Mapping Sacred Games

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"Oh… What part of India are you from?"

This question is almost always posed to me after the one asking my name. Even after decades, I never fail to find this inquiry presumptuous and amusing. It raises obvious concerns in my mind: Why is a Pakistani Hindu an anomaly in this society? Must all Hindus be Indian? Can a Hindu thrive in a Muslim-majority Pakistan? Regardless of the answers, I have become conditioned to refer to myself as what I am not, rather than what I am. Thus, I am a Non-Muslim Pakistani unrelated to India by blood or origin. Born to a Sindhi household, three protective brothers, a large joint family, and married to more of the same, my background has admittedly given me an edge when it comes to conversation starters in post-Partition Pakistan. Growing up in Karachi as a minority in an overtly Muslim state and studying architecture and urbanism has given me a clearer understanding of cities and the politics of religion and ethnicity.

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Religious faith is an ephemeral construct that is enacted in individual ways of life, but also plays out publicly and politically. Within the city, there are many representations of religion scattered in the landscape as architectures and rituals, some permanent and others more temporary. Their material traces can be felt in the sound of bells, the visible markers on bodies, the smells of ritual offerings, and recognisable structures. Religion impacts both urban form and city life in at least three domains. The first is religious populations consisting of mobile and flexible bodies — they breathe, they perform, they celebrate. Second is religious institutions that are based on foundational literature and become points of congregation, orientation, and collective action. The third is religious discourses that are in constant flux from within and through external influences. Layers of expressions and ecologies sanctified over time make up a city, and the existence of multiple faiths sets up a complex urban landscape.

In Pakistan, where the vast majority strongly identifies with one religion or other, religion is tied to the state in more ways than one, well beyond constitutional, legal, and electoral structures. This has made religious affiliation an important factor of integration and disintegration for its civil society. I grapple with what this intersection has produced in the past and continues to produce for the future, particularly for the 1% of Hindu population[1] that lives in urban Karachi.

The intersection of religion and the urban sphere is a highly spatialised phenomenon protected and promoted by social and political will.

This conversation is not a cry for human rights, and most certainly not a plea for asylum in India.[2] It is an interpretation of Karachi's metalogue in an attempt to unpack manifestations of religions in the public space. The text that follows will foreground the sociocultural and spatial aspects of religion in Karachi, its histories and promises, risks and limits, roots and routes. In turn, it questions how urban religious identities have been or are being reshaped. This commentary is necessary in my view to better understand the politics that form the geographies of (in) accessibility and (in)visibility in my homeland.

The Minoritisation of Hindus in Karachi

On my trip to Siachen Glacier last year, the sepoy chose not to write my name in the visitors register to save himself, and me, the trouble of dealing with the possible conspiracies that could surround a 'Priya Pinjani' being at the disputed Pakistan-India border. "I have not heard such a name before," he said, "How are you Pakistani?" I didn't quite know how to prove myself. My National Identity Card was already in his hands. Was I to break into the national anthem, or to yell the second part of the slogan 'Pakistan ka matlab kya?'[3] I chuckled at the dilemma my identity had caused him, whilst equally fearful of what the khaki-uniformed man would do next. With doubt, he chose to let me go.
The invisibility cloak[4] had its perks. The glacier was hauntingly beautiful, reaching it simultaneously empowering and humbling. Could it have been any more so, were I allowed to be visible while present at it?

