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Urban Spaces and Dilemmas of Perception in the Ancient Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

Archaeological discussions of ancient cities and the material analysis of modern cities focus on obvious physical 'facts' such as buildings, streets and open spaces. Buildings and their surrounding streetscapes are mutually influenced: what happens inside structures is conditioned and counterbalanced by areas outside of them. Open spaces such as streets are differentiated by the presence of nearby establishments: a street around a courthouse or a school has a different energy than a street of storefronts. People create and negotiate these urban settings as they make choices about practical activities such as shopping, eating, conversing, working and seeking shade from the sun or shelter from the rain. They move into and out of spaces and buildings for a variety of purposes at a variety of periodicities, from once-in-a-lifetime ceremonies to acts of routine purchasing, visiting, education and entertainment. In doing so, they select from a range of duplicate entities, given that cities are places with multiple venues for nearly every type of activity.

Jacques Lévy (Lévy 2021: 1) has discussed the concept of co-spatiality as one in which the inevitable overlapping demands of space in daily life has both practical and philosophical outcomes, in which co-spatiality results from simultaneous, yet different social realities under the conditions marked by 'neither distance, nor inclusion.' Co-spatiality is the result of multiple physical entities existing together in the crowded visual field of a city, but co-spatiality is also the result of co-existence *through* spatiality. Of all of the spaces in a city, the ones that are the most dramatic, the most publicly visible and yet the most restricted, are religious spaces. These restrictions are almost always entirely *voluntary*; in other words, many individuals who could enter those spaces elect not to do so within the cosmopolitan milieu in which the architecture and spaces of others' religious traditions are part of the streetscape. What is the value of seeing or not seeing in the religious sense? How did the built environments of cities create opportunities not only for people to see things, but also to *avoid* seeing things?

The cognitive efficiency of 'un-seeing' that which is of little direct relevance is especially germane to ritual practices and religious affiliation. Compared to social and economic activities, a person's ritual activities incur the least day-to-day choice-making, and individuals within any religious tradition adhere to temporal and spatial patterns associated with already-established spaces and timings of activity. Although urban centres have multiple religious buildings (and often, multiple religious traditions), this duplication does not result in a constant negotiation of selectivity in the same way as a person addresses regular needs for food, clothing, or repair services. A historical and archaeological perspective on urban religious place-making shows that religious diversity has always been part of urban life, and may well have been foundational to the urban experience (summarised in Urciuoli 2020). How do people learn to 'un-see' the religious elements

of the urban sphere that are therefore not relevant to them? And how does the process of 'un-seeing' become increasingly prevalent in non-religious domains as a result of the experiences incurred through religious activities? This article discusses the historical traditions of the mid-first millennium BCE in the Indian subcontinent, when numerous ritual traditions including Buddhist, Jain, Ajivika, Vedic, and other traditions were developed and manifested in architecture and ritual practice in and around urban areas.

Table of Contents Show

Exposition: Phenomenon or process addressed, agents, media

Why Study Urban Religion?

The study of religious spaces has profound implications for our understanding of modern as well as ancient urbanism. There has been an expectation that modern urban life is somehow secular, yet religious movements and the construction of religious buildings continue strongly in cities across the globe. In nearly every city today there is a diversity of religious movements, structures and communities, and urban religious centres provide resources for both long-term residents and new arrivals into cities as seen by examples as varied as South Korea's Protestant megachurches (Thumma and Bird 2015), African diaspora faith groups (Garbin 2013), Jewish synagogues (Snyder 2015) and Buddhist transnational temples (Reinke 2021). As noted by Jörg Rüpke and Susanne Rau (Rüpke and Rau 2020), religion and urbanism are mutual formations that reflect – but also create – the dynamism of urban life.

Archaeologically, it is clear that religious structures were prominent parts of urban built environments starting with the first cities. Like modern cities, ancient cities' architectural expressions show the simultaneous presence of multiple religious structures and traditions (e.g. Mordechai and Pickett 2018; Rüpke 2018; Urciuoli 2020 for the Roman Mediterranean; Dauber 1992 for first-millennium CE Japan; Little 1976 for first-millennium CE Egypt; George 1992 for ancient Mesopotamia). Large ritual buildings often cluster within the central zone: the pyramids of Mayan and other Mesoamerican cities; the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia; the temples of ancient Roman, Greek, and Egyptian cities; the Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro; mosques of the Islamic faith; Buddhist temples in Japan, Korea and China; and Christian churches in the European tradition. These structures were prominent both in the experiences of the ancient people who used them and as the focal point of archaeologists for whom the excavation of large central ritual buildings has anchored our understanding of the development of urbanism as a human phenomenon.

Cities Are Full of Buildings

Indeed, it is the proliferation of special-purpose architecture that marks the historical and contemporary growth of urbanism compared to villages and other small settlements. Special-purpose secular structures in cities – warehouses, armouries, barracks, palaces, courts, schools – are marked by distinctive physical elements that can include building height and size; decorative elements such as a tower or finial; an imposing façade; extra-large doors; and/or the shielding of the

view of the interior by a baffled entrance. Special-purpose buildings thus look different from surrounding homes and shops, but in addition to their physical distinctions there are social factors that characterise differential activity and access. These social factors exist from the beginning of the building's life, including patronage for construction (funded by the state, political leaders or private donors) and formal opening ceremonies that mark the structures as ready for use. Once occupied, large buildings often are controlled by a collective entity rather than a private person: for example, a government body in the case of a courthouse, jail or tax office; a corporation for a factory or warehouse; a board of trustees for a school. And once they cease to be useful, special-purpose buildings often are transferred to new managers and re-used in new ways that make use of their physical size and internal configuration (e.g. Williams 2021).

