities greatly under-estimate the size of urban populations as most population studies interpret ‘urban’ rigidly, excluding peri-urban areas and populations (Haider and Haider 2006; Narayanan 2015). The parameters for urban governance in South Asia thus spatially far exceeds the metropolitan and suburban bounds of cities, and typically also covers large conurbations of surrounding districts and regions.

The manner in which the nations of South Asia urbanise has sustainability implications worldwide. The much invoked Perlman Principles systematically link the achievement of global sustainability itself, to the eradication of urban poverty in the developing regions of the world (Perlman 2007). Janice Perlman emphasised the need for inclusivity in eliminating poverty – inclusivity of these regions in determining and implementing global urban sustainable development, but also, of the disenfranchised, minorities and others within developing cities who had thus far been excluded from political participation in the making of their cities. Perlman (2007) argued that in addition to ecological restoration, economic vitality and social justice (the three universally acknowledged pillars of sustainable development), a ‘sustainable city’ depends on the equitable political participation of its citizens, and cannot exist without this. The ultimate conclusion of the Perlman Principles is that ‘There can be no sustainable city in the twenty-first century without social justice and political participation as well as economic vitality and ecological regeneration’ (Perlman 2007: 173). In contrast, Indian cities continue to be ‘developed’ under a Master Plan, with no or minimal citizen participation (Downton 2000). Neither do the planning models for the cities of South Asia account for critical categories of identity – such as religion – which can emphatically impact inclusivity (Narayanan 2015).

Sustainable development is now a significant planning concept and strategy for South Asian cities. Almost all recent Master Plans in India for instance emphasise its importance as one of the foremost guiding principles. It is clear that sustainable development itself, with its broad applicability to ecological, economic and socially equitable development is desirable. The elements that define sustainable development in the clearest and most meaningful ways must however be drawn from insight and practices locally. Haas (2009: 7–8): ‘To create sustainable living places, what we need from urbanism is a broad coalition of progressive ideas at a systems level, one which will offer a synthesis of skills, innovation, and knowledge . . . Sustainability is . . . a necessity’. In particular, Bolay (2011: 85) identifies four aspects of urbanism that must be considered in any strategy for sustainable urban development in the South:

1. ‘a multidimensional perspective on new urban forms, in both diagnosing problems (inter-disciplinary vision) and devising proposals (holistic approach and inter-sectorial actions);
2. the participation of all stakeholders involved in designing and implementing the city's transformation;
3. the multiplicity of scales to take into consideration [from neighbourhoods to the city fringe to the regional outreach of urbanisation in developing countries];
4. [the different] social and urban processes’ available that make place and space in cities.

However the focus of urban planning has generally always been the solution of ‘immediate problems’ related to housing, transportation and employment (Sanchez-Rodriguez 2008). What this has resulted in is a form of piecemeal spatial planning process with imbalanced access to infrastructure, leading to a sharp polarisation of assets and real income. Sanchez-Rodriguez (2008: 150) writes, ‘This fragmented vision overlooks the wide range of multidimensional social, economic, political, cultural and biophysical interactions behind each urban problem’.

Considering the factors that determine identity politics is a critical step in identifying the ways in which they obstruct or enable a just society. Pacione (1999: 120) argued, ‘In a just society a principal aim would be the amelioration of excessive inequalities, as manifested in spatial or opportunity terms, between persons, groups and communities’. As Pacione (1999: 120) further wrote, ‘A religious perspective embedded in a particular spatial and temporal context merits as much consideration as a source of emancipatory and socially-progressive action as any other “meta-theory” – such as socialism, liberalism, feminism, humanism or postmodernism’. In multifaith, highly pluralistic South Asian cities, religion emerges strongly as one of the most critical categories that determines justice, and by extension, sustainability (Narayanan 2015: 26).

Socio-spatial justice can best be enabled when dimensions that constitute context-specific development such as a range of anthropological, socio-cultural and political factors are considered by formal planning. In the context of Indian cities (and arguably elsewhere in the subcontinent), religion emerges as one critical analytical factor that determines socio-spatial justice, especially for the poor.

