Introduction: Ontologies of Relational Space in South Asia

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Relational space is an entity that does not exist on its own.[1] While space, conventionally understood, is an a-priori condition for the existence of entities, "relational space" is nothing unto itself prior to the exchanges between its constituents. Its contours and outlines are contingent upon the particular ways in which communities and materialities enter into relation. In other words, relationships have causal efficacy.[2]

But what distinguishes "relational space" as a category in the South Asian context? How are spaces in the subcontinent transformed by the emergence of new relationships or antagonisms between social groups that collectivize or self-identify along the lines of ethnicity, class, caste, language and religion? Why are particular spatial forms sometimes reified by the emergence of the very relationships that they are expected to discourage? Our special issue is an attempt at answering some of these questions.

Existing spatial categories and boundaries in South Asia, whether historical, religious or administrative, begin to reproportion themselves in the most unexpected ways when viewed through the specific vantages of relationality. No sooner do we make interactions between communities and objects ontologically central to the way we perceive *Bastis, Qasbas, Paras, Purs, Pods, Vadis, or Pattis,* we find that these terms loosen their grip on our imagination as pre-given administrative apparatuses for ordering everyday experience. Instead, we cast a beam on the relationships that necessitated their invocation in the first place; relationships now become causes for all kinds of spatial effects.[3]

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[1] The emphasis on relational space here draws from extensive conversations with Preeti Sampat (October 8, 2022), whose more recent work addresses relationality in spatial terms in South Asia.

[2] One way of addressing the causal efficacy of relationships is to draw on the anthropologist Bernard Cohn's arguments on 'regions' in the nineteen sixties. In his now classic *Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History and Society*, Cohn rallied against a purely geographical or physical approach towards regions in India: "the conceptualization of regions," he observed, "involves basically non-physical phenomena, which I might term historical, linguistic, cultural, social structural, and/or the interrelations among these kinds of variables" (1987: 102). Regions, Cohn observes, are also ephemeral. The phenomenon known as the region, "no matter how we define it, exists through time and we must constantly be aware of the danger of reifying what might be a set of contingent choices by some individual or groups within the society we are studying and of elevating the contingent choices into an absolute" (Ibid.: 132).

[3] David Harvey has written extensively about the causal efficacy of capitalist relations. He has argued that capitalist relations often serve to compress space and make it less of "a barrier to communicative action" (1994: 130). In capitalism we bear witness to the emergence of a new ideology of space whose very existence hinges on relationships structured around the speeding up of the circulation of capital and the acceleration of capital's turnover. Capitalist relationalities, in short, produce entirely new spatio-temporal rhythms (Ibid.: 131).

As the contributions of this special issue demonstrate, however, acts of relating and collectivizing, particularly in the context of everydayness, are heavily mediated in the South Asian context. For instance, caste, gender, religion and other social markers of subordination coordinate the assembling and movement of bodies within the sphere of everydayness. As the political scientist Gopal Guru (2012: 71-106) demonstrates in relation to caste, socially dominant groups often affirm their power by producing specific kinds of tormenting experiences. They mobilize space in terms of purity and impurity "in order to give Dalits an experience that pushes…[them] beyond the pale of social civilization" (Ibid.: 116). In other words, dominant groups imprison the marginalized within a "symbolic universe" in which the periphery comes pre-designated for them as the space of habitation (Ibid.: 73).

The victims and the dominated, on the other hand, need not passively submit to the symbolic universe of their tormentors. They can annihilate existing hierarchies by intensifying their own experiences through the lenses of a language of morality that exists outside the symbolic universe of their tormentors. For instance, those who are dominated can reflect on their own experiences through the auspices of powerful political and moral categories such as self-respect, dignity, equality and freedom, and social justice (Ibid.: 74). These categories then become the grounds for new mobilizations, solidarities and relationalities among the dominated, and consequently reformulate the grounds for a renewed conception of equality.