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Kolachi, Kurrachee, and Kalachi has been spelled and pronounced multiple ways in its 300 years of existence. Each change has succeeded or preceded a change in the politics on the ground, of people, ethnicity, dialects. The minoritisation of Hindus has been a long process involving the loss of numbers, loss of visibility, and loss of power in the public sphere, continuing well after the 1947 Partition[5]. By 1951, Karachi's 51% Hindu population had dwindled to 2% and there had been a rapid increase in its Muslim residents due to the influx of post-Partition migrants.[6] This demographic change led to the adjusting, adopting, and refuting of religious identities

across the city. Karachi embraced new architectures and was made to shed others: landmarks were renamed, sculptures removed, sacred spaces camouflaged or entirely disappeared. The last census in 2017 records nine spoken languages in Karachi, with a clear majority of Urdu-speaking populations. This is followed by Pashto and Punjabi, oddly leaving Sindhi-speaking groups in fourth place in the capital city of their own province.[7]

Pakistan has been consistently placed at 'high/very high' in the Governmental Restrictions and Social Hostilities Index on minority religions,[8] despite the images of plurality objectified for consumption in multiple adverts and films for local and foreign audiences in the country.[9] In recent decades, successive governments in Karachi have dreamed of turning it into a world-class city. The fifth master plan for the city, the Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020, centred on 'urban renewal': to regenerate the inner city even at the cost of peri-urban regions, and give its core a facelift. As James Scott argues, urban renewal is an example of a high modernist attempt to use the power of the state to impose a rational order on society.[10] It becomes pertinent to question, what is the order Karachi aspires to through all the many phases of urban renewal? Who is the ordering for? How is the ordering manifested?

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Somewhere between faith and religion, majority and minority, language and wealth, the alternate persona of 'Fariha Punjabi' has become a fitting alias to my name. I wear the phonetic appropriation out of convenience when wary of my audience. On other days, I shuffle between my many identities, and the connotations they come with. Recently, being Sindhi has allowed greater access and discounts in this city. Being a woman has gotten me in shorter queues. On my trip to Mumbai, the camouflage of being a mistakenly Indian 'Priya' made it easy to move around. In Istanbul, being Pakistani won more smiles. In New York City, no one really cared.

The Social Life of Small Urban Myths[11]

Karachi narrowly escaped Cyclones Phet in 2010, Nilofar in 2014, and Gulab in 2021.[12] In the true spirit of the city, the weather warnings were welcomed with binoculars and picnics by the beach, and music blaring from motorised vehicles. The city stood confident against all caution. Why not? Each time it has evidently been 'saved' and wound up with beautiful rainbows. Believers credit the last-minute fizzling of the seas to the city's patron saint, Abdullah Shah

Ghazi, whose shrine is perched on a hill since the 10th century.[13] Steve Inskeep writes, "at this shrine by the sea, Karachi seems spiritual, open-hearted, quirky, tolerant, and diverse."[14] There is little scientific ground connecting Ghazi and the Pakistan Meteorological Department. Yet, if the myth of the saviour has survived generations with such conviction, clearly there is an audience for it among believers and even the twitterati.[15]

Just beside the shrine, at the nine o'clock position, lies a 3000-year-old[16] cave temple named Shree Ratneshwar Mahadev Temple. It is accessed by a discreet flight of stairs through a portal under the shade of a *peepal*[17] tree. The stairs descend and fold, in stark contrast to the grand linear ascent to the shrine, and culminate deep inside a rock where the statue of Lord Shiva is seated. The Mahabharata and Ramayana seem to describe this very location as the home for Shiva under the sea. The faithful say the temple surfaced as the sea receded, and that it is in fact Shiva who has been protecting Karachiites from cyclones this whole time. Needless to add, there is no scientific evidence for this either.

I only recently discovered Lord Shiva as Karachi's silent coast guard beneath Ghazi's superpowered one. The question is not which of these myths is more credible, but how visibility and power are inextricably linked and lead to one being remembered more than the other. The two legends are effectively the same story, on either side of the ground. However, only one has become part of the public narrative. One is rendered 'legible'[18] and the other invisible. One is repeated enough times to become real, and the other is left literally underground, a secret amongst a few. A city has archived, preserved, and celebrated a narrow form of memory. It seems this political ordering of narratives and associated spaces in my city has become the lived reality for my people.

