



Capitalism, Violence, and Difference in South Asia

A public workshop hosted by
the Department of Indian Studies,
Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich

Friday, 21 August 2026, 9:00–17:30, followed by an apéro
Rämistrasse 59, 8001 Zürich, Room RAA-E-12



The "Pakistan" section of the Vatva resettlement site, Ahmedabad, created under Modi's post-2002 urban development agenda to house residents displaced by the Sabarmati Riverfront Project; its segregated blocks came to be known informally as "Hindustan," "Pakistan," and "Sri Lanka." From Shrey Kapoor's book project *From Riots to Dispossession*. Photograph by Surabhi Vaya, August 2018.

About the workshop

This workshop brings together scholars examining how capitalism and nationalism intersect to reshape political power, urban life, and the governance of difference in South Asia. The aim is to think conjuncturally: to situate South Asian transformations within a broader moment marked by rising authoritarianism, while remaining attentive to the specific histories, spatial forms, and social relations that animate the region's cities and their agrarian hinterlands.

Across the region, shifts in political economy, development, and infrastructure have reorganized how violence is produced and managed, how communities are incorporated or marginalized, and how forms of belonging and exclusion take shape, in registers ranging from property regimes and state institutions to the textures of everyday life. The workshop engages questions of communal and racialized capitalisms, infrastructural and spatial violence, political ecology, minority urbanism, and changing forms of citizenship and hegemony.

Attendance is open to all. For questions, please contact Shrey Kapoor (shrey.kapoor@aoi.uzh.ch).

Programme at a glance

9:00	Arrival and coffee
9:15	Welcome
9:30–10:15	Opening paper Ghazala Jamil (Jawaharlal Nehru University)
10:15–10:30	Coffee
10:30–12:00	Panel 1: Minority Lives in the North Indian City Sharik Laliwala (UC Berkeley) and Raphael Susewind (LSE)
12:00–13:15	Lunch
13:15–14:45	Panel 2: Land, Caste, and the State Aman Banerji (Princeton) and Nicolas Martin (University of Zurich)
14:45–15:15	Coffee
15:15–17:30	Panel 3: Infrastructure, Law, and Authoritarian Urbanism Rakib Akhtar (Birmingham), Majed Akhter (King's College London), and Moubani Maitra (University of Zurich)
17:30	Apéro

Papers and abstracts

9:30–10:15 Opening Paper

Ghazala Jamil (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

Leisure Mobilities, Citizenship and Cultural Nationalism in South Asia

Citizenship when interposed with identity, memory and politics is very complex, especially in South Asia. States in the region have employed cultural nationalism all too often to push for exclusionary conception of citizenship and to justify the dispossession of the already impoverished and beleaguered minorities. This paper begins by delineating the most contentious questions of national citizenship and ethno-religious strife in the region. It briefly places the histories of citizenship laws in South Asian States in the backdrop of the experience of democracy and evolution of cultural nationalisms in each state. It then moves to trace the fortunes of ‘South Asian’ regional identity, while interrogating the role of homegrown brands of cultural/ethno nationalism in bilateral and regional cultural cooperation.

While the experiences of forced migrants and refugees have long been a fertile ground for studies providing insight into socio-economic stresses, international disputes etc, this article trains its scrutiny to leisure mobilities or travel undertaken by pilgrims and tourists. The paper evidences that the legal, policy and institutional regimes for governance of tourism and heritage, and certain tourist practices are deeply embroiled in nationalist and ethno-nationalist tendencies. It argues that on the one hand spatial transformation through tourism development disrupts the sense of belonging through distortion or obliteration of histories of the dispossessed and subalterns, while on the other, tourists undertake travel (or are governed through State-practices) to chart trajectories that contest memories, thereby altering geographies. Within this field, the article then focuses its attention on a few case studies of cross border travel routes and circuits in South Asia which signal exclusion and inclusion criteria in national communities.

Positioned at the conceptual frontier between leisure mobilities, cultural nationalism and citizenship the paper attempts to contribute to the understanding of the yet incomplete, continuing projects of nation-building by the South Asian States saddled by issues arising out of linguistic and religious fault lines that refuse to be neatly contained by their (redrawn) borders.