Special-purpose structures may be managed with a degree of control over those who are allowed to come inside. Sometimes permissions to enter are legally binding, such as taverns that are off-limits to children. Sometimes permissions are contractually restricted, such as construction areas or maintenance facilities that are only for trained and bonded personnel. Sanctions are negative as well as positive; for example, people enter a jail cell only when they are arrested or if they serve an official role for those who have been detained. Most often, however, special-purpose buildings in cities are places that people could freely enter, but choose not to do so lacking a specific reason. A person generally does not go to a hospital or nursing home unless they are a patient, a staff member, a relative, or making a delivery. A person does not go into a gym unless they have paid the fees to become a member. A person does not go into a school unless they are a student, a parent, a teacher or staff member. A person does not enter a government building, a post office, or a courthouse unless they are carrying out a specific task.

Because of the distinct activities within them, many special-purpose buildings are unneeded, nor even perceived, by those who pass by. Their interiors are not accessed by the majority of people because they are not in need of the services or facilities offered there; because they have not acquired the rights of access; or because the buildings are duplicative and they already have chosen one such entity to fulfil a particular need. Among similar facilities that people do enter on a regular basis, such as a grocery store, they establish patterns of frequency that lead them to habitually return and establish routines within the physical confines of a mercantile space. People also join and maintain memberships in other types of spaces such as a gym by choosing among competitors and subsequently engaging with the managers and community formed within a building and sustained through the fact that everyone has paid to enter and use the facilities. People also establish rights of access through networks established by institutions, as in the case of banks, which are primarily entered by those who have an account but are also entered by those who wish to transact business of a sort that any bank might provide.

For any individual living in a city, the sum total of buildings is thus far greater than what a person needs, resulting in a constant process of selection among the multiplicity of educational, employment, entertainment, and other options that exist in urban places. Among the many forms of employment, a person can only simultaneously hold one or two jobs; among the many forms of education, a person can only simultaneously matriculate in one or two institutions; among the many forms of entertainment, a person can only simultaneously enjoy one or two forms of music, dance, theatre, sports, art, or other leisure pursuits. Habituation is a necessary strategy under conditions of abundance, in which people quickly engage with excess choice by forming patterns of engagement. Studies of choice-making indicate that people who face too many alternatives are unable to make efficient decisions (Iyengar 2010). As choices increase, people use filtering mechanisms to reduce choices, including practices such as brand loyalty (Atulkar 2020) for consumer products and the use of institutions and influencers for choices related to healthcare and other personal decisions (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). In crowded landscapes, people also exercise a number of strategies to avoid cognitive overload and overstimulation (cf. Allen 2004; Cicourel 2004). The resultant choices are encoded into materiality through both objects and architecture as people move around in spaces that are clearly demarcated and in which entering and exiting a structure or a portion of a structure clearly signals intentionality and adherence.

In cities, the visual overstimulus of physical locales in the form of architectural abundance is paralleled by the need to adjust to social overstimulus in the form of large numbers of unfamiliar people. In the villages that preceded urban development, everyone was known to everyone else, with strangers being a rare occurrence and limited to itinerant merchants or newly married family members (Smith 2019). In a city, by contrast, there are strangers everywhere, and becoming accustomed to being surrounded by unknown persons is a constant component of initial and subsequent urban life into the present day. Because there are so many people, one does not feel obligated to interact with each and every stranger; instead, there is a quickly developed practice of not seeing, or not paying attention to, other individuals with whom one has no particular need for contact. Similarly, it is more efficient and manageable to focus only on those structures that are relevant to one's needs, and to stop actively noticing most of the grocery stores, gyms, banks, hospitals, schools, and government buildings in one's surroundings. By 'un-seeing' irrelevant inputs, a person habituates the urban gaze towards elements that are relevant and away from elements that are not relevant.

If we accept that the process of 'un-seeing' is a useful psychological adaptation to urban life in practical affairs such as interpersonal communication, domestic activities, economic transactions, and bureaucratic interventions, can we also apply this concept to the religious realm? Although we are inclined to analyse religious institutions as having a specific

moral and societal function, in terms of their buildings' accessibility, visibility and constituency we might think of them very much like a gym, a grocery store or a bank. Membership (in a gym), familiarity (in a grocery store) and having an account (in a bank) all provide a self-identified legitimacy of access that is also recognised by the other clients and managers of those spaces. Each religious institution is subject to repeated visits in which people select from an array of potential services and products at each visit, but in general the only people who enter in and use the facilities of a religious building are those who are already familiar with the customs, artefacts and mannerisms appropriate to that space.