In order to develop planning protocols that reflect the social, cultural, political and environmental realities of cities as accurately as possible, a localised sense of place, place identity and placemaking have been identified as vital elements of sustainable cities (Sepe 2013), and which modernist planning in Indian cities has almost entirely neglected to consider. Religion is a vital category that demonstrably makes place in South Asian cities, in both positive and problematic ways (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012). The older conceptual differentiations between ‘space’ and ‘place’ have specific resonances when religion is understood as a spatial category. Philosophers like Tilley (1994) tend to view space as the primary
motherhood notion from which ‘place’ is derived as opposed to geographers who argue for a primary focus on ‘place’ that may be directly experienced as opposed to space which is more abstract. Urban theorist H.S. Geyer uses Weber's (1929) model depicting different layers of human activities starting from agrarian/rural to increasingly industrialised/urban, to show how different human activities in distinct and real ways attach different ‘place’ qualities to urban space. Space becomes place when infused with identity (Hague and Jenkins 2005).

Religion is so fundamentally intrinsic to identity in India and its neighbours that anthropologist Gerald Larson (1995: 280) argues for an understanding of ‘religion’ as an essentially anthropological construct, comparable with other identity-forming concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘language’ and ‘society’. By no means, clarifies Larson, does this mean that it is necessary to claim allegiance or sympathy to any religion; indeed, one may claim agnosticism or atheism. Larson here stresses that religion in India or elsewhere in South Asia may not be simplistically understood purely in terms of sacrality, but mundanity and secularity are shaped by religion, as they shape religion. Religion is life-encompassing in its ambit rather than only its sacred dimensions.

How may religion pragmatically be identified in its multifarious forms as an element that determines urbanism? The urban heritage discourse presents a functional possibility of considering religion in terms of its tangible and intangible heritage. As intangible heritage, Pacione’s (1999: 118) deconstruction of religion in six ways further furnishes a useful frame of reference as ‘doctrine, sacred narrative, ethics, ritual, experience and social institutions’.

In addition, religion can also be conceptualised in terms of space and built form. Framing religion as tangible or intangible heritage also offers the greater consideration of the range of informal development in cities which are often determined by religious structures, sites, identities and rituals (Davis 2006; Narayanan 2015). The UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage describes tangible heritage such as ‘monuments, groups of buildings, sites and cultural landscapes’ and intangible heritage as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills of communities and groups, and sometimes individuals, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith’ (Roders and van Oers 2011: 6). The Convention emphasises that intangible heritage was as important as tangible, material heritage to cultural diversity and sustainable development, and they both share a ‘deep-seated interdependence’ with natural heritage (UNESCO 2003). While some scholars question the classification of heritage as tangible or intangible, arguing that ultimately the experience of heritage makes all heritage intangible (Munjeri 2004; Smith 2006), this distinction is useful for the purposes of policymaking.

**Urban histories and heritage: space, built form and living traditions**

Urban history and heritage in their various tangible and intangible forms have strong resonances for contemporary urban sustainable development for South Asia (Narayanan 2015, Patel 2009). While city planning is certainly a ‘prospective’
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project, planners are necessarily required to adopt a clear position in regards to history and the past, while orienting policy towards the future, ‘whether they cling to legacies, memories and precedents or reject them’ (Hebbert and Sonne 2006: 3). As Gottmann (1954: 2) wrote, ‘the geographer must keep the past in mind if he wants to understand the “whys” behind the present problems and the present landscapes’.

The trajectories of urbanism in South Asia particularly make a historical analysis relevant and imperative to contemporary urban planning. Without critical inquiry into the history and heritage of cities, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand what constitutes the vital genius loci or ‘spirit of place’, and how current planning can take this account while planning sustainable cities. Precolonial urban heritage, tangible and intangible, continues to exert a palpable influence on the nature of the commonplace and everyday in many historic South Asian cities as well as the modern, postcolonial urban forms built over and around the old historic cores. Precolonial cities like Varanasi or Kathmandu, or modern postcolonial urban centres like Delhi, Colombo or Jaipur with an older, historic, ‘native’ core often had strong historical royal and religious patronage.