Shahrah-e-Firdousi is a fascinating intersection of coexistence in the postcolonial subcontinent. Between the emblematic shrine of Ghazi and Shiva's temple lie a mall, a skyscraper, a mosque, an amusement park, and a public park. The tangible heritage at this site developed over many phases and is named after people from different faiths: the Hindu Judicial Commissioner Rupchand Bilaram Park of the 1900s, the Parsi Jehangir Hormas Kothari Parade and Kavasji Katrak Bandstand of 1919, the British Christian Lady Lloyd Pier of 1921, the Parsi Pirojbai Hormusji Khajurina, and the Hindu Motumal Shewaram Setpal Fountains of 1936.[19] Fast forward 70 years and you will collide with the Muslim Mayor Syed Mustafa Kamal who commissioned the Bagh Ibn-e-Qasim in 2005, and Muslim Imran Khan who inaugurated it in 2019.

All the above-mentioned names are visible in the built forms, materials, or plaques at these sites, although after much searching in some cases. Jehangir Kothari and Rupchand Bilaram had developed this seafront centuries after Muhammad bin Qasim's arrival, yet only some of these names are part of urban memory and legitimised by geotagging on Google Maps. As with the

myths, the urban fabric appears to be conveniently warped to propel a privileged discourse. This imposition of cultural singularity on the built environment reinforces a skewed understanding of history for the communities in the city.

In the last decade, the shrine, the temple, and their peripheries have been undergoing another major change through a glaringly visible intervention of questionable legality by Bahria Town, the largest real estate development company in the country. The sanctity of the architectures is diminishing, as is their interface with and access to the street. The Icon Tower with its supporting road network and many bright white lights stands tall, dominating the skyline and overpowering these remnants of the past. This 'height of sophistication' is now 62 storeys tall.[20] In contemporary Karachi urbanism, form follows financial clout.

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Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir has stood beside the Native Jetty Bridge since at least 1943.[21] In Sanskrit, the name 'Lakshmi' means 'wealth and good fortune'. However, since 2011 the Mandir[22] has been enveloped by the shopping and entertainment hub of Port Grand, just off one end of M.A. Jinnah Road. The temple entrance is sequestered from the security checks of the complex under the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) flyover. On one of my visits, the resident priest stopped me at the entrance to ask me the purpose of my visit and to confirm my faith. Without a second thought, rather than reciting a verse from scripture, I rattled off recognisable names of men from my family: Ishwar, Daulat, Vijay, Rajkumar, Manoher, Suneel, Amit, Dhiraj, Ravi, Pardeep, Ajay — as if I was reading ice cream flavours off a menu card. I knew I couldn't hesitate nor slow down in this naming exercise. Convinced by what rolled off my tongue, the priest let me through.

Future of the Past

Every city is simultaneously real and imagined. It is at once a place of tangible materialities and a dreamscape, haunted by ghosts of the past, caught in multiple social imaginaries, and constantly reconstructed by dominant and dominating aspirations.[23] As a temporal abstraction, it holds the "possibilities of representing these temporalities and the historical experiences they signal in spatial terms."[24] This makes the city a rich but convoluted and multilayered archive of memory and belonging, and by extension, of access and visibility. In an instant it offers windows into the past, the present, and various futures.

The "city-as-archive"[25] raises some important questions. What happens when everyday experiences become memories, memories become narratives, and narratives are collected in urban form? On the one hand, urban form becomes an event in history, significantly distanced from the protagonist, and on the other, a reflexive tool used to decipher past experiences, reconfigure memory, and reconstruct narratives. Who decides what memory, whose experience, and which narrative?

