

# Introduction to crowds and conviviality: Ethnographies of the South Asian city

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## Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue of *Ethnography*, we argue that the South Asian city is not an inert backdrop to the lives of its various inhabitants. Living cities change and morph, their instability and transformation demanding a concomitant openness to change from its inhabitants. The open-endedness of the living city in South Asia requires an open and exploratory ethnographic approach unburdened by inflexible terminology, formats or concepts. We call for creative forms of writing to do justice to both such an ethnographic practice and to the city itself.

## Keywords

South Asian city, openness to change, living cities, ethnographic writing

One reaction that the cities of South Asia commonly produce – among both visitors and longstanding residents – is bafflement. Anthropologists commonly write of their disorientation upon arriving in their research sites. Yet for their natives, cities are no less likely to seem, at times, opaque and bewildering. Hardly inert backdrops, cities are commonly talked about as actors: more anthropos than topos. Thus the urban environment, containing an overproduction of ambition and desire, seems to make its own involuntary demands. Foremost among them is that diverse communities settle their scores in a competitive, shared environment. In such a milieu, sociality is hardly a predictable affair, despite the diligent

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projections of the street hustler and municipal planner alike. Ever more people seem to crowd the city; demands and grudges proliferate easily; and the city's fashion and lingo hardly stay still. This perpetual sense of instability extends to the city's actual sites of interaction. Parks, markets and roadsides have present and potential incarnations: as venues of danger and pleasure, segregation and communitas, sincerity and irreverence.

These days, South Asian cities are considered to be deserving of further study. In some sense, this is a corrective move. Anthropology – often underwritten by official patronage – for long saw the rural village as the default site of sociality in the region. In the work of Verrier Elwin, Frederick Barth, Louis Dumont and M.N. Srinivas, among others, politics, religion and kinship unfold in their natural setting – pastoral climes all. By now, the bias against the city – purportedly antithetical to culture – is hard to sustain. Especially in the 21st century, Delhi and Ahmedabad, Colombo and Dhaka are metropolises of the vanguard. They set the style and norms emulated in their respective hinterlands. More obviously, such cities are entangled in national and international concerns around political terror, migrant flows and economic rationalization.

We are a collective of anthropologists, based in Europe and the US. All of us have conducted ethnographic research in the South Asian subcontinent's major cities over the past decade. At this point we could trot out the economic and demographic statistics that give urgency to any intellectual project on these places. Instead, we want to suggest that, from an ethnographic perspective, what makes these spaces compelling is precisely that, for analyst and resident alike, these cities are often barely comprehended. Their size and diversity makes them by nature impossible to fully understand. Population charts or migration reports aren't of much use when navigating through crushing crowds. Consulting a city map is an act of faith when faced with tin roof encroachment and pavement squatting. The continuous tides of the encroaching and clearing of such tin roofs shows how the political economy of the city changes and undulates with it. Rather than a straightforward framework to understand the city by, questions of the urban economy are open to ethnographic questions and labour. The economic data cannot explain why certain brands are popular, or the mysteries of who makes what. South Asian cities defy the anthropological tendency to make every subject a comprehensive repository of culture. In these places, residents easily concede their inability to fully explain or anticipate the social.

Such experiences are among the common frustrations and preoccupations of urban residents. Narratives of the South Asian city's incompleteness and intrigue are widespread. Yet they are often sidestepped in conceptual social science analysis. The articles collected in this special issue instead draw from the 'vernacular sociology' of the South Asian city. Namely, the authors hone in on the pervasive myths, offhand practices, and knowing puns that urban residents employ to make sense – if tentatively – of their home.