Further, the wide income gap in the Indian subcontinent, the history of privilege and power – or lack thereof – conferred by religion and caste, the fluidities of rural/urban migrations, and the quickened pace of urbanisation since European colonisation mandate the questioning of the ways in which anthropological categories like religion continue to determine social and spatial hierarchies. Emphasising the links between urbanism and capitalism, Indian urban historian Sujata Patel (2009: 31) argues for the ‘need to evolve an interdisciplinary historical perspective that can explore the uneven and transitional character of the urban process structured by colonial capitalism’. She notes that the analysis of five themes – all of which rely on a clear understanding and analysis of past and contemporary histories – can provide insights the real nature of urbanisation in the region, and further claims that these themes can also become the building blocks for fashioning a new urban sociology not only in India but the developing world in general:

- uneven capitalist development and its impact on urbanisation; the nature of urban inequalities; the influence of globalisation on city forms and structures; the intervention of state policies and the impact of collective action; and the various dimensions of urban cultures and modernities.

(Patel 2009: 31)

However inserting religion as a category – or yet another theme, as it were – for an urban historical analysis deepens and illuminates even more clearly the enduring impact of the past on present and future processes of urban development in the region stretching further back in precolonial urban history and beyond. South Asia undoubtedly is one of the richest regions to uncover the extent to which tangible and intangible religious heritage has been influential in influencing its urbanscapes, and in turn being influenced by it. Cities like Varanasi, Taxila, Madurai, Kathmandu Valley, Delhi and even Visakhapatnam among others
are regarded as ‘living cities’ for the continuity of built form and living traditions over millennia, and were among the first to have a history of religion in their built and cultural environments. Buddhist and Jain monasteries dating back to 1st millennium BC existed in these sites, which later gave way to more temple-centric urban sites, as in Varanasi itself or Madurai (Hancock and Srinivas 2008). Indeed, whole cities actually evolved out of spaces that contained institutions of religious learning like Amritsar city, or the sacred site and later shrine of the great Sufi teacher Nizamuddin Auliya around which grew Shahjahanabad or Old Delhi (Hancock and Srinivas 2008).

Urban studies have been most preoccupied with the physical sites, architectures and the planning and design of cities, and this is also one of the vital running themes across most of the contributions of this book. Historians and anthropologists of South Asia have closely studied several key physical sites of cities in relation to religion – the gendered negotiations of space based on religious frameworks for feminine engagement, in high-rise apartments in Karachi (Ring 2006); tourism and heritage sites to pilgrimage sites like temples and natural heritage sites (Sachdev and Tillotson 2002; Tillotson 1987), urban design, layout and planning based on classical planning literacies inspired by religion (Sachdev 2001, 2005), and last but not the least, sacred spaces and sites like temples (Hancock 1999, 2002) and mosques (Asher 2000, 2001, 2012). In their utilisation of common spaces and celebrations around it, physical structures of religion, sacred and secular, often tend to have an overtly public engagement with the surrounding community. Hancock (1999: 178) writes in her study of the temple spaces in cities in Tamil Nadu, 'Temples, as loci for collective ritual activity and sumptuary display, are certainly public places insofar as they are open and accessible to large sections of the populace'.

The nodes and networks in turn influence the spatial dynamics of spatiality, mobility and access through the distinctive ways in which religion and heritage organises their everyday life. Religious heritage sites, observances, public celebrations and protocols, gendered participation and inhibition in the city, the organisation of trade and economics, political and cultural festivals in the city, and the ecology are all influenced by the different ways in which religion might engage with the modern city. The city has unique, detailed and complicated religious dimensions in material forms such as symbols which are significant in the experience and placemaking of the city, and cultivating identities. In his detailed study of the utilisation of Hindu symbols, rituals and histories in the making of the contemporary city of Bhaktapur in Nepal, anthropologist Robert Levy writes (1997: 52), ‘In Bhaktapur sacralized symbols were extensively put to work to organize much of the time, space, status, economic and psychological life of the city, helping, in short, to shape it into a community’. Religion mediates the relationship between people and place, and as Bhaktapur demonstrates, can play even a central role in the creation of sites, structures, urban artefacts, and the utilisation of natural resources and space.