In Karachi, further up on M.A. Jinnah Road, there is a park and yet another legend that has gone missing. 'Aram Bagh' translates as 'garden of rest' and 'Ram Bagh' is a garden named after Lord Ram. The two share the same coordinates in a historic neighbourhood, but in different time periods. There is a belief that Ram, Sita, and Laxman camped at this location which marks it as a sacred site for their followers. When the belief was in circulation in the public sphere, the neighbourhood was populated with temples. During that time, it also hosted events to commemorate Ram and Leela. Due to its central location and abundance of water, this public space was sanctioned for political rallies and eventually as a campsite during Partition. It is said that the park continued to host music and theatre commemorating these legends in the new country of Pakistan. Then it was renamed. The performance stage is now buried under a mosque and where there used to be four temples earlier,[26] there now remains only one. Aligning with the new name, the garden of rest is now accessed by a wide road — the present-day Shahrah-e-Liaquat — and surrounded by a furniture market along narrow streets named Panjrapur, Ram Talao, and Rupchand Bilaram, at least on Google Maps. However, colloquially this is now just referred to as the Aram Bagh district and these street names have been forgotten.

The change from 'Ram' to 'Aram' might just be the addition of one letter, but this renaming has enforced a change on the entire neighbourhood. When names are used as titles of places and streets, they invoke a particular story and imbue them with a distinctive character. Renaming public spaces gives them new ownership and erases previously established identities. As a result, contemporary visitors to the park relate differently to the space and this distinction comes into play at the first sound of the *azaan*[27]. Some are active participants and respond to this sound by proceeding to their prayers, others tune in more passively, while a third category is excluded, 'othered', and ultimately erased.[28] These different positionalities go unacknowledged in the archive of the city.

The fight to claim space by renaming non-Muslim remnants is a common practice in Karachi. The contradictions continue in the virtual realm, facing off in the neighbourhood's representation on the crowdsourced OpenStreetMap (OSM) and on Google Maps. Sawa Sunderdas Street, Takchand Udhamdas Road, and Shankar Lal Road become Park Lane, Memon Gali, and 'untitled' respectively in two maps of the district. In the OSM, the visualisation is fed by data from bottom-up sources, and in Google Maps, via top-down modes. The list of name conversions is

long, with some sly and others more aggressive. In other neighbourhoods of Karachi, Moti Lal Nehru Road has become Jigar Muradabadi Road, Hari Chand Rai Road is now Siddiq Wahab Road, Patel Park is Nishtar Park, and Krishan Nagar is Islam Pura. These new names threaten the space, material, and memory of the city. Is it presumptuous to read these as the state's efforts of ordering narratives? Can we admit this is concerted invisibilisation of the Hindu community in the public sphere? Each change has erased anachronistically from the map in order to, as Scott says, "simplify and standardise"[29] the post-1947 city grid by repositioning history and creating a hierarchy of visibilities and power.

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In an aerial map of Karachi representing the different ethnicities across city neighbourhoods, published in Dawn, a leading newspaper, it is both worrying and amusing to find one area marked simply as 'wealthy'. Marking wealthy as an ethnicity comparable to other spoken languages in the city implies that wealth neutralises ethnic and linguistic differences.[30] Given Karachi's land governance and land reclamation patterns, perhaps the 'wealthy' Army Cantonment — formalised in 1980 as the Defence Housing Authority — is a good place to visualise the aspirational city grid. A dreamscape, an ordered ideal. In the same locality, however, my conspicuously different name compelled the landlord of a residential property to refuse me tenancy. Contrary to expectation, wealth has not been a great equaliser as evidenced in the nomenclature of each newly laid street. Behold the Muslim Manhattan, with Khayaban-e-Muslim-gentleman's-name for avenues cutting across numbered streets; a sanitised housing project sans history, sans texture, sans culture.

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Cities, as we know, house many individuals who are difficult to pull under an umbrella identity. After all, identity is a complex phenomenon: layered, malleable, and accumulated over various geographies and generations. It is formed by, but not limited to, attributes such as gender, class, origin, ethnicity, and infamously, religion. Each of these qualifiers may be socially produced along scales ranging across body, home, community, urban, regional, national, and global boundaries.[31] Thus, identity is not an absolute condition, but a fluid performance. Every day an individual negotiates and enacts one, two, four, or even six aspects, depending on the space they inhabit. In effect, each individual becomes another representation of the city.