Our collective focus is on popular classes, public practices and common spaces in urban South Asia. The articles collected here do not provide a definitive

anthropological account of such places. Our interlocutors, often marginal subjects in religious or economic terms, would themselves not pretend otherwise. Rather, what this collection of articles seeks to do in this special issue of *Ethnography* is stay close to the ground of a South Asian city. We reiterate our informants' sense of being in a city: both the humdrum of moving through it, and its violent surge in intensity. In this sense, what this collection of articles does is outline, through detailed ethnographic description, steps towards a phenomenology of urban life for hundreds of millions of people in South Asia in terms that are pervasive but rarely codified.

### **Ethnographies of the living city**

If the city's ways and forms are often without codification, its planners thwarted and its surfaces opaque, then how might one write an urban phenomenology that resists suppressing the movement latent in urban forms, populations and practices? In its days and sodium lit nights, the city moves, changing its shape and moulding the life within it. The articles gathered here show that the city shapes the life of city dwellers, its material infrastructure and its symbolic universe impinging on its citizens. But it does not do so in any predictable manner. The logic of urban planning and the uses it envisages for the city's spaces are quickly outrun by the inherent potentiality of urban space, gladly pounced upon by the ever imaginative citizen. Road dividers come to join roads and pavements are turned into tearooms. The city is not the passive object of our desires, obeying the fantasies of the modernist imagination that inscribe city space with unequivocal meanings and functions, its citizens with clear directives: 'commit no nuisance'. Instead the city is a continually morphing entity, marked by flux and change, whether in its growth or in entropy.

'If I could find a language in which to perpetuate those appearances, at once so unstable and so resistant to description', ponders Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1992: 62). On a voyage to Brazil in 1934, he watches the daily spectacle of the rising and setting sun from the deck of his ship. Reflecting on his new-found profession, he wonders whether he would be able to capture the continually changing light in writing:

if it were granted to me to be able to communicate to others the phases and sequences of a unique event which would never occur in the same terms – so it seemed to me – I should in one go have discovered the deepest secret of my profession: however strange and peculiar the experiences to which anthropological research might expose me, there would be none whose meaning and importance I could not eventually make clear to everybody. (p. 62)

This deepest secret continued to haunt the profession, as anthropological writing was subjected to extensive critiques. But the writing culture debates focused squarely on the ethnographer, rarely taking up the question of the changing light.

Like the variable light of dawn and dusk, the living city is not easily captured and perpetuated in writing. And like the vast sky above the small ship, this city embraces and overwhelms the ethnographer. There can be no vantage point from which to oversee the city, and no position from which it appears still. How indeed to capture that which is always changeable, never occurring in the same terms? With Lévi-Strauss, we seek a language with which to sustain the dynamics of the city in the texts that represent its daily life. What sort of language, and what form of description, can be suitable to such a task?

Any description that starts from the intended functions and meanings of the city's spaces and structures is doomed to be outrun by the fickle city and its moving citizens. Instead, it is to ethnography as process, hanging out in the depths of the city, and as product, the expertly crafted text, to which we turn of necessity. Combining these facets, ethnography, with all its warts and blemishes, is supple enough to move with the pace of the city, to listen to its casual variations of language, and to participate in the eloquent gestures of its citizens. Such ethnography partakes of the casual urban styles and modes that together make up the fabric of the city. The articles collected here present engaged and opinionated ethnographers, who have indulged the city to take them on its course, moving close to the ground of its colonies, factories, slums, pavements and parks. These authors aim for descriptions that move beyond the moribund words and categories that have frozen and stilted the city and its dwellers beyond all recognition in the texts aimed to represent them. It is the city itself that demands a new form of description, thicker than water, a visceral writing by engaged authors who are neither naively objective nor overburdened by displays of scholarly prowess. This is standpoint writing, where the ground moves beneath one's feet.

The ethnographic essay, exemplary in *Tristes Tropiques*, provides us with an aspirational form. Flexible, the essay is particularly suitable to the ethnographic enterprise that attempts to capture the changing light of day and night. Engaged and engaging, the essay form matches a passionate ethnographic research practice that moves at a pace with its field sites. An urban form par excellence, it is to the essays that we try to turn. We make a start here with the renewed exploration of the essay as a genre of ethnographic writing.