There is, therefore, a social landscape that is at once sustained or reproduced by dominant groups, and resisted or trans-valued by those who are dominated by them. This perpetually transitioning and evolving landscape, or "socially codified space," or what Henri Lefebvre once titled "representational space," intercedes powerfully in the ways in which people collectivize (1991: 39).[4] No matter how people may be predisposed towards being with each other, representational space or socially codified space all too often has a bearing on the ways in which they relate or associate.

This volume, therefore, proceeds along two simultaneous and seemingly unconnected lines. On the one hand it emphasizes the ontological centrality of relationships to our comprehension of physical or mental conceptions of space. On the other hand, it also simultaneously emphasizes the ontological centrality of socially codified spaces or representational spaces to our comprehension of the ways in which people relate with each other in the South Asian context. The census town, the *Firka*, the *Naamghar*, the *Tirath and* Mughal imperial architecture as we shall see in this volume, are at once both: the effects of particular contingent acts of relating and associating, and localizations of representational spaces that pre-configure the ways in which people relate and associate with each other. A rich history of such localizations of representational space already exists. Guru's writing, for instance, has already shown us the manner in which emerging and abating impressions of socially codified spaces refract the way we approach relationalities in the context of temples, factories, villages and Sarais (Guru 2012: 95-106). The essays in this volume, therefore, are an attempt at extending our comprehension of such refractions to a wider range of spatial

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[4] According to Lefebvre, representational space "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs" (1991: 39).

configurations encompassing the census town, the *Firka*, the *Naamghar*, the *Tirath and Mughal* imperial architecture. While from the vantages of fields such as urban studies, architectural history and religious studies we've come to accept these spatial configurations as significant epistemological categories in their own right, the essays in the first volume of this special issue undertake the laborious work of microscopically examining how socially codified space or representational space overlays them and oftentimes saturates them.

Essay Descriptions

Socially codified space and its refractions are palpably in evidence in Yaminie Sharma's paper on the presence of Swangla migrants, a Scheduled Tribe from Himachal Pradesh from the Pattan Valley of Lahaul in the town of Kullu. Sharma writes against dominant conceptions of the urban as a space for the fostering of organic solidarities. For instance, far from serving to enfeeble family bonds and caste-based kinship associations, a growing sense of accretive citizenship in Kullu town reinforces them, and in some instances, reconfigures them. The existence of urban space, in this distinct sense, is not so much predicated on the distribution of labour in the modern context, as it is constituted by and oftentimes even reinforces a kind of representational space in which ethnic affinities and caste-based affinities dominate. Sharma's findings are paradoxical. City-form is reified and made to endure by precisely those relationships and forms of discrimination that it has historically been seen as undermining. City-form, in short, hosts relationships that are entirely different from and antithetical to the very hegemonic idea of the city as the space for the dissolution of mechanical forms of solidarity.

At a distinct remove from city-form and its physicality, relational space in KV Cybil's essay on the martyrdom of Sardar Gopalakrishnan KV, manifests itself more in the realm of ideas and memories. Cybil engages with the *Firka*, a revenue division within a taluka of the British Malabar, not so much in terms of its validity as an administrative unit in the historical sense, but rather with shifting recollections of the way it existed prior to 1956. Cybil locates the *Firka* and the death of Sardar Gopalakrishnan within the domain of rumours which endlessly proliferate and within which there is no "positivity or finality in terms of a given telos." Putting it differently, the rules governing the discourse surrounding the status of the *Firka* and the event of the martyrdom of Sardar Gopalakrishnan are not so much situated in an a priori authority of historical knowledge or experience, but rather in social discourse itself as it contingently unfolds in local conversations on martyrdom. As Cybil shows, this field of social discourse, "with its own laws of development," challenges dominant a-priori conceptions of martyrdom.