For me, the city-as-archive and all its representations are equally important. Together, they

produce the space for urban religious identities to thrive within its actual and imagined realities. In Pakistan, the intersection of religion and state has been used to order narratives and concretise power in a way that refuses to let some identities be flexible, particularly minority ones. Instead, the city fixes their identities to just one poster image and nothing else. The imposed singularity ignores the people behind the image and the many layers of their identities. It hinders accessibility and fosters fear in the community. Perhaps for this reason, I was problematic for the state at Siachen as a Hindu Pakistani. With each minoritisation, I shrank further. I became a minority, I became a Non-Muslim. I became a Hindu, I became the Other. Until, in plain sight, I became invisible.

Augmented City

A city thrives somewhere between romanticism and utopia.[32] However much we grant an autonomous life and reality to the history of Karachi, history at its core is a futurist proposition, a way of drawing on the past to dream another world.[33] I suspect we may not have to look very far for this other world. It sits in our pockets.

Maps have changed our inhabitation of both real and imagined cities. The trajectory from analogue maps to digital maps has been momentous and has impacted how we perceive and experience three-dimensional space. Earlier, maps allowed us to explore a route via landmarks between points A and B, in which the starting point, in-between paths, and the ending point held equal importance. Their designs allowed us to explore multiple routes to a destination. Their recent digital successor, Google Maps, promises accurate navigation of familiar and unfamiliar territories with frequent updates to direct the user to the shortest or most time-efficient route. Navigation has now become a matter of following directions faithfully.

In *Mapping the Sovereign State*, Jordan Branch credits maps for much more than navigational ease. His theory extrapolates that nation-states didn't create borders, but it was the creation of borders that gave birth to the idea of territorial nation-states.[34] An in-depth study of communities living 'on the lines', from Siachen down to the Arabian Sea, may give us a more realistic perspective. Analogue or digital, one cannot deny the map's privileged God's eye view, which in itself augments this representation. It gazes from the top, and looks down at urban life; it shows you an elevation that your eyes were not meant to see. Maps have a quality that is so convincingly official that it is dangerously illusory. We forget that, like all other forms of representations, maps too are abstractions of the material, political, and aspirational will of the maker, be it the cartographer or the nation-state.

The corporate mission of Google Maps is "to organise the world's information", but it also bends it to its will.[35] By processes of selective inclusion and exclusion, for different audiences, the resultant visualisations distort reality. The embedded data in this map, because of its widespread reach, has the power to order discourses about the city. Google Maps' algorithms thus dictate geographies and histories. For Karachi, it takes a very particular vision — a largely Muslim one — and then turns it into an objective reality through its visualisation. Repeated enough times and easier on the hearts of a majority, this narrative is quite easily accepted. Once again, a curated reality is consumed.

The digital world, however, is nothing if not disruptive. In this milieu of ordered data capture and information overload, those who throw the first spanner into the works are as celebrated as those who pick it up as the gauntlet of innovation. In that sense, Pokemon Go has subtly but surely presented a counter-imaginary of the city. In 2016, the American software company, Niantic, launched an augmented reality and location-based game called Pokemon Go.[36] The game negotiates the real and the virtual city simultaneously. Amongst other attributes, the interface flattened the globe into a singular plane. A blank city, untainted by anyone's markers of identity, power or politics. With nameless streets and spaces, grey building blocks, and a shared blue sky [Image 1], a real-time scavenger hunt for virtual Pokemons, Pokestops, and Pokegyms scattered across the cityscape induced many enthusiasts to walk or drive with their phones and map the city afresh.

