



Guest Editor's Remarks: Rethinking Cities Across South Asia

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This special issue of the *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* is dedicated to the study of cities in South Asia. In 2024, I undertook a Research Initiative to study cities across South Asia. This issue presents ten papers from scholars who have undergone a series of activities conceptualizing South Asian cities under the Research Initiative. They have attended rigorous seminars that I had given them from December 2024 to April 2025. Additionally, they have all participated in the talk series titled "Dialogue on Cities" in May 2025.

Under the patronage of Prof. Amma Raj Joshi, I organized a talk series titled "Dialogue on Cities" as part of "Rethinking Cities Across South Asia-I" from May 5 to 17, 2025. Prof. Shruti Das delivered her talk on "Cuttack as an Emerging City in Odisha, India" on May 5, 2025. Similarly, Dr. Moiz Khan delivered the second talk in the series from Karachi on May 7, 2025. He liberally discussed "Karachi as an Islamic City in Pakistan." Dr. Khan outlined the historical contours of Karachi and its Islamization after 1947. Prof. Amma Raj Joshi had chaired the session. Prof. Joshi appreciated Dr. Khan's efforts to bring to the scholars from Kathmandu the development of Karachi from an eighteenth-century village into a cosmopolitan city in South Asia.

Mr. Sadat Zaman Khan from Premier University in Chattogram, Bangladesh, delivered the third lecture in the talk series under "Dialogues on Cities" on May 10, 2025. His paper was titled "Impact of Rohingya Influx on Local Population of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh." Prof. Arun Gupto chaired the session. Prof. Gupto appreciated Khan's efforts to critically engage the audience in thinking about the impact on the local population due to migration. Eminent Sri Lankan writer Daya Dissanayake joined the series as the fourth speaker to deliver his talk on "Colombo –A City by Accident." Prof. Abhi Subedi, who chaired the session, appreciated Dissanayake's presentation, stating that Dissanayake had effectively telescoped Sri Lankan history while capturing the essence of Colombo's formation as a city.

Prof. Sharif Atiquzzaman joined the series of talks from Khulna, Bangladesh, as the fifth speaker on May 14, 2025. He delivered his talk titled "Dhaka and Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust*: History and Present." Prof. Mohit Ul Alam, former Vice Chancellor of Jatiye Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Dhaka, chaired the session. Both the speaker and the chair gave their remarks on Dilruba Ahmed's poems and her emotional attachment to her



homeland. Prof. Mahboob Hussain gave the final lecture in the series on May 17, 2025. He currently serves as the Chair of the Department of History and Pakistan Studies at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. After his talk titled "Layers of Lahore: A Journey through Time and Cultures" was over, Prof. Shridhar Gautam, who chaired the session, elaborated on Prof. Hussain's argument and appreciated his efforts to introduce the scholars in Kathmandu with the history and culture of Lahore. Prof. Gautam concluded the talk series titled "Dialogue on Cities" on May 17, 2025.

The scholars actively participated in the talk series, listened to the ideas, critically engaged with the arguments presented, raised questions, and exchanged their perspectives with the speakers. I have selected ten papers to be published in this issue of the journal. Of ten papers, four are on Kathmandu from the 1920s to the 2010s. Chulendra Adhikari examines the impact of a cosmopolitan city on the youth from the Kathmandu Valley in Bal Krishna Sama's play *Mukunda Indira* (1937). This play embodies the spirit of Nepali society in the 1920s and 1930s – it is also the time of Nepal's intellectual and political awakening. While discussing the elements of the city and its impact on the formation of Mukunda's self, Adhikari has also significantly contributed to understanding Nepali modernity in the nascent state. The paper offers a critical examination of colonial modernity and the cosmopolitan ways of Kolkata in the 1930s.

Suman Pokharel's reading significantly raises the issues of consumer culture formation in Kathmandu from 1960 to 2000. He critically examines Samrat Upadhyay's 2010 novel *Buddha's Orphans*, which chronicles the formation of the middle class in the forty years of Nepal's historical landscape. The people who fall from the upper class and those who rise from the lower class meet in the space known as the middle class. Nilu and Raja meet in the class, which promotes the ideology of consumerism. Pokharel links the feature to the rise of cities in South Asia and provides a critical reading of the novel, drawing on theories from city studies. This reading of Kathmandu enriches the readers with a sense of the historical development of modern practices in the city.

