# New Urban Peace in Delhi
## The Partition Museum

*Neha Khetrapal*

The recent emphasis on "space" within the sphere of conflict and peace studies has duly highlighted the urban space as a legitimate locus for investigative efforts (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016, 2022). Maintaining focus on peace for this brief article, I define peace as a space-specific process in line with other theorists (e.g., Macaspac and Moore 2022). The emphasis on space is important because the material structures built on these spaces are saturated with meanings, a sense of collective identity and (collective) memories. These spatial markers can, thus, bind people across generations as imagined communities. In this sense, spaces convey meanings and a sense of connection that can be altered with the change in demographics and the consequent spatial interventions that accompany such changes. There are numerous instances of such spatial interventions after conclusions of wars where spaces are erased to either precipitate forgetting or communal segregation. Examples from the former category include destruction of heritage or architectural cleansing (e.g., Bardi 2016), while "mohallas" or the walled and gated urban communities—dotting older parts of Delhi among other parts of India—serve as examples of spatial divisions that segregate the dwellings that belong to members of different religious groups (e.g., Parveen 2016).

Conversely, new spatial interventions can also come into being in a manner that allows members of different ethnic and socioreligious groups and groups in conflict to claim collective symbolic ownership of historic heritage or material culture and to collectively remember past events or atrocities that impacted the lives of their communities. In the latter case, construction endeavors involve a process of spatial overlay or the creation of a palimpsest that characterizes amalgamated cultural and ethnic markers. Such blended spaces—characterized by architectural syntheses—neither belong to one camp or the other nor are amenable to a limited interpretation of the past that privileges storytelling from one major perspective. These blended spaces, in other words, are palimpsest of memories underpinned by a spatial palimpsest. The major objective of this article is to focus on one such spatial palimpsest, the Partition Museum in New Delhi, for a geographical region—India—that does not routinely appear in discussions of space and peace.

## The Partition Museum, New Delhi

Inaugurated on 18 May 2023, the second Partition Museum—established to commemorate lived experiences associated with the political partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947—is managed by The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust (TAACHT) (Correspondent 2023). Notably, the museum came into being 75 years after political partition. The remembrance of the partition, as such, signifies that the memories and pain of the political division have long been silenced for India in contrast to the memories of another noteworthy political milestone that happened in the same year, namely independence from the British crown.

The museum, thereby, offers a unique opportunity to people—including those with firsthand traumatic experiences and others who have experienced the trauma of partition through their parents and grand-

parents—to share their partition-associated emotions and stories. Since it is conceptualized as a people's museum and memorial, people are encouraged to donate their partition stories and personal objects, as preserved by generations, that moved across the borders with people. Some of these objects—currently hosted at the Partition Museum in Delhi—include stamps, an Indo-Pak passport, clothes, a key and a lock, bedposts, an electricity meter, and family and community photos. Glancing through the objects and by listening to oral histories, visitors can expect to learn about people's partition-related experiences that have been, so far, disregarded in the public domain. Survivor stories and experiences of despair, loss, hope and strength successfully bring to the fore subaltern heroism that appears to stand in stark contrast to independence heroism—commonly associated with the sacrifices made by Indian freedom fighters (for example, Svensson 2021).

The museum exhibits, restricted to only highlighting lived human experiences, do not offer closure or a conclusion about the rationality of the political partition. In this manner, the museum helps to cut across the communal lines that had been staunchly associated with the political division of India and Pakistan. This is an important element of the visitor experience that adds to the plurality of peace(s), as visitors are nudged to expand their collective sense of identity that transcends the communal lines. Although it is too early to conclude, it may still be possible to underscore that this exercise could be useful to precipitate societal acknowledgment that antithetical (communal) identities can be reconciled. What is of further import is the strategic location of the museum, deliberations for which are covered in the subsequent sections.

## Space and Lived Experiences

Besides spotlighting the exhibits of the museum and how these afford several opportunities for weaving a collective sense of identity, I endeavor to broaden the scope of the spatial turn by including lived or everyday experiences. There are grounds for this move, as we continue to witness a growing urge for building memorials that commemorate painful human experiences as a means of offering symbolic reparations—repair—to (forgotten) victims of political violence and atrocities within the "transitional justice framework" (Atkinson-Phillips 2018).

As such, peace and conflict researchers can expect to investigate spaces as repositories of collective identities, collective knowledge and values as opposed to mere sites on maps or contested borders between nation-states. This is why location decisions for situating difficult heritage, or its material signifiers, matter even after the relevant events have transpired. For instance, the first Partition Museum of India—that came into being in 2017—is situated on a busy heritage street of Amritsar (Punjab) where everyday life unfolds (figure 1). The strategic and central location of the museum places the partition within the focus of everyday life—an issue that has long been silenced—and, thereby, nudges people to integrate the pain of the partition into their daily lives just as they have integrated the celebratory aspects of independence for years.