The layering of religious meaning throughout the city – expressed in art and iconography, embodied in architecture and the exact citing of temples and
shrines in city space, achieved in the representation of the city and its space in religious terms, constituted in action by way of rituals, processions and festivals – means that the city itself becomes a kind of sign of the sacred.

(Parish 1997: 453)

Religion does not refer only to sacrality, but it encompasses that the secular (Bailey 2001) and religious symbols and meaning-making devices deployed throughout the city are not necessarily distinct from secular ones at all. Space can be framed as an empirical reality, as well as a symbolic, theoretical site. Levy (1997: 56) for instance, understands Bhaktapur’s urban space in two ways: sacralised space, and ‘at the level of city-as-city’. He defines sacralised space thus:

Sacralized space contrasts with mundane, ordinary space and is (in company with sacralized images, times, status divisions, and actions) clearly marked through various devices as being extraordinary, powerful, and participant in a transcendent world, a world elaborately defined by means of the extensive meaning-giving resources of Hinduism.

The non-sacred elements of the built environment develop and are utilised in similar ways to the sacred dimensions, and together, they form a coherent narrative of the heritage of the city. The symbols develop in responses to its topography, material witnesses to a variety of historical projects and happenings, responses to and indexes of the economic, utilitarian, and communicative needs of the city . . . Sometimes these other spaces are related to sacred ones, sometimes they are quite independent and secular.

(Parish 1997: 453)

However the rapid pace of growth of cities in South Asia, especially of the million-plus cities that are at risk of becoming megacities with large outlying conurbations make it very difficult to properly analyse urban history for the purposes of policymaking. Archaeological sites and structures are rapidly being destroyed or degraded to accommodate the escalating demand for growing cities. The change involves not merely a population spurt but associated changes and transformations caused by modernisation such as mechanisation, lifestyles, housing, leisure, gendered experiences and religio-cultural changes. Heitzman (2008: 36) writes:

[T]here is the problem of conducting ethno-historical investigation within hundreds of sites where the population may be increasing so rapidly, and the conditions of existence altering so utterly, that the theorization and even the description of the contemporary middle city may remain undone or impossible.

In addition, other valuable heritage such as entire precolonial knowledge systems relating to building and design are being lost. South Asian urban historian
James Heitzman (2008) notes that the South Asian city is losing its identity, sense of place and history through

source degradation through rapid construction or renovation of the built environment, resulting in the rapid erasure of older housing and business/commercial districts and the replacement of older buildings (many, admittedly, of limited aesthetic appeal) by the blockular brick-and-concrete architecture of South Asian modernity.

(Heitzman 2008: 36)

Sacred tangible and intangible heritage however are more likely of all other heritage to endure and be preserved in South Asia. The perception, utilisation and claims on all urban heritage intersect with the socio-economic-cultural complexities that constitute formal and informal urbanism, and the spatial fractures of ‘gray spacing’ between these constructs. The section below surveys religion’s role in mediating such informal urbanism in South Asia.

**Identities and informality: marginalisation and violence**

The introduction of municipalities as nodes of authority for urban governance in the British colonies of South Asia (as elsewhere) privileged elite – the colonialists and then native Indian – participation and governance of the city (Beverley 2011). From the very beginning, only the small minority of the elite and powerful dictated the formal planning of the city, reinforcing existing social inequalities and introducing new ones. However there was also a constant – and an extremely large – ‘counter-discourse’ that sought to occupy and use spaces in ways not envisaged by the British colonists (Legg 2007). The everyday life and practices of the millions of citizens in South Asian cities, and their utilisation of and negotiations over the city’s spaces, formed the infinitely larger scale of informal growth that came to characterise the split or even schizophrenic, uneven development in these cities.

These practices and spatial assertions have come to define the different types of informal development, understood as such essentially by the general incapacity of formal planning to control, manage or intervene in such development. Roy (2005: 147–148) refers to ‘informality as a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization’. The informality in the city destabilises any perception of the city as ‘a space of control’ and instead allows the South Asian urban space to be one of ‘autonomy and ambivalence’ (Beverley 2011: 494). As informality is founded in the lived processes and structures of – generally poorer or more disenfranchised – citizens everyday rather than iconic milestones of planned development, it ‘is fundamentally a process rather than a norm’ (Dovey and King 2012: 276). Beverley (2011: 493–94) writes, ‘focus on everyday practices reveals non-elite interventions in the late colonial city, parallel to the formal political domain of elites who entered into, and later inherited, the
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institutions of colonial urbanism’. The informal spaces show the ‘complexity, ingenuity and creativity of everyday adaptations’ (Dovey and King 2012: 276) as the non-elite/non-privileged conceptualise of innovative ways to claim and live in the city.