Comparative or entangled perspective: Background and preconditions

The Archaeology of Urban Spaces

The first cities came into existence about six thousand years ago, and the city form subsequently has become the dominant mode of human settlement (Creekmore and Fisher 2014; Smith 2019). Even in the first cities, there were new forms of architecture and associated experiences. We know from archaeological research that ancient cities included a variety of structures beyond residences and shops, and that the use of structures was accompanied by the use of a variety of both practical and symbolic artefacts. No ancient cities have been completely excavated, so that the information that we acquire from digs is supplemented by other data such as textual sources and scientific techniques such as Lidar, ground-penetrating radar and gradiometry that can detect the outlines of structures below the ground on a much larger scale than can typically be excavated. Whether excavated or traced through survey methods, ancient urban structures can be differentiated on the basis of size, the presence of internal walls and partitions, and the presence of special-purpose artefacts in or around the buildings whether inside rooms or in external trash deposits. Structures' uses also can be evaluated on the basis of their locations relative to other features, buildings and adjacent open spaces (e.g. Fleisher 2014; George 1992; Smith 2008).

Archaeologists assess visibility and access for ancient contexts on the basis of both excavated remains and reconstructions. One of the first strategies developed to understand the complexities of architecture is found in space syntax analysis, a concept pioneered by Hillier and Hanson (1984). Access patterns can be ascertained for individual structures in which doorways and corridors provide a branching diagram of nested spaces; access patterns have also been ascertained for entire urban centres in which patterns of movement around the city can be mapped by the location and frequency of use of pathways (e.g. Branting 2004). Another mode of assessment is viewshed analysis, which utilises GIS and other imaging techniques to evaluate what could physically be seen from one place to the next. Viewshed analysis has been widely applied to the study of ancient military establishments and sacred sites and their intervisibility and for the impact of sacred sites on their landscapes (e.g. Kantner and Hobgood 2016; Verhagen 2018). The concept of proximity and repetition as a component of viewsheds also has been applied to urban settings to consider the ways in which duplicative urban facilities would have been clustered (e.g. Ellis 2004). The reconstructions of urban settlements through computer-generated imagery (CGI) will be increasingly helpful, a revolution aided not only by academic projects but by the expertise wielded by video game designers who often have superior equipment and expertise for digital visualisations (e.g. Politopoulos et al. 2019).

Archaeological and textual evidence shows that ancient urban special-purpose structures included warehouses, palaces, armouries, and barracks; government buildings associated with record-keeping and administration; workshops and warehouses; and a variety of purpose-built religious structures. Although the remains of temples, churches, mosques and pyramids may seem very obvious to us today when we visit ancient cities, there are aspects of the current visibility of urban religious architecture that may skew our interpretations of their importance to ancient inhabitants. One of the challenges that we face as archaeologists is that we frequently find only the foundations of buildings. Standing at the edge of an archaeological site, we therefore imagine transparencies of perception that were certainly not experienced by ancient people, whose view of their surroundings would have been blocked by many different types of structures restricting their lines of sight. The ability to see might have been quite narrow down streets and alleyways, with only a wedge of light across courtyards. As a result, the architectural configurations themselves were likely to have promoted a sense of both visibility and invisibility, a physical set of barriers to perception that would have been augmented by other forms of 'un-seeing' as a practical matter by urban dwellers who were focused on elements that were useful to them rather than on the city as a whole.

Oscillations between 'Seeing' and 'Un-seeing'

The conscious perception of available goods, services, and architecture is variable throughout a person's lifespan, but cities present an especially challenging environment due to the constantly shifting landscape of new opportunities. When do people begin to 'see' or 'un-see' the variety of options within an urban setting, particularly in matters of religious practice? We can suggest that there are a number of occasions in which a structure or practice that was previously 'un-seen' by urban residents suddenly can become more actively perceived. These include 1) at liminal moments or at times of unexpected developments in which a building's function as a religious entity is superseded by its function as a structure that is visible for other purposes; 2) at times of individual need for a specific service or activity; 3) at times of conflict; 4) when individuals are alerted to the presence of a religious building through an additional sensory perception that emanates from the structure, such as sound or aroma; and 5) at times of coalescence and syncretic accommodation.

Although buildings are solid, three-dimensional structures, they can agentively experience and create liminal moments in which the normal rules of engagement are suspended. Just like secular buildings, religious institutions can be considered open under conditions of emergency (such as firefighters entering during a fire or rescuing people during a flood); at times of transition (as when strangers enter a property to view it at the time of sale); or when requisitioned by government authorities (such as the use of a church building to house refugees, to serve as a polling place or designated as a shelter at times of natural disaster). The sanctification of a religious building may be evident from the beginning (for example, through a groundbreaking ceremony or the laying of a cornerstone) or incrementally in which the structure is open to all until the moment of final dedication (as is the case with Mormon temples; see Kurzius 2020; Östman 2008). When a religious building under construction reaches a state of completion that is adequate for consecration, the structure takes on a moral veneer against the uninitiated (cf. Dehejia and Rockwell 2011).

Religious institutions also become 'seen' by individuals who are facing times of need in which the institution, and its sense of largesse or community, are perceived as a form of emotional, financial or physical shelter. Immediate needs for housing are met by religious institutions that harbour refugees, sometimes in defiance of government authority (e.g. O'Sullivan 2016). Individuals may also approach religious institutions for services provided as an outgrowth of ministry (e.g. Thumma and Bird 2015 on the social services provided by megachurches, and Hirvi 2014 on the role of Sikh temples in providing food and medical aid to the community). Religious institutions not only provide such services as a component of their regular ministry, but in so doing raise their visibility to non-adherents when such services take place in visible spaces such as public areas or on the exterior of the religious structures. These acts of seeing and un-seeing extend from religious buildings to their surroundings. Although archaeologically and in contemporary life we think of cities as places full of buildings, we might equally think of cities as places that are full of open spaces defined by the places where buildings are not. Spaces themselves become part of the religious activity, particularly when religious practices and secular activities become blended or when religious activities begin to inform secular practices, whether temporarily or permanently (e.g. della Dora 2018).

