

P03. Building Identity: Religious Architecture and Sacral Landscapes of Christian Minorities in South Asia

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The cultural heritage associated with South Asia's Christian minorities remains understudied and its historical significance is often contested. Many of the region's churches dating back to the medieval and early modern periods were built primarily for communities of newly converted Christians, which came from different backgrounds and therefore carried corresponding identities. Even today, many of the region's churches and sacral landscapes reflect these local identities and traditions, with factors such as caste, "native" agency, and cultural "accommodation" playing a role in their entangled social and architectural histories. However, most scholarly work has addressed the design of these buildings against the background of European artistic tendencies – such as mannerism or baroque - while South Asian contexts and traditions remain overlooked.

On the other hand, recent approaches have considered the multi-layered nature of South Asia's Christian sites in the context of contested heritage, a growing area of concern arising when different societal groups attempt to claim, manipulate, or erase elements of specific heritage sites. Issues of contested heritage are critical in South Asian contexts, especially considering how they can become entangled with the painful realities of post-colonial struggles. In some cases, cultural heritage perceived to be predominantly of European influence or origin can become a vexing issue for states or nations whose governments adopt hegemonic discourses in relation to culture, heritage, and history. Arguably, up to this day, Christian religious architecture is still perceived by many people in South Asian countries as the manifestation of a "foreign element" (Friederichs, 2018). This has not advanced the cause for its study and conservation. As religious minorities in South Asia face increasing challenges and disenfranchisement, many of the region's older churches have disappeared, are in ruins or have been deeply transformed.

This panel welcomes papers on the History of the Built Environment of South Asia's churches and sacral landscapes, with a focus on structures built before ca. 1800, when British Hegemony began to progressively dominate and standardize Christian religious architecture. Papers that uncover the intercultural influences of diverse local agencies, identities, and traditions on the overall design of buildings and landscapes are particularly welcome.

Keywords: South Asia; Heritage; Built Environment; Religion; Identity.

Thematic lines: Heritage and Identities; Destroyed Heritage and Vulnerable Heritage; Heritage Practices.

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Short bio: Sidh Losa Mendiratta holds a Ph.D. in Theory and History of Architecture from the University of Coimbra (2012, summa cum laude). He is an integrated researcher at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, and an auxiliary professor in the Department of Architecture of Lusófona University of Porto, where he holds the chair of History of Portuguese Architecture. He is currently the Co-PI of the research project “PORTofCALL. African-Asian-European Encounters: Cultural Heritage and Ports of Call in the Indian Ocean during the Early Modern Period,” funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. Specializing in the cultural heritage of Portuguese influence in South Asia, he has conducted twenty-seven georeferenced topographic surveys of archaeological sites in India, in collaboration with the Archaeological Survey of India.

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