The social hierarchies in highly diverse South Asian cities are reflected spatially when the benefits of formal planning such as public transportation and other urban infrastructures are selectively available in some spaces, and not in the other parts of the city. Indeed, these wide differences in identities are one of the primary reasons for the large structures of informal spaces that exist in developing cities, and which generally fall outside of the formally ‘plannable’, rendering them ‘unplannable’ (Roy 2005: 147). Israeli urban planner Oren Yiftachel argues (2012: 150) that the ‘new political geography, characterized by the proliferation of “gray spaces” of informalities . . . thrusts the politics of identity as a central foundation of urban regimes’. Yiftachel (2012: 153) defines gray spaces thus:

(as) developments, enclaves, populations, and transactions positioned between the “lightness” of legality/approval/safety, and the “darkness” of eviction/destruction/death. Gray spaces are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions, which exist partially outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans.

The intersections between religion and informality is one of the largest gaps of formal policymaking for South Asian cities. Religion is central to the making of the great social diversity of South Asian cities, and their highly variegated organisation and codified stratification. Geographers have generally shied away from exploring ethics and morality too deeply; however the pursuit of ‘relevant’ social policy for managing spaces requires an understanding and appreciation of the significance of these frameworks on the everyday life of citizens and communities (Pacione 1999).

How does religion contribute to the organisation of the city in terms of space, access to resources, rationale of religious priorities and opportunities for individual self-development? How do religious politics of urban space impact flow and fluidity of the interactions between people, and between people and place? What sorts of symbols and rituals are employed to assert rights to the city and its resources? Do questions of privilege and vulnerability apply only to human communities in the city? Where can we begin to see the development of a post-human, non-anthropocentric politics and worldview in relation to animal/nonhuman citizens of a city, and their utilisation as religious icons and/or urban resources?

Understanding the ‘workings’ of religion in identity and spatial politics is necessary in pluralistic cities to uncover the configurations of power that crosscut space and identity, and to plan for inclusive cities and empower communities. Patel (2009: 33) explicitly links space to identity formation itself, and she asks, ‘How does space construct identities? What is the relationship between spatial
segregation and identity formation?’ Intersecting religion with identity exposes how spatial issues directly relate to equity such as ghettoisation (Rathore 2012), marginalisation, informal development and even gendered inequalities (Narayanan forthcoming; Hosagrahar 2005; Matin et al. 2002; Ranade 2007). Ahearne and Bennet (2011: 111) note that religions ‘shed revealing light on underlying relations between the ‘cultures’ and ‘policies’ that maintain and divide human social groupings across time’.

The links between identity, privilege and powerlessness are enacted as well as reinforced through differential spatial rights and multiple options – or not – for mobilities. It is well established that mobilities enable economic empowerment, and inadequate capacity for mobility can intensify impoverishment (Uteng and Cresswell 2008). Dissimilar spatial rights further intensify privilege as well as vulnerabilities shaped by individual and communal identities and can actively contribute to the continued impoverishment and disempowerment of historically unprotected or weaker groups. A study in the city of Old Hyderabad in India shows that minority religious groups can experience a total inability to move at all outside of the bounded precincts of their ghettos without fears for their safety, leading to a state of feeling ‘landlocked’ in the old walled city (Rao and Thaha 2012). Predictably, these limitations on spatial and mobility rights lead to increased impoverishment of minority religious groups in India (and other South Asian nations), destabilising caste as an indicator of poverty, and establishing religious identity instead as a more relevant marker in the current millennium (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012; Sachar Commission Report 2006).