10:30–12:00 Panel 1: Minority Lives in the North Indian City

Sharik Laliwala (University of California, Berkeley)

Trapped Minorities and Protective Leaders: Muslims in Urban India

Across Indian cities, residential segregation along ethno-religious lines increasingly confines Muslims, the world’s largest Muslim minority, to a shrinking set of urban neighborhoods. Drawing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Ahmedabad and Jaipur, this paper argues that segregation places minority residents in a double bind. On one side, the spatial concentration of housing demand produces a “minority penalty”: Muslims pay substantially more for formal housing while securing inferior quality, and poorer households are pushed into informal settlements exposed to eviction and demolition. On the other, that same concentration lowers the state’s cost of discrimination, rendering minorities easier to target through demolition drives and discriminatory policing. Caught in this double bind, residents come to demand elite “protective leaders” who can shield both residents and their homes from the state. In turn, I argue that protection and physical security becomes the organizing logic of minority political life in segregated localities, reproducing their infrastructural neglect. This argument contradicts the clientelist scholarship that typically focuses on the claim-making on public goods and services. Alongside the fieldwork, I present quantitative evidence: segregation indices built using my new individual-level dataset of India’s voter rolls

(which contains over ~700 million individual-level observations) and urban land records from Ahmedabad documenting the inferior formal housing Muslims obtain.

Raphael Susewind (London School of Economics and Political Science)

The Will to Clarity and the Making of 'Tension' in North India

In north India an English loanword, 'tension', names states from everyday anxiety to the rigidity behind violence; its prescribed cure, from guru and cleric alike, is clarity. I argue the reverse: the diffuse texture of lived experience is mostly liveable, sometimes solace; what turns harmful is the will to clarity, the modern demand that every diffuse thing resolve into one settled story; there 'tension', and some of the violence beyond it, take hold. I prise apart two terms anthropology uses loosely—ambivalence (either/or, or double clarity) and ambiguity (neither/nor, or non-clarity)—and recast the former as the psychologically harmful correlate of trying to suppress the latter: human experience carries a diffuse surplus of meaning, which the will to clarity narrows and, at the limit, abolishes in a process of alienation. Two Lucknow lives carry the argument: a dancer who holds his faith and his city open, and a divorcee who polices a child's name, a preacher's checklist, and, in the end, loses his marriage in bitterness—though each takes both stances, register by register. This vocabulary shifts where we look for the danger: from confusion to the demand that confusion end, a gesture the standard accounts leave unnamed.

13:15–14:45 Panel 2: Land, Caste, and the State

Aman Banerji (Princeton University)

I didn't do real estate': Contested Identity Formation among India's Landed Castes

Following the intensified commodification of land since the 2000s, formerly peasant caste groups at the urban periphery have emerged as increasingly central to the Indian urban transition. Despite their growing centrality to networks of transnational accumulation, these middle-caste, or 'Other Backward Class,' groups have remained relatively excluded from the ranks of emergent Indian big business. Simultaneously, their incorporation into the national Hindutva fold has remained a site of intense contestation over the last decade. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on urban peripheral logistics in Bangalore, this paper seeks to examine the rhetorics, imaginaries, and discursive maneuvers through which these landowning groups make sense of their growing imbrication in agrarian-urban transformation. First, I document how such propertied castes (or jatis) continue to cling to an essentialized peasant self-imaginary through critical appraisals of real estate and landed development, the very domains in which they appear increasingly central. Second, I examine the discursive work conducted by these groups in constructing boundaries between the arena of anti-capitalist, agrarian tradition and the corroding forces of market capitalism. Even where land is acquired through state-sponsored, 'primitive' grabs and marketized purchase, I outline how elite members within these cliques continue to narrate these acquisitions through dubious claims of ancestral or patrimonial holdings. In this sense, the paper investigates how strategically deployed claims can effectuate the procedural marketization of land even as they obscure the violence of these processes. The presentation seeks to deploy historical and anthropological conceptions of 'immovable property', 'intermittent commodification,' and in-alienable-ability to make sense of the conjunctural character of identity formation amid India's ongoing urban transformation.