## Themes

### *Spatial potentiality*

There are a number of recurring themes in this collection, the first of which is the spatial potentiality of the city. Several articles explore the inherent potentiality of different urban spaces. Conflicting rumours and myths of city life in South Asia are partly generated by the multiple uses and abuses inflicted on ordinary space. Forms built as examples of civic values or designed for respectable classes become inhabited in remarkably diverse ways. Tombs or parks become boudoirs for frustrated lovers and their simian counterparts; residential neighbourhoods

are also industrial workshops; municipal wasteland can quickly become sacred space. Such latent dynamism is explored in Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi's article on Ahmedabad, in western India. There, prosaic features of the commuting landscape, such as traffic roadways, become cosmologically charged. Residents of that Gujarati city, marked by extraordinary tension between Hindus and Muslims, use the humble road crossing as a place to disavow oneself of negative energy. Possession by ghosts and curses by evil spirits are ritually dispensed at these crossings. Magical waste gets left behind amidst the anonymous traffic. The underdetermined nature of the city is also evident in Ajay Gandhi's article detailing the lives of men and monkeys in India's capital Delhi. Here, the contours of the jungle and the settled land, a persistent imaginary demarcating South Asian spaces, blur as humans and non-humans are entangled. The municipal monkey-catchers, ostensibly tasked with maintaining such clear demarcations, ambivalently police the line between city space and jungle hinterland.

Another example of the multiple uses of significant urban spaces is the tangential uses in which civic institutions are put by those on the city's margins. Ostensible sites for inculcating civic virtue, from public museums to the governmental Film Development Corporation, become, in Lotte Hoek's article, degraded places of obscenity and provinciality. The lingering allure of these sites is nonetheless powerfully animated and claimed by those who indulge in the now apparently antiquated appeal to civic duty and public virtue. Similarly, the pliability of public urban space is shown in the claims laid by Dalit political movements in Kanpur through a street politics that directly interacts with the shapes of urban neighbourhood. Nicolas Jaoul explores in painstaking detail the jostling at every gate and in each lane of a *basti* or slum that eventually resulted in a dramatic change of political allegiance for its inhabitants.

### *Travelling idioms of representation*

A second theme cross-cutting the articles concerns the democratization of idioms of representation, sovereignty and respectability. A host of groups – lower-caste communities, provincial migrants to regional capitals, and religious minorities – are challenging the middle-class hegemony on how South Asian cities function. In so doing, they are unconcerned with becoming modern in a simply imitative or developmentalist manner. Their modernity is achieved by voraciously drawing from myriad sources, rather than fretting about achieving fidelity to form. A day spent in any South Asian city proves the point. There is no dearth of striking architectural forms, cinematic styles or fashion sensibilities, churning out and evolving. This aesthetic modernity is a mash-up of visual styles often considered by the city's betters to be gauche, kitsch or derivative. At the same time, a more classical definition of modernity, and related political and aesthetic norms, continue to have enormous purchase – and some of the assembled articles detail how this tension unfolds in urban life.

For example, Nicolas Jaoul's article examines the increased propriety Dalit communities have over large cities such as Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, in northern India. Dilapidated *bastis* or slums were formerly the default urban dwellings for untouchable communities. Over the past two decades, their political power has increased, as has their visibility as government officers and urban brokers. Dalits have concomitantly asserted more symbolic control over city space. Jaoul details how Kanpur's roads and parks, where Dalits and other castes converge, are marked by a frenzy of political rallies, statue building, and caste processions. There is a long politicized practice of erecting statues, renaming roads and even entire cities in India, to placate linguistic and nationalist sensibilities. Dalits in north India seem to be reifying, in their move from the periphery to the centre, conventional means of celebrating political strength, one statue at a time.

