



Spatialisation of selves: Religion and liveable spaces among Hindus and Muslims in the walled city of Ahmedabad, India



Aparajita De

Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the processes of constructing liveable neighbourhoods in the walled city of Ahmedabad, in the context of 2002. Godhra carnage and subsequent anti-Muslim riots throughout Gujarat, India. The walled city of Ahmedabad have been perceived as riot prone and highly segregated place where Hindus and Muslims have been living separately since the city was built in early fifteenth century. The paper attempts to unpack this relationship between religion and liveability in Indian cities, particularly how religion negotiates normatively religious differences that appear to be incommensurable having high potentiality of violence and yet create sustainable liveable spaces. The paper adopts an ethnographic approach towards understanding the role of religion in the making liveable urban spaces that are socially and culturally sustainable focusing on individual narratives and experiences in order to capture its different meanings and notions, especially at the local micro-level. The narratives, as argued in the paper, articulates the spatialisation of self and their particular cultures through the production of neighbourhoods. The existence of 'my place/places' or neighbourhoods ensure the survival of these particular cultures as well as the demarcation of 'their place/places' suggest not the intolerance of the other but recognition of the other and its culture, albeit on the outside. It is this continual negotiation that enables recognition of the self as well as the other making these divided spaces liveable.

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1. Introduction

In June 2004 I returned to the walled city, more than two years since my last visit to Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, India. I met NareshKaka, a local resident of *Jagaseth ni pol* in Khadia. I asked, 'how have things been, Kaka?' 'It's been business as usual' Kaka replied, 'nothing much happened in the kot after Godhra except for the few usual areas like Kalupur and Dariapur.' The casualness in Kaka's remarks was not what I had anticipated, especially in the aftermath of the Godhra carnage and the subsequent riots. Perhaps, I had expected to hear an angry tirade of a Hindu demonizing the Muslim other, of Hindu nationalism and how the ghettoization of Muslims is successfully complete. But none was forthcoming. Just like the kot's many yet contradictory names that of the walled city and the city of gates – a closed yet open place, its people too appeared so. Later during the day, I met Kasifbhai, a Muslim trader

in Rani ki Hajiro and living in Kalupur. He too narrated a very casual description of post-Godhra everyday life without mentioning any major or minor conflicts with the Hindus.

After my first day meetings with both Nareshkaka and Kasifbhai, I started questioning Hindu-Muslim relations in this country, the everyday life of these religious communities and their capacity to create a liveable space for themselves within the walled city of Ahmedabad, especially after the massive communal violence of 2002 which became such a sensational issue both in India and abroad. I argue that though the walled city appeared to be highly segregated along the lines of religion, particularly residential localities. The local communities within the walled city negotiated these lines of division in a manner that they were recognized and accepted. The very act of acceptance of these lines of division ensured that any interactions, specifically those outside the residential areas may not be perceived as acts of transgression and thus limiting acts of communal violence and tension. Thus, liveability is created through the acceptance of these lines of division that accommodate multiples religious practices without privileging one over the other.

E-mail address: ade.dse@gmail.com.

This study is set in the background of the 2002 Godhra carnage and subsequent anti-Muslim riots throughout Gujarat.¹ The post-Godhra Gujarat riots was perhaps one of the most publicly discussed riots in post-independent India being viewed as not only the rise of Hindu nationalism but an alarming tendency amongst the Hindu majority of ‘demonizing’ the Muslim other, of ‘marginalizing’ and ‘ghettoizing’ the Muslims, both spatially and socially (HRW, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2003). Within this context the paper takes a close look at the walled city of Ahmedabad, also locally known as ‘kot’ and the ‘city of *darwazas*’ (gates), and its neighbourhoods. The kot is generally perceived as riot prone, and a highly divided and b/orderd place where Hindus and Muslims have been living separately and in almost total segregation since the city was built by Sultan Ahmed Shah I in early fifteenth century (Gillion, 1968).

The paper seeks to examine the social and cultural processes through which both Hindus and Muslims, produces and reproduces liveable neighbourhoods and spaces. The processes of constructing liveable neighbourhoods and spaces, in the Foucauldian sense articulates a technology of producing self, of creating a system of significations and spatialisation of self and the other (Foucault, 1994). And to unravel the stories, interpretations, both personal and social that underlie these spaces for self and others (Massey, 2000), the study focuses primarily on the two main groups living in the kot – Hindus and Muslims both in peace and conflicting situations. The paper attempts to unpack this relationship between religion and liveability, particularly how religion negotiates normatively religious differences that appear to be incommensurable having high potentiality of violence and yet create liveable spaces with both the communities living together side by side.