Religious institutions' physical premises and community engagement become particularly noticeable at times of conflict, especially when the religious institution is symbolic of an entire (usually minority) community that is adversely affected by political will, warfare or perceptions of cultural clash. At those moments, congregants may struggle to make their religious monuments 'seen' as a demonstration of legitimacy and presence, while non-adherents struggle to continue the practice of 'un-seeing.' The opposite is also true: sometimes at times of conflict adherents seek to make their practices and beliefs *less* visible (e.g. Billings 2011; Reinkowski 2007). The visibility of religious buildings as a source of conflict is not new, as discussed by Billings (2011) for early Christian urban communities and Lerner (2011) for the development of Jewish synagogues in Europe in the 19th century. This desire to be hidden may be expressed situationally or even permanently; as Mitra and Sadhukhan (2020) show, it is surprisingly easy for entire religious buildings to be concealed and camouflaged. In modern times, physical structures such as churches, mosques and synagogues have become the targets of aggressive acts and community grievance. Non-violent actions of change also happen as religious structures and places become repurposed for new faiths or for new secular practices (della Dora 2018).

The physicality of buildings as purposeful religious places is accentuated and re-envisioned when associated with additional sensory perceptions beyond the visual. The effects of sound can emanate from specific religious structures, such as bell towers or minarets, but sound also can be used to occupy adjacent streets and plazas in a 'nonspatial way of appropriating space' (Streicker 1997: 116). Aromas emanate from specific substances such as food, smoke or incense. Streets are places for processions as the urban equivalent of rural pilgrimage, in which people gather for movement but also gather to watch movement. Such processions can prompt the recognition of others' religious existence and inform non-adherents about religious practices, beliefs and iconography in a way that requires no investment on the part of the observer other than keeping their eyes focused on the procession. The 'contingent' actions of representatives of religious institutions in public spaces (cf. Cicourel 2004: 43) result in a temporary marker of religious expression that is nonetheless contained in a landscape anchored by the presence of religious buildings. Contingency can also occur when buildings are too small for their

congregations (e.g. Downey 2017 on the temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra) or when there are multiple levels of initiates, not all of whom are sanctioned to enter inside a ritual structure (see, e.g. Moreno García 2019 on temples in ancient Egypt; Baker 2011 on the built environment of Babylonia).

Finally, the appearance, visibility and 'legibility' (*sensu* Janks 2010) of religious traditions becomes accentuated when practitioners of a religious tradition become deliberately engaged with the practices of others. This can occur as minority groups band together in the form of political support for other minority groups in the face of political changes, as Little (1976) discusses for the coalitions of Christians and Jews in early medieval Cairo. Deliberate engagement and mutual support also can occur as the result of the resonance of place itself, where a landscape or settlement becomes a locus of intensive theological investment and sacrality through the presence of multiple religious traditions (as is the case with Jerusalem's role for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, see Limor 2007; or Glastonbury's role for multiple Christian groups as well as Islam, Goddess worship and nature-based spirituality, see Bowman 2008).

What happens when cities are in the process of accepting new religious traditions, or when new religious traditions emerge that have an impact on both private buildings and public spaces? Cities have distinct opportunities for the development and promulgation of new religious traditions (e.g. Billings 2011 and Mordechai and Pickett 2018 for early Christian churches; Walmsley and Damgaard 2005 for the growth of Islam; Garbin 2013 for contemporary Christian practices; Mitra and Sadhukhan 2020 for the historical shifts of Hindu temples). Cities also can be highly effective locales for political leaders to endorse particular religious practices in the present (e.g. Burchart and del Mar Griera 2020 for early 20th-century Barcelona) and in the past (e.g. Joyce 1997 for ritual and political power at Monte Albán in the Mexican Valley of Oaxaca in the first millennium BCE). We can examine the dynamic process of development in South Asian cities of the first millennium BCE, where the default of 'un-seeing' was continually broken by the development of new forms of religious tradition signalled by the construction of buildings but also in the use of public spaces for performances of alternative religious traditions.

Geographical and temporal reach

South Asia in the Early Historic Period

In the first millennium BCE, people in the Indian subcontinent brought into existence numerous social transformations simultaneously: they developed and inhabited cities along major river systems such as the Ganges, the Mahanadi and the Krishna-Godavari, and elsewhere throughout the subcontinent; they engaged in the development of new and syncretic religious practices; and they developed a written script for which the most prominent initial uses consisted of inscriptions focused on religious donations and political philosophy. The religious and ritual component of change was particularly dynamic: by the mid-first millennium BCE, there were multiple religious traditions in the Indian subcontinent, each of which was vying for followers and each of which was sponsoring new landscapes of built environments. There was the Vedic tradition of priest-led and hierarchical traditions of sacrifice encompassed in ancient Sanskrit texts; Buddhism, Jainism, and Ajivikism, each of which espoused self-actualised pathways to spiritual achievement, often expressed in vernacular languages; the beginnings of the identification of individual deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Krishna (Klostermeier 2007; Malinar 2007); and many spirit religions and local traditions (Bronkhorst 2000; DeCaroli 2004; Jacobsen 2020; Singh 2008). The practitioners of all of these religious traditions were in active dialogue with each other and would have been very aware of the physical spaces in which rituals were performed both in cities and in the surrounding countryside. At the same time, few individuals would have been practicing adherents of more than one religious tradition at a time, given mutually-exclusive philosophies of being and distinctly different practices of worship. The ability to 'see' or 'unsee' new, emergent, and potentially conflicting religious traditions was an essential aspect of religious activities anywhere in the landscape, but especially in the crowded conditions of urban spaces.