Yubaraj Subedi analyzes Nayan Raj Pandey's Nepali novella *Ular* (1998), which explores the issues of feudalism and patron politics in the 1990s at the periphery of Kathmandu. Subedi builds on Pandey's premise that people suffer from the city, which pushes them further away from it. Subedi's critical lens is more focused on the persona's self and their encounter with the power centers in Kathmandu and Nepalgunj. The restoration of democracy fails to transform the power centers in favor of the people – Pandey presents this through his depiction of ruthless cities and confused people. Mani Prasad Dumre rereads Kathmandu and its fast growth in the first two decades of the twenty-first century through Dipendra K. Khanal's 2016 Nepali movie, *Pashupati Prasad*. This movie presents the confusion of youths about wealth, success, and happiness in the cities like Kathmandu. Dumre uses the lens of urbanism and metropolitan self to understand the protagonist's quest at the burning ghat of the Bagmati River.

Similarly, the remaining six papers deal with various other South Asian cities, from modern times to mythical times. For instance, Bhabika Dangol reads Arundhati Roy's 2017



novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, to explore the lives of people at the margins of the city. She sees the plight of people in New Delhi, Old Delhi, and Kashmir: the people struggle to establish themselves and fight through their daily activities. Dangol's reading fuses urban spatial theory with the novel to explore the torments that people must endure in city space. Similarly, Chet Bahadur Pokharel analyzes Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* to see the foundational ideology at the establishment of the city in ancient times. The power struggle is a key feature of the city that Pokharel presents through his analysis of Hastinapur, Indraprastha, and similar locations. The novel introduces the interaction among key actors, such as Draupadi, Krishna, Drupad, Arjun, and Yudhisthira, who contribute to the formation of ideology in the city. The state apparatus and the system of generating revenue differ distinctly from one city to another. Pokharel's reading suggests that modern cities also need to reassess their ideological foundation, which strategically positions them to assert their authority.

Sibu Dhakal's paper critically examines Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), which outlines the shifting contours of city life in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. This reading moves to the Western frontiers of South Asia and examines the lives of people during this period of change. Untangling through multiple layers of politics, history, and culture, Dhakal also analyzes sectarian violence in Kabul as the anti-modern forces that pushed the city into the conservative camp. Tej Narayan Adhikari focuses on the Indian town and the townspeople's dream of moving to the city in his readings of Anita Desai's short story "The Farewell Party" (1980) and Intizar Hussain's short story "Noise" (2014). Through the critical lens of urban studies, he examines the issues of social inequality, globalization, and the impact of technology on urban life. Chhabita Sharma's paper examines the themes of urban freedom and alienation in R. K. Narayan's 1958 novel, *The Guide*. Narayan's imaginary city, Malgudi, serves as the urban space in Sharma's analysis, which centers on the issues of self, psyche, and power dynamics. The capitalist forces disturb the tourist guide, who fails to assimilate himself into the mainstream flow of Malgudi and subsequently ends up seeking refuge in his own culture. Sharma analyzes the failure of modern cities that push people to alienation and suffering within. Mumaya Thapa critically approaches Romesh Gunasekera's 1998 novel *The Sandglass*, which chronicles the tales of two cities: London and Colombo. Thapa applies Simmel's idea of mental life in the metropolis to excavate the memories of the Sri Lankan city of Colombo from them. She sees the loss of spiritual intimacy in the city dwellers as they undergo alienation in the city.

This issue showcases the academic pursuits of the emerging scholars who attempt to interpret cities across South Asia. They have critically engaged with literary works depicting multifaceted aspects of Kathmandu, New Delhi, Old Delhi, Kashmir, Hastinapur, Indraprastha, Kabul, Mumbai and its vicinity, Malgudi, and Colombo. The issue does not have discussion on cities of Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Bhutan. As the editor of the issue, I accept this as the limitation of critical pursuit this time. I will certainly make my best efforts to include all major cities in this Research Initiative in one way or another.



I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Amma Raj Joshi, who has provided patronage to this Research Initiative. Prof. Arun Gupto has always inspired me to take up new projects and complete them. I am equally grateful to Prof. Abhi Subedi, Prof. Shridhar Gautam, and Prof. Mohit Ul Alam. I am grateful to Prof. Shruti Das, Mr. Sadat Zaman Khan, Dr. Moiz Khan, Mr. Daya Dissanayake, Prof. Sharif Atiquzzaman, and Prof. Mahboob Hussain for accepting my invitation to deliver their lectures in the talk series under "Dialogue on Cities" which was one of the key activities of "Rethinking Cities Across South Asia-I." I thank Dr. Shiva Rijal and Mr. Laxman KC for their unwavering support throughout these activities. I thank all the reviewers and desk editors for making it possible to bring this special issue on time. I congratulate all the participating scholars whose papers have been selected and published in this issue.