

Sub-Theme Descriptions

I. City and Infrastructure

The neoliberal time is witness to rapid urbanisation through mega-projects, re-structuring of city space, and expansion. Southern cities are undergoing a different process of city making, marked by an avalanche of mega infrastructural projects – metros, flyovers, roads, rebuilt localities, all modelled on the concept of global cities, and at times funded by international financial corporations. City today is driven by accumulation and circulation of massive capital inflows often through private-public partnerships towards the goal of turning the city into a logistical hub – the peripheries and suburbs characterised by terminals, warehouses, and IT infrastructure. Such logistical urban nodes change the contours of urban geography, along with it change the nature of migration and the information and social chains for inter-state and inter-country communication. The logistical reorientation of cities and the frenzied redevelopment of old city spaces constantly displace the marginalised population groups and communities of the urban poor.

Unlike the northern cities, Southern cities are full of contradictions, where informalities in different forms – slums, markets, bazaars, squatters, protests, and resistances to structured planning - lead to a different kind of what Lefebvre would call, 'production of space.' City spaces are thus heterogenous. Localities differ from each other depending on variables such as planning, urban governance, and the dynamics of space production by different stakeholders that do not resemble each other.

This sub-theme aims to focus on the material politics of changing city-scape – built environment, huge capital driven mega-projects, displacement of people, regimentation of urban public, and more.

II. Labour and Economy

With changing lived and built environment, infrastructure, material, and financial flows of the city also changing, there are consequent changes in the forms, politics, and organisation of labour. From colonial and industrial cities to post-colonial and service-oriented cities there is a transformative change in how goods and services are produced, marketized and circulated. Urban labour is increasingly precarious, unorganised, informal and platform driven. Along with increase in hotel, food, retail chains, construction industry, domestic, and care work that employ huge population of city dwellers, it is largely the gig or platform economy that is driving the city economy today.

This subtheme tries to understand changing forms of labour in the past few years with changing city-scape, modes of production, distribution, and the launch of the digital economy. With the Covid-19 pandemic one has become acutely aware of the rapidly transforming nature of urban labour. Migrant workers from towns, villages, and at times countries (like cities of the Middle East) form a large chunk of the urban workforce. Here,

it becomes necessary to ask: How is urban economy changing and what are the changing forms of labour in the Southern cities today? Who are the urban workers? What are their class-caste-religious-ethnic compositions? How is gender-based work reproduced in the new forms of urban precarity? Who does the urban care work consist of? In the context of the colonial past of much of the world's labouring population as well as the traditional western industrial context, this sub-theme will try to address some of these questions in the rapidly changing worlds of labour and labour organisation in the cities of our time.

III. Climate Change and Urban Ecological Crisis

Climate change, though a hot topic of deliberation today in international institutions, global fora, conferences, the relationship between urbanisation and climate crisis remains a vexed one. Southern cities are more prone to climate disasters and less capacity and resources for climate-change induced hazard mitigation. This sub-theme tries to bring in questions of how climate change is created by aggressive urbanisation, the consumptive and waste producing character of cities, especially through retail, food, logistical hubs, mega projects, redevelopment of older neighbourhoods, etc. Such planned urbanisation through real-estate/ private and public nexus have destroyed water bodies, lakes, rivers, forests, and agricultural land, and are creating vulnerabilities for local people as well as urban population. Such making of cities today stands at the cusp of creating more and more poverty, homelessness, joblessness, vulnerabilities for the rural and urban working class. Untimely rains, floods, rising sea-level, heatwaves, droughts, and cyclones, are becoming common and pose unbearable challenges in many parts of the world, pushing us to think more about the politico-ecological crisis facing us now. The very urban form with its built-in characteristics has always impacted ecology, and is doing more so today than ever.

Urban ecology is shaped further by infectious diseases in as much as by climate change. "Contagion" is the spectre the city suffers from. The city is restructured spatially to prevent spread of disease. Covid-19 experiences add only to the long list of diseases ravaging the city. Public health authorities are set up. New public health measures are taken. Human mobility is severely controlled. Science and statistics are marshalled to control the disease. Spread of a disease occasions the emergence of care workers on a large scale. Considerations of public health restructure the city again and again. Disease control becomes a strong factor in city making/unmaking.

This sub-theme will engage with the question of climate change and public health in the wider framework of urban ecology.