Traditions of Ritual Practice in South Asia

The religious traditions of the subcontinent can be described as accretionary, with each new development augmenting, subsuming and/or rejecting prior traditions. The configurations of rock art in the subcontinent starting in the late Stone Age suggests the transmission of esoteric knowledge from one generation to the next, perhaps as early as 25,000 years ago and continuing through the medium of petroglyphs and pictographs thereafter (Neumayer 2013: 47–49). By the Bronze Age Indus period (2600–1900 BCE), there are suggestions of formal group and individual practices of devotion indicated in the presence of terracotta figurines, the configurations of formal human burials and the iconography of stone hand-held seals and pottery decorations (Possehl 2002; Wright 2010).

Within a few centuries after the waning of the urban-focused Indus culture and the return to small-scale village life and pastoralism, there emerged what is known as the Vedic tradition which focused on a pantheon of gods, priest-led rituals of animal sacrifice, fire ceremonies and offerings of sacred beverages and other items (Lopez 2020; Roy 1995). The literature and liturgy associated with the Vedic period were not initially written down, but continuous oral transmission in Sanskrit resulted in the preservation of sacred hymns such as the *Rig Veda*, *Atharva Veda* and the *Yajur Veda* along with others for many centuries until they were eventually transcribed into physical form. There are no structures that can be clearly associated with Vedic traditions from this early era, but there are excavated hearths that have been described in the archaeological literature as 'fire altars' both before and during the Vedic period that suggest an interpretation of ritual activity associated with fire (e.g. Thapar 1975: 24).

The practice of Vedic traditions in urban areas in the first millennium BCE could easily have taken place in both structures and in open areas, in which chanting, the cries of animals and the aroma of smoke would have been perceptible to others in the vicinity. Nonetheless, the Vedic tradition had encoded within it some elements of practice that were meant to be exclusive and even hidden: not all individuals could chant hymns or perform sacrifices; some rituals such as Mahavrata and Pravargya could neither be performed nor even studied in inhabited areas; and some rituals were meant to be performed in the home (Lopez 2020).

By the mid-first millennium BCE, charismatic religious leaders responded to the long-standing Vedic tradition with the creation of new practices that emphasised the individual person's path to salvation without the intervention of priests or the performance of sacrifices. The best-known of these configurations were Buddhism and Jainism, but there were other, lesser-known renunciant practices such as Ajivikism. Buddhism's roots date to the life of the historical Buddha of the late 6th century BCE, who espoused and demonstrated self-actualising ritual practices of meditation. The Buddha travelled extensively in his lifetime among cities in the regions of what is today India and Nepal, including the urban centres of Kapilavastu, Rajgir and Vaishali. In those cities, specific architecture was developed for his use, such as the Santhagara or assembly hall of Kapilavastu that according to textual sources was a 'large and solid structure with stone pavements… furnished with pillars, and was erected for the reception and preaching of the Buddha' (Mukherji 1901: 13).

Political support for Buddhism included the 3rd-century BCE ruler Ashoka's recognition of the political value of non-violence and the pursuit of righteous principles, described in a series of inscriptions that are widely distributed throughout the subcontinent. Some of these declarations would have been very visible to urban dwellers, such as the inscription on the monolithic pillar at the ancient city of Kaushambi or the rock-cut inscription located in what is now New Delhi (Smith et al. 2016). Social support for Buddhism included the development of pilgrimage locales and monasteries that also served as stopping-points for merchants starting in the 2nd century BCE (Ray 1986; Rees 2021). The rural and urban traditions of Buddhism thus blended together in the landscape through the liturgical and sculptural narratives that showed the historical Buddha moving back and forth from the city to the forest and back again throughout his life as an expression of 'blurring the boundaries between urban centres and the wilderness' (Basu 2021: 145; Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Buddha taming the elephant Nalagiri within a town, sculpture from the site of Amaravati, 2nd century CE (https://www.akg-images.co.uk/archive/-2UMDHUQPYTQR.html, reprinted with permission).

Jainism is a somewhat more ascetic tradition than Buddhism that also relies on meditation and individualised ritual practice, with a founding linked to the historical individual Mahavira of the 6th century BCE (Singh 2008: 312). Jainism was perpetuated as an oral tradition for many generations prior to the advent of written documents, but the epigraphical record of southern India in the form of cave-inscriptions contains Jain dedications as early as the 3rd century BCE (Rajan 2008: 49). The Ajivikas, about whom much less is known, were another ascetic religious tradition (Bronkhorst 2000). While they had localities of interaction (what Singh 2008: 302 characterises as 'sabhas'), Ajivika practitioners left few distinct architectural monuments with the best-known example being the Barabar caves in north-central India. Their beliefs and practices are primarily captured within other religious traditions' (generally negative) reporting on their activities, such as the iconography in which Ajivikas' extremes of bodily denial are contrasted with the more practical engagements with the world promulgated through Buddhism (Brancaccio 1991).