Nicolas Martin (University of Zurich)

Institutional Dominance and Durable Inequality in Rural Punjab

This paper proposes an approach to social mobility that centres the state as the principal producer of durable inequality. Drawing on ethnographic research among Dalits in Punjab, India, I show how state institutions — through property regimes, policy architecture, and electoral structures — generate and

reproduce the relations of power and dependence that keep subordinate groups in place. I refer to this process as institutionalised dominance. Institutionalised dominance operates through the state's allocation of bundles of rights to different groups — property, subsidies, guaranteed prices, preferential access to credit, and the powers that attach to public office — which confer durable advantages on their recipients. In Punjab, colonial land settlements constituted the dominant Jat farming class as a propertied class while locking Dalits out of landownership, and post-colonial state entitlements have extended and entrenched those advantages. The electoral principle, as Manin (1997) would lead us to expect, has compounded this pattern by concentrating the powers of office in the hands of those who already command the resources and social distinction that elections reward. Meanwhile, the system of joint electorates, as Ambedkar feared, compels Dalit representatives to serve dominant-caste interests as a condition of their election, and even among Dalits it is the relatively privileged who become political leaders — reproducing inequalities within the subordinate group itself. Reservations and state employment have provided some Dalits with opportunities for advancement, but on terms that have not translated into structural change for the wider community. The paper argues that without a far more egalitarian distribution of the bundles of rights on which political participation and social mobility depend, representative democracy alone will tend to reproduce the inequalities it inherits rather than dissolve them.

15:15–17:30 Panel 3: Infrastructure, Law, and Authoritarian Urbanism

Rakib Akhtar (University of Birmingham)

Neoliberalism and Hindutva in the Making of an Indian Smart City

With the global rise of authoritarian populism, Dr Akhtar's recent book, *Neoliberalism and Hindutva in the Making of an Indian Smart City*, published by Cambridge University Press, explores how smart city development in contemporary India is shaped by the convergence of technology-led urbanisation, neoliberal economic reforms, and right-wing nationalist politics. In this timely study, Rakib Akhtar examines how the language of innovation, digital infrastructure, and future-ready cities is increasingly tied to broader political and ideological projects.

Positioning smart cities as more than technical or developmental initiatives, the book asks critical questions about the relationship between urban transformation and political power. How do market-oriented reforms intersect with right-wing populism? In what ways are visions of technological progress and modern urban living mobilised to reshape ideas of citizenship, identity, and belonging? Against the backdrop of rising global populism, the book offers a critical perspective on how technology, infrastructure, and urban governance are being used to reimagine both cities and society.

Majed Akhter (King's College London)

Authoritarian Urbanism in Asia: A Conjunctural Comparison of New City Visions

This paper conducts a conjunctural comparison of two planned new cities in Asia: Ravi City in Pakistan, and Nusantara in Indonesia. Planned urbanization, and infrastructure-led development (ILD) more broadly, has been connected in the literature to a rise in authoritarian urbanism. This paper analyses legal sources to situate the historical-geographical trajectories of Ravi City and Nusantara within the global conjunctural moment of ILD. Our legal lens reveals two features of authoritarian urbanism that connect and differentiate our study sites: (1) the legacies of colonial land laws and (2) the scalar politics of land governance. The paper highlights how authoritarian urbanism is exercised, and challenged, in legal arenas such as courts, parliaments, and constitutions. Our method of conjunctural comparison demonstrates that authoritarian urbanism is both transregional and historically-geographically situated. This paper thus advances geographic understandings of authoritarian urbanism and comparative methodology.

Moubani Maitra (University of Zurich)

The Architecture of Displacement: Evictions, Demolitions, and State Power in Uttar Pradesh

This chapter examines how evictions and dispossession unfold in contemporary India. Recent scholarship has emphasized the communal character of such evictions, highlighting their disproportionate targeting of Muslim neighbourhoods and dissenters, with the bulldozer emerging as a central symbol in BJP ruled states and election campaigns. This chapter argues that even where eviction follows an ostensibly procedural process, the bulldozer's effective operation depends on specific structural conditions rooted in the institutional settings through which eviction orders are issued and subsequently legitimised. Focusing on the eviction of a Muslim-majority neighbourhood in Uttar Pradesh, I show how the institutional design of development authorities — where the internal appellate mechanism is structurally compromised — enables the deployment of coercive capacity, through police and central security forces, and infrastructural means, through the cooperation of utility providers withdrawing essential services. Even institutions with independence from the development authority arrived at aligned outcomes: courts engaged with residents' challenges, granting stays and hearing negotiations, yet ultimately validated the eviction and offered resettlement as remedy. I argue that executive reach in such cases is achieved neither through institutional co-optation nor through the breaking of institutional rules, but through the exploitation of gaps within an accountability structure that continues, formally, to function.