This sense of claiming the city as sovereign space is echoed in Atrejee Sen's article. She focuses on an inner-city Muslim *mohalla* or neighbourhood in the large South Indian city of Hyderabad. There, Muslim youth, viewed with suspicion by the state, seek to invert the stigma attached to their community. They articulate their puffed-up desires by anointing themselves the protectors of the Muslim community. These male children discipline female transgressors of moral virtue and predatory traders, while themselves engaged in petty criminality. Nevertheless, according to Sen, these young Muslims fancy themselves to be righteous soldiers policing a sovereign domain, bosses, like Dalits in urban UP, of their own turf. As a final example that illustrates this theme, Hoek's article discusses the uses of urban spaces set aside for the public consumption of the fine arts among recent migrants to the city. These *mofussil* or hinterland-derived connoisseurs, sartorially awkward and self-consciously rural, nevertheless claim membership within the culturally avant-garde. Hoek's interlocutors claim *bhadralok* or bourgeois respectability through their artistic endeavours and urban leisure practices that focus specifically on the city's civic sites from the 1960s and 1970s marked by explicit architectural modernism.

### *Kinship and segregation*

A third theme evident in the assembled articles concerns the forms of kinship and segregation used to manage difference in South Asian cities. An enormous amount of heterogeneity exists in these urban spaces, often in grudging circumstances. In these cities, body language, dress styles and language dialects are relentlessly scrutinized, allowing one entry or barring passage. Facility in mastering multiple registers, or in staying within circumscribed boundaries, is an asset. Indeed, for those groups outside the established order – refugees, national or class enemies, religious minorities – learning to be invisible in the city's crowd is literally a matter of life and death. Ghassem-Fachandi's article on Ahmedabad details, for example, how bridges, police-posts, temples and shrines constitute material cues for those navigating the city. Muslim or Hindu, middle-class or inner-city, safe or communally 'sensitive': inhabitants look for these hints and behave accordingly.

Besides ethnic and religious others, another ubiquitous form of difference in South Asian cities concerns non-human beings. Monkeys, dogs, cows and goats, among others, are neighbours and flaneurs. They are as likely to be found chained to people's homes as they are roaming through traffic. Ajay Gandhi's article delves into the world of municipal monkey-catchers and their quarry in Delhi. Neither simply wild nor domesticated, brute mass or religious avatars, monkeys, like dogs, cows and goats, fall into overlapping jurisdictions. These include friendship and domestication, municipal programs of sterilization and relocation, and ritual pretexts that give or take away life. As with the assertion of exclusion and difference between humans, there is a desire to purify and segregate urban space, here through a hierarchy of appropriate animality. Yet, as with the polyglot human world, animals remain an inextricable element of the South Asian city. The will to cleanse – and thus simplify – competes with invitations to conviviality, and thus cohabitation. Humans both gift food to monkeys and exile them, oscillating between generous and constrictive modes with their co-residents. Thus, hierarchies vis-à-vis urban animals such as monkeys can be maintained or transcended, depending on the context.

### *Utopia and dystopia*

A fourth theme in the articles concerns the South Asian city as utopian or dystopic space. Some of the cities in which these contributions are set – such as Delhi or Dhaka – were built to display sovereign might. These cities have been consciously made or remade through the lens of imperial modernity and postcolonial nation-building. At a more quotidian level, they offer something – howsoever undefined or fleeting – unavailable elsewhere, to any migrant or runaway. Still other cities explored in this collection – Ahmedabad and Kanpur among them – former examples of industrial optimism, are now associated with division. In such places, religious mockery and caste humiliation abound, registered as oblique comments and coercive injunctions. Indeed, rare is the large South Asian city that has not been marked by communal riots and refugee inflows, or which does not contain serious impoverishment. Yet it is far more common, in the experience of the anthropologists convened here, for the utopian and dystopic to be messily intermingled. The line separating the sense of momentum and betterment, and the complaint of stagnation or injustice, is thin. Families and communities can be on one side of this fault-line and then another, in a single generation. And amidst the jockeying for higher status and material comfort, there is a dense moral economy: of obligations and expectations, inducements and threats.