The dynamic development and adoption of new community and renunciant traditions was accompanied by reconfigurations of the oldest ritual practices. The Vedic tradition was transformed by becoming increasingly tied to the veneration of specific deities and a personal relationship to the divine in a progression towards what we would identify today as 'Hinduism,' although the theology of image worship remained doctrinally complex (Geslani 2020; it should be cautioned that the word 'Hinduism' itself makes 'an abstract and generic entity out the many diverse and specific traditions' evident in the subcontinent, see Klostermaier 2007: 17). In particular, the text of the *Bhagavadhgita* which was composed by around

the 2nd or 1st centuries BCE promoted a newly emergent 'cosmological monotheism' focused on Krishna as a supreme god whose singularity was nonetheless completely compatible with a diverse pantheon of other deities (see Malinar 2007: 7, following Assmann 1993). Engagement with Krishna was intensely personal, and included an array of potential actions ranging from yoga to offerings of flowers, fruit or water in the course of engaging in *bhakti*, or personal devotion (Malinar 2007: 155).

Each of the most distinctive religious traditions of the 1st millennium BCE (Vedic practices, Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikism, and personal-god *bhakti* practices) would have had some recognition or placement in the cities of the time as well as in the surrounding rural areas. A multiplicity of rural religious sites were part of the lived experiences of urban dwellers who had access to an abundance of religious locales within easy reach of the city (Sahu 1984; Varma 2021), a pattern that continued well into the 1st millennium CE and beyond (e.g. Sinha 2021; Verma 2004; Verma Mishra 2009). Pilgrimage (by urban dwellers to rural shrines) and visits (by rural ascetics to cities for sustenance) would have been a two-way mode of communication that blended the urban with the rural. In some cases, cities themselves became the focal point of religious activity, starting with their initial settlement as 'temple towns' and places of pilgrimage (Sugandhi and Morrison 2012).

Movements between rural and urban places would have connected people not only to the objects of their belief systems but also to the historical trajectories of religious development that were continually incorporated into the lived ritual experience. As Jacobsen (2020: 113) notes, 'It seems therefore reasonable to assume that the later Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain pilgrimage traditions were influenced by traditions associated with pre-Buddhist, non-Vedic religious rituals connected to yakṣas (and perhaps other divine beings), who were identified with specific sites or territories which they owned and guarded.' Even without syncretism or the sharing of spaces, there was influence in the materialisation of religious practice; for example, the depiction of the Buddha and Mahavir in human form by the 1st century BCE was nearly concurrent with the creation of icons of what are characterised as 'Hindu' traditions as the inheritors of Vedic practices (DeCaroli 2004; Geslani 2020: 102). The adherents of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions of worship began to make three-dimensional images of religious founders and deities in human form at almost exactly the same time in the northern portion of India at and around the ancient city of Mathura, an observation that John Cort (2010: 18) urges us to see not as a phenomenon of mere copying and emulation, but a process of 'the growth of the use of images as a religious, cultural, and artistic phenomenon that affected all three traditions at more or less the same time.'

The rendering of religious traditions in material form would have been replicated at the level of ordinary daily life in cities as well as in the countryside, in which the physical manifestations of religious practice indicated distinctive sensory fields of reference. Buddhist and Jain traditions differed significantly in their treatment of their historical founder with mortal remains of Buddha enshrined in stupas in contrast to the non-relic practices of Jainism (Bronkhorst 2010: 5–6). There were also different languages used, including the eventual adoption of Sanskrit by Buddhists in the northern portion of the subcontinent (Bronkhorst 2010), a factor that would have lent a textual, and perhaps aural, differentiation that could be heard in urban public places. Concepts of fragrance permeated religious texts, encoded in devotional acts such as the preparation for the Buddha through the act of sweeping and the placement of flowers and incense (Strong 1977; see also McHugh 2012). Vedic practices were increasingly augmented not only by the creation of formal temple spaces but also by people performing rituals at home that included the use of fire and the presentation of food and water to deities as daily devotional acts of puja (Geslani 2020). And everything about architecture and emplacement could be tailored to suit local climate and the availability of raw materials in ways that also created distinct visual opportunities; Mitra and Sadhukhan (2020: 407) note, for example, that 'In Bengal, due to unavailability of stones, the temples were made of terracotta tiles, more in human scale and more like a residential setup.'

At the time of their emergence as well as throughout their mutual encounters, the subcontinent's distinctive religious traditions were juxtaposed in collaborative as well as contrasting ways (Verma Mishra 2009). Each group was dynamic and evolving, with a sense of competition, or at least differentiation, within its own realm. Vedic hymns were widely circulated among different groups, each of which was 'characterized by the peculiarities and particularities of their dialect of Vedic Sanskrit, recitational styles, ritual techniques, and sacrificial performances' (Lopez 2020: 18). The dynamic nature of Buddhism as a new religious practice led to the need for the periodic reaffirmation of what the historical Buddha said and believed, in the form of Buddhist Councils held in the city of Rajagriha (Rajgir) at the time of his physical demise; in the city of Vaishali about a century afterwards; and in the city of Pataliputra (Patna) in the mid-3rd century BCE (Pokhrel 2019). Buddhism also experienced numerous schisms of theology, as evidenced in attempts of the Buddhist Councils to resolve doctrinal differences (Reat 1994).