The identification and consideration of religious identities and politics thus become vital to address in development and planning protocols to reduce or eliminate any social and political vulnerabilities in different communities, which limit or control rights to urban spaces. All of these various aspects of the community contribute meaning and structure to the urban form, through space, symbols, rituals in public spaces, and other meaning-making devices that are used to lend hierarchy coherence and legitimacy. Parish (1997: 449) writes:

Hierarchy is . . . meaningful [because] it acquires meaning, moral force, psychological significance, and political gravity because a variety of symbolic forms make it palpable and compelling and because people struggle against hierarchy, and for it, elaborating on it as they actively enact, defend, reject, and contest it. Boundaries and hierarchies are redundantly constructed, defended, breached and resisted.

The chapters in the book scrutinise the intersections of religion, and informality and informal development in two ways: one, in the commonly understood framework of the spread of slums and the unstable nature of livelihoods and security implied therein. Dovey and King (2012: 276) write, ‘Informality emerged initially from critiques of the informal economy and now applies also to
people (floating populations) and places (informal settlements). Informality is a framework for understanding the encroachment of informal activities and settlements within formally planned cities’. However there is need for an understanding of the informal beyond squatter settlements as ‘informality is not a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another (Roy 2005: 148). The second focus for informality will examine the organisation of spaces, communities and economies around religious structures and rituals in public spaces as ‘states of exceptions’ to the order of formal planning. How can this state of exception ‘be strategically used by planners to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities of the urban poor’, as advised by Roy (2005: 148)?

Ten years ago, it was estimated that more than a billion people worldwide lived in slums (Bolay 2011); of these, the cities of South Asia accounted for some 24.13 per cent of this population (UN-Habitat 2009). The UNEP (2004: 12) report Sustainable Development Priorities for South Asia notes that at least half the area of almost all towns and cities in region have become shanties and slums due to migration and the excessive pressure on existing urban infrastructure. Likewise, almost half the land area is also environmentally degraded because of increased vulnerability to cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts and floods, as well as over-exploitation of water and green resources (UNEP 2004).

Violence and insecurity have also become strongly associated with informality. UN-Habitat (2009: 38) notes that ‘income inequality and spatial fragmentation are mutually reinforcing, leading to segregated and violent cities’ Like many of the cities of north India, the large cities of Pakistan too, immediately upon freedom, had to deal with the one of the most destabilising and enduring impacts of the Partition, the great influx of arriving refugees. Karachi in particular faced – and in many respects, continues to experience – ‘the refugee problem’, creating almost ‘intractable’ tensions between the native residents or the ‘sons of the soil’ and the immigrants, who called themselves as mujhahirs, an almost provocative self-identification with the Prophet’s own migration from Mecca to Medina (Daeschel 2013: 89). Daeschel notes (2013: 89) that ‘the city of government was a city blighted like no other by uprooted and dislocated populations, leading to chronic housing shortages and burgeoning slum settlements close to the very hearts of power’.

The sacred and other religious structures and sites in the urban built environment also play a vital role in organising space, identities, and thereby privileging or compromising rights to the city. The assertion politics of religious minorities is usually strategised around meaningful religious structures, and can in fact be unstable spaces between informality and formality, as they struggle for recognition and resources from governance. The state typically deals with informal spaces either through continued tolerance by turning a blind eye, by legitimising the ‘gray space’ into white by formalising the informality of development, or by aggressively initiating slum demolition movements and definitively marking such areas as black (Yiftachel 2012).
It falls upon sensitive and attentive urban planning to address several issues related to spatial inequality such as ‘urbanization of poverty and the prevalence of slums; income inequality and the resultant social exclusion; uncertain economic growth; and poor urban unemployment prospects’ (UN-Habitat’s 2009: 38). While urban governance cannot counter the forces of neoliberal growth, it can attempt to manage its impact on cities through inventive ways of achieving ‘social integration and cohesion’ (UN-Habitat 2009: 38). The intersections of religion and informality offer realistic lessons and opportunities in urban management. This book offers a modest starting point to the challenge of exploring radical new frameworks of sustainable cities for South Asia that recognise these realities and intersections.

