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Space, Gender, and Social Cohesion

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SYNOPSIS

Space can be exclusive or inclusive. It can embrace difference and alternative histories – those of subaltern groups, women, men, and minority religious groups – or it can exclude these.

COMMENTARY

Earlier this year, a spontaneous protest movement grew in Sri Lanka, in the context of the economic crisis there. In Colombo, the protesters gathered at Galle Face Green, an open area bordering the sea. One of their posters proclaimed:

"First, they made us fear the Tamils. Next, they made us hate the Muslims. Then they killed the Catholics. Today we are here as one to chase [away] the racists."

The protesters, men and women, often young, came from all the religious and ethnic groups in Sri Lanka to embody this message non-violently. They were signaling that the ethnic and religious sectarianism of the past, which had divided the different communities of Sri Lanka, had to be transcended if the country were to become a cohesive society.

Galle Face Green, under British rule, was mainly the preserve of the British. It was used variously as a racecourse and an esplanade for leisurely walks or rides. Sri Lankans were largely excluded from these sport and leisure pursuits.

After independence, in 1948, Galle Face Green became a locus of political protest. In 1957, one of the first acts of violence against the Tamil minority occurred when members of the Tamil Federal Party protested peacefully there against the Official

Language Act No. 33, which made Sinhala the official language of the country, linguistically crippling Tamil communities. Sinhala mobs violently broke up the protest before the police eventually stepped in. Galle Face Green was not a random space for such protests. It was chosen because of its visibility and its symbolic value.

When space is used to exclude others, there is often a “mythic imaginary” behind it, conditioned by religious texts or traditional narratives. In Sri Lanka, many within the Sinhala majority believe that the island is holy to the Buddha. Narratives within Sri Lanka’s historical chronicles reinforce this, surrounding the island with events connected with Buddhism. Religious and ethnic minorities have traditionally been welcome if they accepted the subordination that such an imaginary requires. Several decades of ethnic war resulted when some Tamils, particularly the young, refused to tolerate this.

In Israel, the building of Jewish settlements on the West Bank is partly driven by the conviction that Jews have a divine right to the land, because of narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Exclusion of those seen to be “other,” namely the Palestinians, has resulted. In such contexts, religious texts and traditional narratives are held by some to have more authority than international law.

Unraveling Sacred Spaces

Space is potent because it bears the weight of worldviews and imaginaries that define the identities of different ethnic and religious groups within pluralistic societies. After war or conflict, returning displaced communities often rebuild places of worship first, to reinforce their sense of identity as a religious community. This is more important than rebuilding homes.

In the West, as cities have become more ethnically and religiously plural, the negotiation of urban space to allow the expression of different identities has not been easy. Mosques, Chinese and Hindu temples, and Sikh places of worship have been seen by some as encroachments on the “Christian” nature of Western culture.

In Switzerland, in 2009, the building of new minarets was banned after a referendum on the issue, not because minarets in themselves were opposed but because of what they represented for many Swiss people, namely a religion that seemed to subordinate women and punish offences such as adultery in an unacceptable way.

Muslims would rightly not have accepted this representation. Nevertheless, patterns of spatial inclusion and exclusion are present not only between religious and ethnic groups but also within them, often as the result of specific prejudices.

In Durham Cathedral in the United Kingdom, there is a black line across the floor towards the back of the building. In the medieval period, women were kept behind the line, at the back of the building, forbidden from moving closer to visit the tomb of St. Cuthbert, although a chapel for their use was eventually allowed.

The same pattern can be seen in several other religions, often in violation of their founding tenets. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist women have pointed out that they are rarely allowed to carry the holy relics held within temples, when these relics are taken out in

religious ceremonies. In Hindu traditions, women have traditionally been seen as emotionally susceptible and impure when they are menstruating and have been debarred from entering the holiest parts of their temples.

Expressing Prejudices through Space

In most of these instances, patriarchal attitudes towards women have a spatial expression. Authority within religious, political and ethnic groups is also expressed in space, for instance when photo opportunities reveal a line of male leaders at important events. Space is gendered, conditioned by exclusion or subordination. Some religious and political groups have tried to change this.

In some Christian churches, women can gain ordination as priests and can become bishops. In some Mahayana Buddhist traditions, women continue to have access to higher ordination as *bhikśuṇīs* (Sanskrit: nuns). However, this is not true across the board.

In Theravada Buddhist countries (e.g., Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand), women cannot officially gain higher ordination, although some live as contemporary nuns and some have gained higher ordination through Mahayana nuns. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, women are debarred from becoming priests. This does not mean that influential women leaders have been absent; while sometimes subordinated, we must acknowledge differences and changes over time, that sometimes accord women more visible and substantive roles in their respective communities.

Spatial Narratives Shape Cohesive Societies

The narratives and imaginaries that inform our plural societies, therefore, have material, spatial dimensions that have considerable impact on whether a society is cohesive, and enables a coexistence that respects and celebrates difference. Where traditional narratives exclude or subordinate others on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender, these need to be supplanted or challenged by narratives that promote inclusion rather than exclusion.

Such narratives, their relevance and contemporary applications can be scrutinized through the lens of international law and technological advancement. For example, in an increasingly digitalised world with widespread use of smart phones, exclusion or inclusion no longer needs physical space. Yet, the significance of spatial exclusion as a contributing factor to conflict will not go away quickly.

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