Snigdha Bhaswati draws attention to social reconfigurations of a dominant historical a priori in an entirely different context. Her paper delves into the religiosity of the followers of Sankaradeva, a saint leader in Assam. Bhaswati writes about Sankaradeva's religious ideology referred to as *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, or *Naba boishnab-baad*, particularly in the context of the *Naamghar*, which is a physical space for congregational practices and worship. The paper interprets divergent sectarian interpretations of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, with an emphasis on the influence of

the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, an organization formed to address practices of caste-based discrimination, and the propagation of Brahmanical rituals among the followers of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in Assam. Bhaswati particularly draws attention to the functioning of the *Naamghars* in the site of Dikhowmukh in Assam. The growing influence of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* in Dikhowmukh resulted in the erosion of commensurability and horizontal relationships between the Sangha members and other followers of Sankaradeva who did not associate with the Sangha. Nevertheless, the physical space of the *Naamghars* is configured within a socially codified space that enables a shared existence for the followers of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* irrespective of their sectarian affiliations.

While Bhaswati's paper draws attention to the ways in which the *Naamghar* is socially emplaced within regional discourses, Yogesh Snehi writes about *Valmiki Tirath*, a major pilgrimage centre for the *Valmiki* community in contemporary Punjab, as a relational space in a trans-regional sense. Beginning with an account of the demographic spread of the *Valmiki* community in Punjab, Snehi subsequently delves into the sacred geography of the Ramayana and the significance of *Valmiki Tirath* within that geography. The affective power of *Valmiki Tirath* surges through its association with events associated with epics and legends that resonate in a larger, more general, trans-regional tradition. At the same time, Snehi also chronicles the rise of trans-regional *adi* traditions—linking the spaces of very local association, such as *Valmiki Tirath,* to transregional critiques of dominant brahmanic traditions and symbols. Socially codified space is therefore constituted through wholly incommensurable but simultaneous invocations of a sense of territory that extends beyond the local. These invocations in turn come to have an impact on the manner in which relationalities are configured locally at the V*almiki Tirath.*

Socially codified space sometimes also mediates the ways in which the past is invoked. In "Mansions of the Gods and Visions of Paradise," Pushkar Sohoni proposes a relational comprehension of the Marathas' deployment, in the 18th century, of specific Islamicate architectural forms, such as the nine-bay mosque plan, the enclosure wall for gardens, and the *hasht bihisht* plan. In particular, Sohoni examines three Maratha temples, the Omkareshvara temple (c. 1738 CE), the Naro Shankara temple (c. 1747 CE) and the Ganesha temple at Tasgaon (c. 1799 CE). At the time of their creation under the auspices of the Marathas, the Islamicate forms of these temples may not so much have harked back to cosmology, eschatology or divinity, but rather to a representational space that enfolded within itself a more immediate Mughal imperial past. In other words, the causal relations underlying the emergence of the three temples can be squarely situated within a more immediate, profane Maratha desire to invoke Mughal imperial power. Equally, Sohoni argues, it is only through the creation of "a sub-Mughal court, in etiquette, manners, and indeed architecture and painting" that Mughal architectural space survived or flourished in the time after the death of Aurangzeb. "Mughal social and visual culture was ironically promulgated by the very polities that were catalysts of Mughal political downfall." What, then Sohoni asks, is Mughal space, if it isn't the relationships that re-enunciate it and reify it long after the passing of the Mughal imperial age?

The papers we have chosen for this issue contribute to our comprehension of the ways in which space supervenes upon relationality. The papers do not so much reify the census town, the *Firka*, the *Naamghar*, the *Tirath and* Mughal imperial architecture as enduring verities, as reveal how they are configured contingently through particular forms of relating and associating at particular moments in time. At the same time, the papers draw our attention to the unique configurations of socially codified space that, in the South Asian context, reproportion relationality. No attempt at historicizing relationality, it would appear, is adequate without a near simultaneous attempt at engaging with the broader field of power within which relationships emerge in the first place.

References

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