H. Boddu (2020: 164) suggests that there was competition between Jains and the Vedic tradition in the southern subcontinent, a competition that also is seen in the northern cities from the very beginning of new religious practices. For example, the 5th-century BCE ruler Bimbisara, one of the kings of the Magadha region of the northern subcontinent, is claimed by Jain texts to have been a follower of Mahavir but by Buddhist texts as a devotee of Buddha (Singh 2008: 270). Subsequent rulers of Magadha were similarly associated with different ritual practices from generation to generation: the ruler Candragupta of the late 4th century BCE was an adherent of Jainism; his son Bindusara a follower of Ajivikism; and

Bindusara's son Ashoka a patron of Buddhism (Reat 1994: 63). Centuries later, this pattern of religious pluralism continued among ruling families; the 1st century CE Kushana rulers were 'connected with the production of images of Vasudeva-Krisna, but also they associated themselves with other gods, mainly Siva, as well as with Buddhism and Jainism' (Malinar 2007: 266). In the competition for adherents, proponents of any one ritual tradition reacted against but also sometimes incorporated ideas and practices from another, such as incorporation of the Vedic concepts of hierarchy and duty and Buddhist concepts of nirvana and self-control in the conversation between god and hero in the *Bhagavadgita* (a theological dialogue that takes place within the battle story of the *Mahabharata* epic, Malinar 2007: 78; see also Bronkhorst 2020).

People shared physical as well as ideological spaces, enabling them to witness others' activities. A few sites of the early centuries BCE/CE in the Indian subcontinent have been excavated at a spatial intensity that allows for the understanding of the relationship of religious and secular buildings. One important example is the site of Taxila, which has a long street excavated in the Sirkap portion of the site that shows an apsidal temple fronting a main thoroughfare and surrounded by smaller passageways and a dense zone of residential structures; in another block, surrounded by densely packed structures, is a feature described as a 'stupa-court' (Marshall 1960: 79 and fig. 2). A re-study of Marshall's excavations at Taxila by Coningham and Edwards (1999) counts a total of nine religious structures. Considering that Marshall's excavations exposed about ten percent of the entirety of the Sirkap walled subdivision, one might project a density of several dozen religious structures within the city itself, in addition to the numerous Buddhist monasteries in the surrounding vicinity. Excavations at Bhita in the Ganges Valley (Marshall 1911–12) also exposed multiple residential areas including houses with intervening spaces, streets and passageways that convey the possibility of open-air sights, sounds and aromas. At Sisupalgarh in eastern India, excavations showed a distinctive, probably ritual, deposit of a complete deer antler, several upturned bowls, a metal finger-ring and a glass bead in an area between houses (Mohanty and Smith 2008: 23). This feature embedded in the open area between structures represents the outcome of what must have been a relatively private and localised event compared to activities in the large monumental pillar zone in the central portion of the ancient city.

Religious activities also were part of the greater landscape of urban settlements and would have been seen by pilgrims and passers-by whether they went to them deliberately or bypassed them on their way to agricultural fields. At Taxila, the valley surrounding the three distinct urban subdivisions of the Bhir Mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh also had numerous Buddhist stupas and monasteries (Marshall 1960). At Mathura, which was a settlement otherwise known as an important centre for Buddhist art and Hindu art, excavations revealed dozens of Jain statues and a Jain stupa on the outskirts of the ancient city (Smith 1901: 3). Sisupalgarh in eastern India had an extensive carved network of Jain caves at the site of Khandagiri/Udayagiri 8 km away, a series of Buddhist caves at Dhauli 4 km away, and a Buddhist hilltop site at Aragarh 18 km away. These places would have been recognised as religious landmarks by residents of nearby cities, even if they did not personally visit all of them. The affirmation of multiple simultaneous ritual traditions is echoed in political endorsement of a religiously variegated landscape, as seen in the Hathigumpha inscription of the 1st-century BCE ruler Kharavela at Udayagiri who described himself as 'the worshipper of all religious orders, the repairer of all shrines of gods' (Sahu 1984: 346).

The physical remains of religious practices that we find archaeologically would have been augmented by many practices that left little discernible trace. Vedic practices can be especially difficult to recognise in the archaeological record, with a minimalism that Vinayak Bharne and Krupali Krusche (2012: 19) identify as 'not needing more than a modest space to perceive and create a place of sacredness.' Vedic religious practices involved ceremonies such as sacrifice and sacrificial fires, traces of which can be difficult to distinguish from routine acts of food preparation and household heating. Much of the architecture associated with the initial phases of other ritual traditions was made of perishable materials; even the holiest sites of Buddhist practice, including the very birthplace of the Buddha himself, appear to have started with wooden architecture that was eventually rebuilt in more durable materials such as brick (Coningham et al. 2013). Some of the first physical evidence of freestanding architecture related to Hinduism comes in the form of an architectural fragment showing the worship of a Shiva-linga from the site of Bhuteshwar dated to the 2nd century BCE (Bharne and Krusche 2012: 19), at around the same time that people also were beginning to construct Buddhist and Jain ritual architecture in stone and brick.