Furthermore, the museum is situated in a historic building, a town hall, that was once used by the British to conduct administrative activities, including the issue of repressive orders against the people of undivided India. To make use of this building to host the museum, therefore, implies that the town hall is repurposed to undo the ills associated with the British administration, albeit years after these have been orchestrated (Zabi 2020). Placement of difficult heritage in such locations—where everyday life happens—improves the likelihood that at least people and visitors may reconsider and acknowledge their difficult past; a past in which people's relationship with the same space was severed. This becomes evident in the case of Amritsar—the location of the first Partition Museum—that lost a large number of Muslim inhabitants who moved to the other side of the border. In this manner, the juxtaposition of space and lived experiences becomes important for the emancipatory potential that emerges, and the recognition of the lost people and their relationship to their space in the interest of non-vocalized sentiments of "never again" and "never forget." In other words, both space and people who inhabit that place become agents of change (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016).

**Figure 1.** The outer facade of the Partition Museum in Amritsar (photography is not permitted inside the museum), Punjab, 2023. Courtesy of the author.

## The Spatial Setting of the Library and the Museum in Delhi

To further exemplify my stance on lived experiences and space, I describe the physical location of Delhi's Partition Museum—Dara Shikoh Library—before drawing implications for peace(s). Dara Shikoh Library can be discerned as the palimpsest of memories, a term that appeals to both urban geographers and memory researchers, as they would attempt to navigate the library premises to re-construct layers of spatial planning and memories for formulating its significance in Delhi.

The record of Dara Shikoh Library—named after the eldest son of the Mughal ruler, Shah Jahan and his wife, Mumtaz Mahal—can be traced back to 1637. Dara Shikoh is known for working closely with both Muslim mystics and Hindu ascetics and acknowledged for his stance on Hindu-Islamic syncretism (Sengupta 2015). He was an avid writer, a philosopher, a reader, and an ardent supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity. Dara is also known for patronizing architecture and art, besides translating the *Upanishads* from Sanskrit to Persian. As well as his scholarly works, he maintained a huge collection of books at his estate, Kashmiri Gate. The collection thrived and was converted into a library under Dara Shikoh's personal supervision but was left ignored after his death. Shikoh was executed by his brother, Aurangzeb, in a war of succession to the Mughal throne.

The ownership of the library changed several times, thereafter. It was bought by Nawab Safdarjung in the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, it was converted into a British residence that was occupied by Sir David Ochterlony.[1] It was during this time that Roman pillars—reminiscent of the colonial era—were added around the library. Thus, Dara Shikoh Library's architectural alterations, as it changed ownership, serve as indicators of both architectural and memory palimpsests. In the current time, the Mughal era architecture—red sandstone arches—that adorn the rear of the library building serve as a potent visual contrast to the library's entrance (see figures 2 and 3).
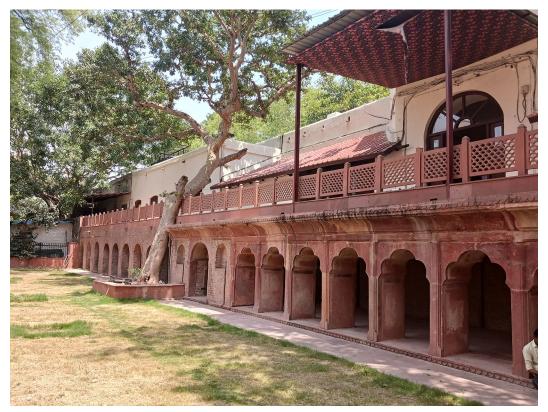


**Figure 2.** Mughal-styled arches in red sandstone decorate the rear of the library building, New Delhi. Courtesy of the author.

**Figure 3.** The architectural style of the entrance to the library building contrasts
with the Mughal-styled arches, New Delhi. Courtesy of the author.

Dara Shikoh Library is now a part of Delhi's Ambedkar University campus, which is located in Kashmiri Gate, a part of the historic walled city that was built by Shah Jahan, now known as Old Delhi. The Dara Shikoh Library subsumes an important division between two urban orders, namely New (associated with the British imperial capital built in the early 1890s) and Old (reminiscent of the Mughal era that preceded the British period) (Sutton 2018). The juxtaposition of the Partition Museum with the Dara Shikoh Library subsumes another important division: the division between pre- and post-independence political orders. Old Delhi experienced a dramatic shift in demography with independence as approximately 330,000 Muslims left Old Delhi for Pakistan while Hindu refugees came to occupy the Muslim spaces that were left behind (Bhardwaj Datta 2021). Subsuming these divisions, both the Partition Museum and the Dara Shikoh Library serve as spaces that are emblematic of syncretic co-existence, despite the political and social ruptures of the past.

A comparative European example might include the Polish "District of Mutual Respect" in the Wrocław area, wherein the space condenses different layers of Wrocław's multicultural historical past, including the postwar period (Törnquist-Plewa and Pietraszewski 2023). Herein, a recent installation of the statue

"Crystal Planet"—a woman dressed in a globe and signifying Mother Earth who welcomes all her children—has been added as a new (cosmopolitan) identity marker, subsuming past sociopolitical divisions. Such spatial interventions are pertinent for Wrocław, which witnessed major demographic shifts when its Jewish minority perished during the Holocaust, and there was an exodus of Germans—due to altered borders between Germany and Poland—followed by the settlement of Poles (Törnquist-Plewa and Pietraszewski 2023). Akin to the Polish "District of Mutual Respect," the strategic location of the Partition Museum does not privilege the narration of history from one perspective, the perspective of the British, or the Muslims, or the Mughals, or the Hindus. The strategic location of the museum, rather, embodies a common past where everyone has a claim to make in contrast to other contested claims (Yuval-Davis 2011).