The game map is built on collective knowledge of geographic features and landmarks of cities, and in that sense, it mirrors the public perceptions of the city. Religion has surreptitiously found its way into the architecture of the internet and the virtual realm to police our encounters in this public space as well. Here again, like Shahrah-e-Firdousi, religion resides alongside contemporary capitalism, even if uncomfortably.[37] In a hilarious turn of events, many public parks and mosques in Karachi are Pokestops [Image 2]. It makes me wonder, what will follow if a non-Muslim Pakistani is able to 'check in' at Aram Bagh for more Pokeballs and 'capture' the Pokemons hiding in the mosque, 'battle' them out, and 'claim' the stage for themselves. Will the names return on the map and the city? Would this be a way to reclaim space, material, and memory from the inside out? What will that do for urbanisms, and importantly, for the many believers of Karachi's curated reality?

Interestingly, Pokemon Go rejects the Google basemap and instead uses location data from OpenStreetMap. In doing so, it presents itself as a unique opportunity — one that allows a new imagination of the city to order a new reality. A politically constructed narrative was made into an uncontested, absolute reality by Google Maps. This familiar reality appears skewed in the Pokemon Go game map, and the interface stands at the "threshold of visibility, pushing against the flood of obfuscating messages, of dominant narratives, fabricated noise, and attempts at

denial."[38] After years of constructed narratives that were made real by reordering, replacing, and erasing, now a new, albeit virtual, reality can be ordered through a crowdsourced imagination. The game offers a chance to return to the old names, to recreate the multilayered archive of Karachi, and become a new equitable public space where all of us can thrive.

For now, in a different dimension, power can be shared in Karachi by making the invisible visible, and the illegible legible. A collective intervention can reshape the city and the experience of religion within it. The various Pokemons are easily identifiable and traceable through their cloaks, if only we have the eyes and the will to see them. This scavenger hunt is an exciting mapping moment between *naya*[39] [new], *purana*[40] [old], and in-between Karachis. I would invite you to join in mapping the Lost and Found in Karachi and to reclaim the spatialities and visualities of Hindu populations.

Notes

1. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Population Census."
2. "Pakistani Hindus Returned Home."
3. Translates to 'what does Pakistan mean?'
4. Reference to the Cloak of Invisibility in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, a magical artefact used to render the wearer invisible.
5. Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 231.
6. Khan and Hasan. "Transformation of the Urban Space," 16.
7. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Population Census."
8. Baronavski *et al.*, "Religious Restrictions around the World."
9. Azad Film Company, "Sacred Spaces."
10. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 342.
11. A play on a film by William Hollingsworth Whyte *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980).
12. John, Umar, Sikander, "Abdullah Shah Ghazi."
13. Shakir, "Sufi Shrine."
14. Inskeep, *Instant City*, 67.
15. "Worst of Cyclone Gulab."
16. Kumar, "Clifton Beach Karachi," 116.
17. *Ficus religiosa* or sacred fig is a tree species native to the subcontinent.
18. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 11.
19. Balouch, "The Clifton of Yore."
20. Reference to the adverts of the development. "Bahria Town Icon."
21. The plaque at the gate reads 1943, but stories about the *Mandir* go back hundreds of years.
22. Hindu temple.
23. I owe this formulation to Joseph Heathcott, who taught me urban theory.
24. Rao, "City as Archive," 179.
25. Rao, "Embracing Urbanism," 377
26. "Rambaugh Quarter." 1874 Map.
27. Muslim call to prayer.
28. These categories are used by Margaret Kohn in *Brave New Neighbourhoods: The Privatisation of Public Space*.
29. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 29.
30. Paracha, "Understanding Karachi."
31. Smith, "Contours of a Spatialised Politics," 54.
32. Coleman, *Lefebvre for Architects*, 20.
33. Borrowed from Joseph Heathcott, Urban Theory.
34. Samuel, "Mapping the Future with Pokémon Go."
35. Bensinger, "Google Redraws the Borders."
36. "Pokémon GO."
37. Gould, "Pokémon Go Feels like a Religion."
38. Weizman, *Forensis*, 29.
39. The term '*Naya Pakistan*' [new Pakistan] was popularised by Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party.
40. '*Purana Pakistan*' [old Pakistan] was used as a retort to the PTI by the Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in his National Assembly speech on 10th April 2022.

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