Urban Life in Contemporary South Asia

Course Description

In this course, we will discuss concepts, contexts, and constructs critical to the study of urban life in contemporary South Asia. Drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary social scientific literature, we will think closely, and collectively, about the historical trajectory of urbanization in South Asia (particularly the role of colonial governance in the (re)making of cities) and its manifestations in the way urban life is experienced in South Asia today. The course provides theoretically informed perspectives on social, cultural, and political life in urban contexts throughout South Asia through attending to histories and legacies of colonialism and development alongside novel forms of governance and claims to the city. Along the way, it will unpack competing and complementary interpretations of citizenship, that play out at the level of the street or the neighborhood. We will pay particular attention to the technologies of government and planning, insurgent modes of claiming space and rights, the politics of difference and belonging, and the role of built form and infrastructural technologies. Through this course, we will focus on how relations of class, gender, caste, and religion shape, and are shaped by, the experience of inequality, violence, and pleasure in the urbanizing regions in South Asia. We will analyze different sites at which social frictions, fictions, and entanglements play out in South Asian cities: urban governance, street life, housing and real estate, infrastructure and planning, crime and violence, consumer culture, gendered mobilities, etc. Additionally, we will do film screenings through the length of the course, as an audio-visual complement to the texts we are reading in class.

By the end of this course, the students will have be well-equipped to critique simplistic mainstream representations of Southern Asian cities as the Other to Western models, as chaotic, incomplete, or dysfunctional. Instead we will examine how these cities work, how they are lived in, and what real implications the dynamics particular to these cities have for urban citizens. Further, we will analyze the role of forms of sociality, difference, and belonging around cleavages like class, gender, caste, and religion. Building on this, we critically interrogate the role of infrastructural technologies and developmental imaginaries in the distribution of the rights and rewards of the city, and pay particular attention to how changing climate risk frames discourses of vulnerability and progress in contemporary South Asia.

Requirements

Class Participation: 10%
Weekly memos: 15%
Mid-Term: 25%
Final Paper + Class Presentation: 40% (25 + 15)
Attendance at film screenings: 10% (if at least 3 out of 6 film screenings are attended).

Class Participation: This course is a discussion-based seminar that requires engagement and
reflection of the course material both before and during class periods. Students are expected to
attend class each week, engage fully in class discussion, and participate in in-class exercises. Being
an active member of the class is likely the most important aspect of the course. You are each a
valuable resource for each other and everyone’s participation will contribute to the depth and shape
of what you will ultimately take away from this course. **This is, admittedly, a readings-heavy
course so attendance in class will ensure fuller understanding of the material on hand.** Remember, attendance is half of participation. If nothing else, attend class regularly.

**Weekly Memos:** One analytical memo **per week.** The readings for each week that qualify for the
post are marked with an asterisk. **You can pick one reading for the week amongst the ones marked with an asterisk** and write a **500 words post** for that reading alone. Summarize the
paper or pick a fight with it – that’s up to you. At the end of the course, each student must have
no less than 10 posts to their credit. (You can skip three)

**Mid-Term:** I will give you 4 essay questions to answer, of which you have to answer 3. These
questions are designed to test your understanding of the concepts covered in the readings. You
will be given a week’s time to turn the answers in. Each answer ought to be about 1000-1200
words. More details to follow in class.

**Final Paper** (if the class is >15, split class into groups of 3 or teams of 2 for this exercise):

**Details TBA.** But will essentially be an empirical case study of an “urban problem” in any South
Asian city as a case study that interests you. This “problem” could be related to infrastructure,
housing, transportation, climate change, gender, or violence. Catalog relevant newspaper material
(any language), or use historical data from library catalogs (newspaper archives, photographs,
films, survey data). The final paper will be a synthesis of the material you have collected and the
texts we have read in class.

**Film Screenings** (an idea, which depends on institute policy etc.)
Films are a fabulous window into the sensory worlds of the cities we are studying through
academic texts. For this reason, as a supplement to our conversations in class, I will be hosting
screenings of six different films which will be of interest to anyone interested in South Asian cities.
These films get at several different themes we will be covering in class; often each film addresses
an entanglement of the themes we are discussing week by week. I highly recommend attending
these screenings. As an incentive, 10% of your grade will be taken care of if you attend at least 3
of the 6 film screenings. These will also be open to public.

Films to be screened on **Thursday evenings** during Week 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13.

- **Week 3:** “The Big City” (Director: Satyajit Ray)
- **Week 5:** “Sincerely Yours, Dhaka” (Producer: Abu Shahed Emon)
- **Week 7:** “Q2P” (Director: Paromita Vohra)
- **Week 9:** “This Shaking Keeps Me Steady” (Director: Shehrezad Maher)
- **Week 11:** “Made in Bangladesh” (Director: Rubaiyat Hossain)
- **Week 13:** “Kathmandu, A Mirror in the Sky” (Director: Iciar Bollain)
Classroom Policies

- **Content:** This course addresses topics that some people may find sensitive or uncomfortable, such as self-harm and violence. I cannot predict in advance what might come up for you, but I do not want you to be surprised. If you are concerned about any of the material, please contact me. And please be aware of mental health and self-care resources available at Student Psychological Services.