Overview of chapters

This volume aims to reconceptualise the notion of sustainable cities in South Asia in two novel ways. One, it presents as a thematic study focussing closely on two ideas in particular: the relevance of an urban historical approach in studying sustainability in South Asian cities, religion as tangible and intangible heritage. The chapters also address the other great theme of informality, and the links between informality and religion, that is beyond the scope of formal planning. All chapters demonstrate the intricate ways in which heritage, religion, informality and sustainable development intersect. Two, the authors have utilised a case-study approach to explore the nexus between religion, urbanism and sustainable development in their selected cities. In this way, the book demonstrates how religion in fact centrally determines urban development by playing a role in some of the greatest challenges confronting South Asian cities. Yet when it comes to policymaking, there is a resounding silence on accommodating religion as an analytical category, leaving large gaps in the conceptualisation, planning and implementing of sustainable development. Discourses and policies that skirt around religion rather than engaging with religion cannot thus possibly address the gamut of issues relating to equity, ecological sustainability, violence and welfare in these cities.

Next, Anthony Ware locates religion’s organising of identities and spaces in precolonial and colonial Burma, and the use of religious identities to assert space in the independent nation state of Myanmar. The site for ultra-nationalist politics is unsurprisingly the capital of Yangon (formerly Rangoon) and the deep historical analysis demonstrates that urban cosmopolitanism can be a narrative of privileged dominance. Inclusivity must necessarily be considered in terms of religious pluralism, which theme is further developed by Stephanie Matti in her exploration of the important concept of ‘intangible values/goods’ in Kabul which dialectically engage with material values and goods to form a deep and satisfying urban experience and identity.

Continuing on the theme of the critical importance of historical analyses for the contemporary development of South Asian cities, particularly cities with strong precolonial planning traditions, Shikha Jain emphasises the connection
between cultural/religious patronage and urban planning for the city of Amritsar. PRASAD, an integrated type of planning based on pilgrimage and spiritual materialities that is explored here has implications for the countless pilgrimage cities of South Asia, and also other cities with a historic and/or religious core. Vera Lazzaretti neatly brings together the unstable binaries of religion and secularism to show the context of religious disputes within communal unrest and violence. Her analysis of the politicisation of a major intra-city pilgrimage route in Varanasi underpins the need for multi-vocal and inclusive concept of sustainability that uses traditional religious insights, allowing religion to be the way planning disputes are resolved.

Rohan Bastin uses the concept of the politics of recognition as a means of finding out how religious structures draw out specific spatial configurations of power, and explores how multifaith communities can co-exist in the city of Colombo. Using Karachi, one of the most violent cities in South Asia as an illustrative example, Claude Rakisits provides a historical overview that shows how violent origins begets future violence. The resolution of the gamut of issues confronting Karachi – violence, corruption, religious fundamentalism and nationalism, which are further reflected spatially through ghettoisation of ethnic communities – require among other things, a further conceptualisation of religion itself as progressive, liberal and post-secular construct.

The idea of informality is vastly expanded in Surjit Chakravarty's historical analysis and reading of the formal planning around mosques in Delhi, projecting informality as a strategic outcome of formality, rather than an absence of the commonly understood characteristics of formality. Informality is further extended as a post-humanist, non-anthropocentric worldview and reality in Yamini Narayanan's analysis of how the animal/nonhuman condition might complicate the notion of sustainable cities in South Asia where the varied animal population are highly visible. Using the example of male calf donations to Hindu temples in Vishakapatnam city, she critiques how iconic status of animals such as cattle in Hinduism determines how these animals are regarded as heritage as well as economic resource, and how neoliberal planning supports animal exploitation.

In the final analysis, renowned feminist urban planner Clara Greed analyses the long tradition of regarding town planning as a secular humanistic profession. She reminds us of two lessons in particular for planning in India and elsewhere in the South Asia – the consequences of ignoring religion as well as gender in framing sustainable cities. Greed proposes a useful model for mainstreaming gender as well as religion into planning policies in the Indian subcontinent.

Note

1 In 2002, a train filled with Hindu kar sevaks (workers of the nationalist RSS and BJP parties) returning from Ayodhya city was halted and burnt in Godhra city in Gujarat, presumably by Muslim fundamentalists. This led to a three-day pogrom of Muslims
across the state of Gujarat with Godhra and Ahmedabad cities reporting the highest casualties.

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