Cressida Jervis Read's article examines this process through the narratives of migrants and lower-middle class workers in Delhi, whose flimsy homes were demolished in the 1970s. The pretext was a strict urban beautification and population control program during an authoritarian period in Indian politics termed the 'Emergency'. To obtain new housing plots in a resettlement colony, Read's subjects, from various regional and caste backgrounds, sometimes had to submit to



sterilization and watch their old homes smashed into pieces. Here Delhi was, for the Emergency's leaders, a space with utopian possibilities: ripe for remaking into a modern metropolis. Yet as Read details, for those affected by the government's unarguable directives, such actions were experienced in the 1970s as impingements. Years later, sitting on their steps, residents of the east Delhi resettlement colony still speak of their government in variously hopefully or pernicious terms, in what Read terms narratives of 'emplacement'. Having dutifully completed the onerous conditions imposed on them to reside where they do, they see their colony as having begun – somewhat counter-intuitively – with respect and mutual agreement. Now, however, the state, making utilities ever more expensive, is seen to have violated this understanding.

Shankar Ramaswami's article also discusses the failed commitments that people face in Delhi. He focuses on a few dozen migrant labourers, working in a metal-polishing factory in south Delhi, as they persist in their peaceful struggle for legal work. The labourers are not a natural sociological unit, having migrated from different areas to one of Delhi's major industrial areas, but coalesce under pressure from capital into an ethico-political community. Read's colony residents are involuntary neighbours who achieve unity by making demands to an outside entity, the municipal government. Ramaswami's Delhi workers also share this sense of fleeting internal cohesion in the city as their jobs are threatened and one among them is killed in the process of claiming their rights. Ramaswami details their struggle with the factory's management and shows how their striving for *haq* (right) extends laterally these affective bonds across the city space and beyond. His close reading of the labour dispute and the actions taken by the labourers shows how what he terms the 'forces of truth' may emerge even within the dystopic conditions of inequality and exploitation.

The South Asian city contains many such narratives, of promising scenarios and more sordid conditions. Some of the other articles also touch on the theme of moral decline in cities. Hoek and Gandhi write of a hyperactive discourse on urban crime and corruption in Dhaka and Delhi. Sen and Ghassem-Fachandi detail how Hyderabad and Ahmedabad's police posts and boundary walls anticipate communal violence – future tragedy defensively written into the city's present.

## South Asia

The articles assembled here are obviously not representative of the entire breadth of South Asian cities. Nepal's, Sri Lanka's and Pakistan's cities, for example, are missing from this collection. Further, without conscious design, cities such as Delhi are proportionally over-represented. We did not set out to occlude the city life of major countries. Nor do we wish to universalize India's capital as a paragon of the region's urban culture – a claim likely to invite howls of protest or laughter by residents elsewhere. Nevertheless, the anthropologists collected here have unpacked places and practices that are remarkably widespread. Their articles detail activities in factories, colonies, bazaars and slums: the sites of sociality for hundreds of



millions of people in South Asia. Our hope is that by detailing focal but under-explored sites through ethnographic research, the articles will be analytically useful for scholars examining other such cities, in South Asia and beyond.

Despite the evident historical continuities and contemporary entanglements within the South Asian subcontinent and the conceptual critiques of methodological nationalism, South Asian studies remain in the grip of nationally defined cultures and spaces. Echoing pervasive national rhetorics, many scholars remain surprisingly attached to national frameworks of exploration. Here, we like to approach South Asia theoretically and empirically as an integrated socio-cultural and historical space, rather than as made up of radically separated nation-states. Rather than reduce our cities to examples of distinct national cultures, we look at the everyday sites and practices of South Asian cities as a set of recurring phenomena, whose close investigation tells us about South Asian urbanity, not about 'India' or 'Bangladesh' per se.

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