- **Classroom Dialogue and Discussion:** While I do encourage a frank and enthusiastic style of discussion of the readings in the course, everyone is required to maintain a respectful attitude towards different viewpoints. In case anyone feels uncomfortable about the content or tone of classroom discussions and has any issues with participating freely in class, do not hesitate to contact me. I am readily accessible via email and office hours to address any concerns that may arise.

- **Academic Dishonesty:** Academic dishonesty is an offense that I take extremely seriously. The grade for essays that show evidence of plagiarism will be forfeited and calculated as a zero. I will pursue disciplinary action in cases of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty.

- **Late Policy:** Deadlines are inflexible. Your grade will fall by 10% per day late. Assignments will not be accepted and you will receive a zero past three days late. If you have an emergency or illness that interferes with a deadline, notify me as soon as possible and provide proper written documentation (in the case of a medical emergency, provide a doctor's note).

- **Accessibility:** If you require special assistance, please email me or call 773.702.8637 in advance. Every effort will be made to ensure equitable access and accessibility. Please visit the following website for more information.

Assignment Policies

- **Late Papers:** I count a paper or homework assignment as late if it is turned in (via email or in person) after class on the due date (e.g. after 10:50 am). Late papers lose 5 points a day (starting immediately after class on the due date. I will not accept any papers or homework seven days past the original due date.

- **Extensions:** Extensions on homework assignments and papers must be requested to me 72 hours in advance of the due date with no exceptions.

- **Incompletes and Withdraws:** Under university rules, an incomplete is only available if you have completed at least 2/3 of the course assignments. If you are seeking an incomplete, please be in touch with your adviser and myself as early as possible. I will support a student’s request to withdraw from the course at any time.
Course Readings

(Note to reader: At this point, I am selecting texts for each week, divided into 2 sessions, based on a 14-week model)

All of the course readings will be made available by me. Please read in the order listed each week.

The first week will be lecture-based followed by Q&A in which students could read the recommended readings if they wish, but it is more my job to lay out the background and historicize the study of South Asian studies. In the following weeks, students will be expected to read all the readings and participate in discussions in class. In-class exercises will be conducted periodically to facilitate vibrant discussion in the classroom. Weekly memos, as already indicated, will be in force Week Two onwards only.

Week One: Introduction and Context

Session One: Studying South Asian urbanisms


Session Two: Colonial Roots


Section I: Class Matters (Week Three-Week Six)

From Week Two till Week Six, we will examine how class relations shape the South Asian city. How is the urban experience structured by class relations? What are the material conditions of housing and politics in contemporary South Asian cities? We start with getting a sense of what the concept ‘informality’ means in the context of urban South Asia, and then delving into the lifeworlds of “informality”.
Week Two: Informality, Illegality, Insurgency

Session One: Seeing Like a State


Session Two: Planned informalities


Week Three: Whose Streets?

Session One: Streets Culture


Session Two: Streets Battles


Week Four: Whose City?

Session One: The Proletariat City

Session Two: The Bourgeois City


Week Five: Housing In The City

Session One: Urban Poverty


Session Two: continued


Week Six: Housing In The City (continued)

Session One: Beyond Mumbai


Session Two: Gated Communities and Fortified Enclaves


Section II: Urban Intersections (Week Seven – Week Ten)

*From Week Seven to Week Ten, we will think about how class relations intersect and entangle with, and reproduce, structures of religion, gender, sex, and caste. We start with religion and how it is shaped by, and shaped, the urban fabric. We then take gender, intimacy and caste as lenses to view South Asian cities through.*

Week Seven: Religion in The City

Session One


Session Two


Week Eight: Gender in The City

Session One: Women in the City


Session Two: Urban Masculinities


Week Nine: Intimacy in the City

Session One: Modern Love


Session Two: Geographies of Desire


**Week Ten: Caste in The City**

Session One:


Session Two:

- Recap lecture + discussion on Final Paper topics/expectations

**Section III. Vital Infrastructures, Utopian Imaginaries, Dystopian Environments**

*In this section, we will further our understanding of South Asian cities by interrogating the linkages between existing infrastructure in cities, and the developmental imaginaries of world-classness that often fuels the growth of these cities. We will bring in emergent conversations on the future of South Asian cities, and think through how climate change frames urban risk and vulnerability.*

**Week Eleven: Infrastructure in The City**

Session One: Disruptions, Interruptions, Domestications


Session Two: Expertise Matters


Also: “Why Dhaka is bursting at the sewers” at https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/mar/21/people-pouring-dhaka-bursting-sewers-overpopulation-bangladesh

Week Twelve: World-Class Aspirations

Session One


Session Two


Week Thirteen: Climate Change In The City

Session One: assessing risks, evaluating vulnerabilities


Recommended: *Documentary. “Are You Listening?”* directed by Kamar Ahmad Simon. Runtime 90 minutes. (OR MOVE TO SESSION TWO, depending on class size)

Session Two:

Class Presentations (Final): format, time, group/single presenter and other details TBD depending on class size.

**Week Fourteen:**
continue Class Presentations

**Week Fifteen:**
continue Class Presentations