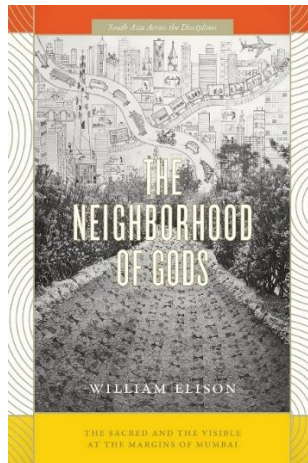


BOOK REVIEW

Sacred as Marker of Space in Mumbai

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Book Title:
The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and the Visible at the Margins of Mumbai (2018)

Author:
William Elison

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The Neighborhood of Gods is a comprehensive and compelling ethnographic study of Mumbai's marginalised communities and their urban spatial religious practices. Elison examines religion as traditional to India and in a capitalist society, its altered forms among the marginalised communities. The book's subtitle – *The Sacred and the Visible at the Margins of Mumbai* – fittingly explains the central arguments of the book. The author asserts that religious practices through divine imagery, are instruments for Mumbai's 'invisible' to gain legitimacy. The complex, postcolonial, socio-territorial conflicts are navigated by the use of religious icons as visual markers to claim urban rights and gain visibility in the legal scheme of things.

"This book is about a holy city." The Prologue opens with this intriguing statement on Mumbai that draws references from William Elison's body of research, heavily set within the context of South Asian Religious studies. As an urban ethnographer and a religious historian, his work is an enquiry on *Hinduism* and the vernacular religious landscape. Elison is an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California. This book is a part of the *South Asia across the Disciplines* series. In a student interview (Nume News, 2007), he recalled that his initial interests in the holy city of *Benaras* was fuelled by his Euro-Japanese and American multicultural religious exposure. His other co-authored book, *Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation* (Elison, W. et al, 2016) analyses the Indian film trope of secularism portrayed in the idealised post-independence cinema. This interlink of film, religion and urban spaces is the lens that is used to decipher Mumbai; its religion, society, urban space.

In *The Neighborhood of Gods*, the author explores the city ethnographically, examining the semantics of concealed, obscure (or seemingly naturalised) religious displays in public space. The book is structured across six chapters, illustrating various scales of instances; the urban *Warli* tribe village temples, to shrines embedded within street corners. Broadly, two key enquiries are put forth. The first cites the notion of temples as religious façades and the other questions divine idols in public streets as tools of land encroachments.

Chapter One situates the first argument within the film studio sets in Mumbai suburbs, *Filmistan* that share the *Warli* tribal community temples. The temples have been likened to *Potemkin Villages*. The temple doubles as a movie-set scene, allowing to blur the actuality of *asli* or *nakli*. This Bollywood's impact on the urban has metaphorically enabled it to transgress the real and simulated boundaries of subaltern citizenship.

In chapter two, he examines the forms Hinduism takes in the Metropolis. The 'village deity' in informal settlements are viewed as markers of territoriality set in defiance with the urban legal provision. The author posits that in Mumbai, the morality of evictions is heightened when religious idols are placed in illegal land. By the transient community, the navigation of divine displays in mobile installations is theorised as the decentralisation of religion and *reverse pilgrimage* as an antithesis to the epicentre of religious historic Indian towns. Through city walking tours, the author stumbles upon religious imagery embedded within incongruent roadside spaces. He asserts that religious street displays that lie within the liminality of private-public, or at the edges of the bourgeoisie enclaves, of the "private walls facing public streets", offer the pavement dwellers a window to extend legitimacy in public space. The chapter further expands on the altered religious spatial practises as a political tool to regulate public

space behaviour and also as one to patronise political ideologies on the bourgeois user. There have been several studies affirming the politicisation of religion in India. Jain, K. (2021) in *Gods in the time of Democracy* examines the construction of monumental divine idols as statements of nationalist establishments. The quest for postcolonial urban citizenship in Mumbai has given rise to new identities, transience and iterations of encroachment.

The narrative is presented as the 'other' or the flâneur in the city. This is reflective in the interpretive style of layering and dissecting social behaviour and colloquial linguistics. Using devices of informal conversations with the citizens, snippets of indigenous poets and unfolding thoughts of interpretation of everyday life, the intricacies of the city life is captured in earnest detail. However, truly comprehending the city's socio-cultural behaviour is often complex and interspersed with cross-references, political differences and mutual urban empathy. His other article, *Line* (Ellison, 2017), attempts to dissect the linguistics of *Mumbaiyya* colloquialism and reveal Ellison's systematic methodology to interpret and immerse in the city's local culture.

Through this book, Ellison highlights a converse, subaltern use of religious markers in marginalised contemporary spatiality. The notion of urban thresholds therefore, takes on new meaning in urban sociality. The city's ongoing challenges of displacements and evictions at the coastal fishing and slum communities are urban planning cues of exclusionary practices, disallowing visibility among the city's subaltern communities. Here, appropriation of urban space could be viewed as the deregulation of urban spatial practices in Mumbai, or as displays of resistance within liminal spaces. The texts would be of particular interest to social and inclusionary studies in the realm of urban planning. The study at an intersection of religion and urbanism offers new insights to comprehend the conflicted land relationships between the State, the indigenous and the transient. The book enables a vital discourse within urban planning and anthropology to perceive socially inclusive approaches to encroachments, urban informality, illegality and land rights. ■

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