IV. Urban Divides

If disease divides the city, slums, informal settlements, shanty towns, and squatter settlements often called, 'jhupris' also have been the symbols of urban divides that characterise Southern cities. Urban divides have continued since the colonial city making time. The phenomenon of planned city has appeared in the postcolonial age. Yet the planned city is accompanied by "unplanned", seemingly anarchic settlements whose

residents negotiate with the governance system for basic rights, such as of water, electricity, sanitation, and other civic services. Yet, while such informal, unplanned settlements are very common to the urban phenomenon in most parts of the world, urban developmental policies try to regiment and sanitise city spaces by destroying the basic 'right to the city.' Massive investment in real-estate leads to sky-scrapers, parks, green and planned neighbourhoods, gentrified and inaccessible to common public, especially the urban poor. Exorbitant cost of land coupled with strict security and surveillance of such spaces make parts of the city inaccessible to the poor and marginalised communities. On the other hand, large-scale infrastructural and real-estate projects evict slum and squatter settlements.

The spatial divide is compounded by class divides, gender divides, communal, caste, and race divides. These divides are reflected in policing methods, and together make a city not an integrated democratic republican entity, but a complex of units of various kinds, islands, and claim making forces at war with each other. The new forms of work only reinforce the social war the city represents.

This sub-theme tries understand how urban divide multiplies with massive urbanisation. The metropolis and small towns under their distinct political regimes and governance suggest a contentious urban future.

V. Conflicts and Urban Protests for Justice

Given the contentious nature of the form of the city and the wide scale of urban divides, it is not surprising that the city historically has been witness to movements and protests on various issues and of different forms. Each city is witness to and shaped by civil unrests and political uprisings at different historical junctures. The public sphere as of thought, is urban. But rarely we recognise that public sphere is a contested terrain claimed by different groups with their marches, occupation, rallies, night vigils, disobedience movements, demonstrations, rebellions, uprisings, mutinies, and aborted or successful revolutions. The historiography of cities is archived through many political uprisings; that is why the urban bears a timeline of politics, movements, changes of governments, and regimes. It is a palimpsest of historically determined forms of claim makings by different marginalised communities and groups, who form the backbone of the city, as labourers, workers, city makers.

This sub-theme tries to raise issues of how the popular movements for right to the city and urban justice are curbed regularly in the name of law and order and city running. Drawing from examples in Southern cities, it reflects on threats to urban commons and democratic city spaces. The 21st century city making is not only disrupting and annihilating old city spaces and settlements of the urban poor. It idealises and aspires for a planned design of the urban that is automatically disrupting lives and settlements of the marginalised and is rapidly annihilating the possibility of organising, movement building, coming together of urban population as citizens. This situation calls for an inquiry as to the changing nature of urban unrest and protests. It also calls for an examination of the imprint of class, gender, and other social phenomena on the nature of urban protests. With

divisions in suffering, and the emergence of biopolitics from below, the city becomes a site of war over the stake that life has in the meaning of the place itself. Time becomes conflictive.

Yet as this sub-theme suggests, city is re-made through these struggles and contentions. Who can deny that the means to life that people of the city have ensured for themselves are a result of these struggles. Would we have the institutions of public health, education, public provisions of food, etc., without these contentions, unrests, and persistent mobilisations? Would an enlightened administration be enough for city-making? All these force us to think of the question of urban justice.

VI. Images and Imaginations of the City in Transition

Cities are made of stories. From stories of progress to those of decay, doom, and dystopia, stories that cities tell of themselves, and stories that are told of them, shape our understanding of cities in everyday life. Dominant narrative tropes and conventions create cities in the social world, replicating and proliferating with time and with iterations. At the same time, important literary and cinematic genres/conventions display decidedly urban origin, at times materially shaping the urban space.

Starting from the panoramic realism of Balzac and the flowers of evil of Baudelaire, novels of Kolkata, Mumbai, or Dhaka in revolt, and the portrayals of the city by famous film-makers and playwrights like Charlie Chaplin, Satyajit Ray, Utpal Dutt, and others, contemporary considerations of the urban owe much to the literary, dramatic, and the cinematic images. Add to these today, the posters, graffiti, and the like, and we get at times the traces of an imagined future where the evil will be banished, and the just will prevail. Some argue that literary and cinematic modernism and the rise of the modern metropolis go hand in hand. For others, growth and development of entertainment districts and infrastructure (think of theatre-houses, cinema/picture houses) are key contributors to the architecture, logistics, and the public culture of urban imagination. Such practices and apparatuses are also crucial in reinforcing as well as breaking the barriers and stereotypes of gender, religion, class, and race, enabling and at times, restricting, the crossing of boundaries and the creation of new public.

This concluding sub-theme will engage with the fascinating dialectic of imaging and imagining the city. The process not only records the city in transition, it facilitates also the transition of the city.