## Lived Experiences: Implications for Peace

The spatial setting of the Partition Museum in Delhi further adds to the plurality of peace(s). The Dara Shikoh Library, and its Mughal heritage paired with British ascendancy, is currently situated in a university premises where everyday literary life takes place. The library's current position, as such, anchors a liminal space between the tumultuous past and present-day daily routines. The juxtaposition of the Partition Museum and the Dara Shikoh Library, on one hand, softens spatial markers that could have served as distinct references for communal and colonial divisions. On the other hand, the juxtaposition offers a unique solution for situating difficult heritage in a manner that could be of benefit to the people; in the end, creating a space where people conduct everyday (literary) activities in the shadows of both colonial domination and the partition coupled with a short-lived era, wherein a Mughal prince staunchly advocated communal unity through his literary works. In this manner, physical space may offer scope for fostering new social realities, as visitors draw connections between their physical space and ideological (syncretic) ideas.

## Spatial Plurality of Peace(s)

The alignment of space and lived experiences paves a way for a niche research agenda that allows researchers to decipher spaces where peace or peace building activities can occur in a multifaceted manner. This line of research, albeit niche, offers a contrasting avenue to the dominant peace research agendas that have, thus far, spotlighted nation-states as the most important conduits for peace building activities. As such, the long-drawn objective is to understand how cityscapes can be integrated into peace building activities.[2] Charting this long-drawn objective rests on the premise that peace is not a static concept or an end-of-conflict state but an ever-evolving concept (Kühn 2012). As such, it is not given but created continuously and, therefore, has the potential to exist in plural forms (Gusic 2022). By charting the urban terrain, here the attempt is to underscore a spatially local turn for creating possibilities that nudge people to transcend communal divisions to recognize common human suffering and trauma, at least, in an ideological space. As such, one way that urban peace could be construed is as endeavors toward materializing or embodying lived experiences within urban spaces. For several researchers, this would mean viewing space as an amalgamation of both social forces and geographical space instead of viewing space merely as an inert geographical construct. For the juxtaposition of Dara Shikoh Library and the Partition Museum, this involves defining the entire amalgamated space—a palimpsest of memories—as an arena where people from various backgrounds can gather together to view the past atrocities through the prism of human rights.

## Conclusion

The move to situate the Partition Museum in the spatial location of the Dara Shikoh Library helps to exemplify how potential for peace can be spatially situated. Through these examples, the thrust is on the gradual accumulation of historical, cultural, and communal memory that is eventually condensed in the

spatial landscape of cities and in the minds of its inhabitants, both of which are mutually constituting (Martin 2007). While various studies have looked at spatial distribution of violence (Elfversson et al. 2019) or communal alienation, the current proposal seeks to move a step beyond and endeavors to build motivation for looking at spatial distribution of peace. Studies patterned along the latter path can help uncover dynamics of urban peace and can also help explain why peace is likely to be distributed unequally across various urban locations in much the same way in which the built environment can precipitate urban violence in an uneven manner. A consistent example includes the intimate relationship between residential segregation and economic marginalization and the implications of this relationship for peace processes (Murtagh et al. 2019). The example chosen in the present analysis intends to argue that materialization of lived experiences and other ways of juxtaposing everyday interactions with various aspects of cityscapes can provide opportunities for (communal) repair and harmony.

As urbanization is expected to continue, spatiality of peace is a topic that is expected to attract further investigative efforts and will continue to be a topic of import for urban planners and peace researchers for the sake of designing or planning peaceful and inclusive cities. An important motivation for designing such inclusive urban spaces, as opposed to segregated or exclusive enclaves, may be associated with their potential for helping people experience "otherness," an experience that may go a long way in promoting collective belonging and tolerance (Peters 2010; Peters et al. 2010).

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**NEHA KHETRAPAL** is an associate professor at the Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences (JIBS) at the O. P. Jindal Global University, India. She is also the Deputy Director for the Jindal India Institute (JII) at the same university. Neha earned her PhD in 2016 at Macquarie University, Australia. Her research interests include museum studies, heritage, and collective memory. Before taking up work in India, Neha lived and worked in several countries including Hungary, Singapore, and Germany, and is inclined to believe that her research interests emerged from her passion for traveling.

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## NOTES

1. Tour My India. "Dara Sikoh Library." https://www.tourmyindia.com/states/delhi/dara-shikoh-library.html (accessed 15 April 2024).
2. This argument is not without precedent. Butcher (2017) argued that capital cities are viewed as symbols of government strength, economic power, and sovereignty. Therefore, large protests in capital cities can precipitate regime changes and transitions. Examples include the Tahrir Square in Egypt—also known as "Revolution Square"—and the Maidan Square in Ukraine, which is also called "Independence Square."

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