

Love in the South Asian city

Discussions on urbanity tend to be focused primarily on the materiality of lived experience: conditions of housing, access to livelihood opportunities and basic services, concerns on ecological commons, and so on. Cities are often imagined in terms of their economic value to regions and societies, as growth engines, as sites of consumption and production, or as regenerative nodes in the wider relay of transnational capital. With humanity turning urban at an unprecedented scale, it is common now to frame conversations on urbanisation in terms of challenges and opportunities, problems and solutions, irredeemable and transformational amidst a widening matrix of actants and stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the technocratic illusion of objectivity which planning and governance apparatuses project to perpetuate their command on urban processes and lived experience, a host of recent scholarship has attempted to uncover their affective moorings in cultural notions of belonging, selfhood, aspiration, and anxiety. We wish to contribute to this discussion by understanding the role and scope of love in constituting not just quotidian lived experience but also the more allegedly scientific governmental processes which seek to determine and constitute urbanity. In regions as linguistically polyphonous and culturally diverse as South Asia, notions of love reflect a very rich history of deep reflection on what love may signify in a multitude of forms, means, and ends.

Hence, though it often appears that the ubiquity of love needs no comment, its underlying and attendant shenanigans do provide a vital entry point towards grounded understandings of the personal as political in all spheres of life. How do flyovers, expressways, and transit hubs transform when they become rendezvous for those whose caste, class, gender, or sexuality denies them the agency to love? Is it love when neighbours risk their own lives in giving shelter to each other from the fury of rampaging rioters? And what of the love which a city's past can evoke, broadening the historical gaze and fusing it with possibilities for the future? Love is as liberating as it is dangerous: it is deeply rooted in our shared cultural consciousness, revels in the transformative anonymity which urban life facilitates, and is closely tied to the aspirational imagery in whose shadow many of us refashion our identities. Yet, it is just as prone to be policed and curtailed in pursuit of cultural and communal purity and is often a risky site of ideological clash and machination.

The essays which we wish to curate in this book should be interested in these and allied concerns. As scholars, we often work on the inequities and injustices which marr our societies. Perhaps it is just as important to also foreground the solidarities, friendships, and compassion which still operates at all levels of our personal and political lives, complicating and somewhat redeeming our collective existence. Correlating the textual with the cartographic, the anecdotal with the spatial, and the architectural with the affective, we wish to attract a motley of methods and sites to lay a richly intersectional framework for understanding love in our cities. Colleagues interested in joining us on this exploration may think along the following lines:

- Love and/in pre-modern notions of urban planning

- Historical legacies of love and sacrifice in cities
- Infrastructures and their affective interstices
- Domestic architectures and spaces of transgression
- Friendships, camaraderies, and the margins
- Mobility and architectures of anonymity
- Anxieties, desires, and cultures of exclusion
- Seductions of development and accumulation
- Everyday registers of loss and belonging

We first began thinking on this at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of much personal and collective loss. The idea gained momentum as a panel at the Annual Conference on South Asia 2022, and has since then been maturing and evolving to reach the current stage that it has. We invite not only urban scholars and practitioners but also artists and activists to consider contributing to this book, which we see as the next step towards an incrementally deeper reflection on love in the South Asian city. While we are aware that the depth and extent of affinities and associations which can be evoked and variously signified by the word love are usually not done justice to by its semiotics in the English language, we hope we will still be able to play with it well enough to do some justice to the proposition at hand. If you feel this speaks to you, please send us a 500 word abstract along with a 50 word bio-note to anubhav.pro18@gmail.com by 15 November 2024. We welcome interested colleagues to discuss their ideas with us, but please be aware that we are not in a tearing hurry to publish and will prefer to put together a truly enriching and unsettling volume of essays rather than just putting words on the page.

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