People managed the sensory input of overlapping or competing traditions not only doctrinally through the textual amalgamation of traditions, but also in physical form. The site of Sanghol, for example, had a significant Buddhist presence but also had in its religious complex a series of large pits (up to 3.3 m in length) full of charred material. The proximity of these pits to the other religious architecture, and the presence of a wide variety of combustible material including food grains, nuts, and fruit pips, led Saraswat and Pokharia (1997–98: 150, 175) to suggest that 'fire-sacrifice would have been ritualized at this complex' and that juxtaposition of Vedic fire-burning practices with Buddhist practices was a deliberate matter of unity and syncretism. They also note that the textual traditions of fire-sacrifices signal that such sacrifices are meant to be done during the daytime, a factor that might interestingly render them less visible than if they were to have been performed at night. Studies of the differential role of night and day (cf. Gonlin and Nowell 2018) can be added to the study of spatial configurations from architecture, topology and vegetation to understand the many points of visibility that would render religious traditions more or less 'seen' by both participants and unengaged passers-by. The regular contact among religious entities resulted in a (still ongoing) circumstance in which there 'can be no simple formula for making

intelligible the pattern/patterns of interrelationship between different faiths, religious practices and institutions and groups of practitioners in a situation of incomparably complex juxtaposition' (Chattopadhyay 2015: 13). Whenever people did wish to perceive and incorporate something different into their ritual practices (emotionally, theologically, politically), it was a simple matter of switching from 'un-seeing' to 'seeing.'

Current research and related phenomena

The study of religious pluralism, religious encounters and religious engagement in ancient cities provides compelling evidence that our own cities' multiple religious locales are not the result of an awkward modernist sensibility, but part of the urban tradition. Cities – wherever they are located in time and space – have a long and complex history of religious activities that appear to increase, rather than decrease, as populations agglomerate in urban spaces. Religion is a way for individuals to find community and meaning in crowded, often economically challenging urban circumstances; religious expression is a way for those communities to be seen and heard as a strategic path of legitimisation of minority as well as majority communities; and subtle religious investment is a mode of individual and community empowerment. The existence of multiple nascent religious traditions results in what we can call 'braided theologies' of mutual influence.

Today, religious traditions make and are made by urban spaces that are increasingly globalised and transnational. Jens Reinke (2021), in an insightful assessment of the growth of modern *renjian* Buddhism, has evaluated the way that a distinctive religious tradition developed and philosophised by the 20th-century Hsing Yun has become locally implanted in China, Taiwan, the United States and South Africa. Reinke notes that the specific activities, social services and even the level of 'strictness' varies from place to place because of the social factors and competing religious traditions of each locale. Similar alterations to ritually informed lifestyles have been ascertained in the Jewish Diaspora (e.g. Ezrachi 2012); among displaced practitioners of Vodou (Brown 1999), and indeed in modern local and global expressions of the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent (e.g. Waghorne 1999; Vanaik 2020).

Conclusion and outlooks

We may propose that un-seeing is actually comparatively easy, because individuals living in cities are constantly conserving their mental resources by looking only in the direction of buildings and activities that are relevant to them. Even if they are confronted with a structure, person or performance of religious activity that is not to their liking or not relevant to their interest, they merely need to re-direct their gaze away from the spectacle. Everyday religious life in cities is a matter of both seeing one's own religious groups and venues, and 'un-seeing' others in order to manage the cacophony of sounds and the plurality of sights within an urban space. Other senses surely contributed to the creation, maintenance and dominance of urban space. 'Un-hearing' church bells, calls to prayer, and loud liturgical music becomes challenging to a religious institution's stationary neighbours (a factor that is recorded centuries ago, and not just in modern ordinances; see Little 1976: 566–567). It is difficult for people to avoid hearing a religious procession that passes by even if it is a temporary occurrence with a palimpsest of quickly-disappearing sound (e.g. Bowman 2008; Burchart and del Mar Griera 2020). In ancient times, these liturgical designates of space and time would have been augmented by other sounds: the murmurs or wails of devotees, the surge of foot traffic at times of worship, the bleating of animals for sacrifice, the noises made by a single individual worshipping alone. Aromas are similarly difficult to ignore: 'un-smelling' the olfactory claims of space made through cooking food or burning incense is nearly impossible.

Yet even the most extreme moments of sound and aroma were likely to have been temporary distractions for urban dwellers who were not otherwise connected to the religious activities that generated those ephemeral traces. Like their modern counterparts, ancient city dwellers would likely have tuned out the sights, sounds and smells of religious practices that were not their own. This is indeed part of the life of the city as a whole; all day long in the cacophony of sensory overload, urban residents learn to 'un-see' many secular as well as religious activities: they overlook petty crime such as vandalism, panhandling and vagrancy; they learn to ignore store fronts selling items that they do not need; and they sidestep broken infrastructure as easily as they negotiate crowds of people. Seeing and 'un-seeing' the religious practices of others was a component of the filtering processes that were part of everyday life at all socioeconomic levels in ancient cities, just as they are in modern ones.

Expressions of religious activities within cities, both past and present, are undertaken by wealthy and poor people, by people of all ages and genders, and by newcomers as well as by long-time residents. Moreover, new synergies are created through the growth patterns of religion (as an intensely internalised, individual adherence) and urbanism (as a physical place that enables the connectivity of strangers along multiple economic, social, and political parameters). Urbanisation contributes to religion, and religion contributes to urbanism, resulting in ways of life and religious practices that are distinctly different from rural expressions of faith (Urciuoli 2020). But given individuals' strong adherence to their own

religious traditions, 'un-seeing' others' religions could be a comparatively easy first step in developing capacities for un-seeing, un-hearing and un-experiencing that enable individuals to make peace with the many other diverse phenomena of the city.

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