2. Methodology

My paper tries to understand the role of religion in the making liveable urban spaces focusing on individual narratives and experiences in order to capture its different meanings and notions, especially at the local level. I particularly focus on the processes involved in creating the borders of neighbourhoods, of self and others, of Hindus and Muslims. The selection of the walled city is primarily because historically it has been a highly segregated space with constant incidences of communal tension and violence (Banu, 1989; Doshi, 1974). Thus, the study calls for an analysis of segregation of spaces over time and peoples perspective in wanting to live in such a manner both in situations of peace and conflict. This will give an insight as to how people negotiate with conflict prone situations and the underlining implications for urban planning and sustainable development of cities (Freestone & Gibson, 2006).

The research for my paper is based on the many conversations, including interviews that I had conducted since 1999 with people living in and out of the kot, primarily with Hindus and Muslims, from all works of life. The interviews were conducted in the six major residential localities of the walled city of Ahmedabad, namely Shahpur, Dariapur, Kalupur, Raikhad, Jamalpur and Khadia. The interviewees were from localities where both the communities lived in a highly segregated to mixed manner. The data on levels of segregation is based on the listing and social profiling of the pols in

the residential localities drawn from De (2002). The other consideration that was taken into account was the internal heterogeneity within Hindus and Muslims along the lines of caste and *jamat*. I conducted a total of thirty-six such detailed interviews, at three points of time in 1999–2000, 2003–04 and 2012–13. In this paper I have deliberately focused on narratives in the post-Godhra Ahmedabad to understand the role of religion in negotiating and perhaps making of liveable spaces in situations of conflict.

3. Rethinking liveability: the discourse of culture and religion

Ho and Douglass (2008) argue that the concept of liveability examines urban life within the narrow confines of a city’s physical dimensions, particularly infrastructure, urban services and economic growth. Ellis and Roberts (2016) affirm this argument when they identify population pressure on land, housing, infrastructure, basic urban services and the environment as reasons that lie at the heart of South Asian city’s lack of liveability. Thus, the concept here does not take into account local cultures and identities that make possible the building of community bonds, the associational life of communities and being integrated within the larger urban fabric (Ho & Douglass, 2008; Kong, 2009).

In scholarship, religion and modernity and thereby liveability seems to be at odds with each other and at times in opposition (de Vries and Weber, 2001). Religion, modernity and urbanity, their meanings and practice in the South Asia suggests an underlying tension and perhaps a larger conflict as the secular and the religious not only co-exist but are multivalent, fluid and mutable often overlapping, complementing or in conflict with one another. (Kong, 2001). The conflict arises due to the discourses on the city that tend to equate it to modern, and necessarily a secular ‘site of progress’ (Hancock & Srinivas, 2008, p. 620). Thus cities have no space for religion which has come to denote the non-modern, the non-secular and communal. The co-existence of religion and modernity is often seen as the failure of the modernity project and the very presence of religion, religious identities in the public domain and spaces within the modern site of urban is read and seen as an anomaly. Not surprisingly, studies on religion in the Indian context tend to focus on communal violence, religious fundamentalism and religious nationalisms (Jaffrelot, 1998; Pandey, 1990; van der Veer, 1994) as a pathological condition that has defied and resisted modern values and modernity itself. The challenge here is to have a critical understanding of how religion, religious identities and practices negotiate with or work towards and have coherent conversations with modernity, development and liveability. More pertinently, how religious and non-religious ways of life can accommodate each other – the interplay between the religion and secular spaces (Howe, 2009; Garbin, 2012). On the other, how in pluralistic societies multiple and competing religious ways of life intersect and accommodates each other through mutual respect and acceptance of different religious obligations, rights and freedoms. (Gokarikel & Secor, 2015). de Vries and Weber (2001) argues that religion provides us with cultural resources and a strategy that informs and helps local people to negotiate and understand others. The attempt here is to understand the connection between religion in everyday life and the making of public sphere and spaces.

Recently, there have been debates that particularly highlight the role played by religion in shaping ethnic minority groups’ construction of spaces of ‘belonging’, ‘becoming’ and ‘participating’ in the wider context of secular city and public space (Baker, 2013). Baker’s work raises an agenda for understanding how urban and religious spatialities need to be reconfigured in the future. Borrowing Baker’s logic here I try to understand how religion plays a role in creating a sense of place and place-making that fosters

¹ In February 2002, 58 people were asphyxiated or burnt to death in the railway coach of Sabarmati Express in Godhra, Gujarat. The people who died were believed to be Hindu devotees or *Karsevaks* returning from a gathering at the contested site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. A local Muslim mob had allegedly set the coach on fire following an altercation with the *karsevaks*. Subsequently, widespread communal riots took place throughout Gujarat which many described as a state sponsored pogrom. The official death toll was nearly 1000 but human-rights groups claim much higher figures of approximately 2000. Many were injured, with homes, businesses and property razed and families completely displaced.

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