

# Narratives of Segregation

## Ghettos of Ahmedabad

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### ABSTRACT

The portrayal of Ahmedabad as one of the best cities in India blatantly celebrates the exclusion of lower caste Dalits<sup>1</sup> and religious minorities, as manifested in their increasing ghettoization. This paper sheds light on how discourse in popular media supports dominant narratives and examines how ghettos are constructed and reinforced through state complicity. I focus on the growth of the ghetto of Juhapura in Ahmedabad and draw parallels between the Indian caste system and that of the apartheid system in South Africa. Further, I examine the responses to riots and related legislative tools, such as the Disturbed Areas Act, that perpetuated ghetto enclaves through a measure I call premeditated ghettoization. I emphasize the need to distinguish between de facto residential separateness and sites of apartheid urbanism as a step toward safeguarding the needs of the vulnerable communities that reside in these ghettos. In the 17 years since the 2002 Gujarat riots, a generation of Ahmedabad residents has grown up in the different administrative divisions of the city, as well as in its ghettos – a generation that has effectively been prevented from interacting with the ‘other.’ There is a need for narratives that speak of this unquantifiable loss.

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The *Times of India*, the largest-selling English language daily in the world and the third-largest Indian newspaper by circulation, ranked Ahmedabad as the best city to live in India on the basis of the following factors: physical and civic infrastructure, social and cultural values, and peace of mind.<sup>2</sup> Ahmedabad is home to one of the largest ghettos in India, Juhapura, in addition to the Dalit Ghetto of Azadnagar Fathewadi. Juhapura is one of the largest minority ghettos in India. At present, its population is estimated to exceed 500,000; at the time of the 2002 Gujarat riots, its population was around 50,000.<sup>3</sup> French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot describes Juhapura as a “city within a city;” that is, a city without administrative division within Ahmedabad.<sup>4</sup>

I contend that constructing narratives that cast Ahmedabad as India’s best city to live in casts it as a model to be emulated by other cities. This narrative silences the political, social, spatial, and economic exclusion faced by the vulnerable communities residing in the ghettos of Ahmedabad. This description is part of the dominant chauvinistic nationalist narrative grounded in caste-based hierarchy, which excludes those who are dehumanized and relegated to occupying what I call sites of apartheid urbanism (SAU).

## **DEMOCRACY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION?**

India is considered to be the largest democracy in the world, and it certainly is a land of diversity. Home to more than

1.2 billion people, India has a significant population of minorities – Dalits (16.6 percent), Christians (2.3 percent), Muslims (14.2 percent), and Sikhs (1.7 percent), as well as tribal groups.<sup>5</sup> In the last quarter of a century, the Indian economy has undergone a transformation from a socialistic structure to a global corporate economy. The Indian political sphere has also experienced transformation; the rise of chauvinistic nationalism is in stark contrast to the Gandhian principles that marked earlier decades of an Independent Indian Republic.<sup>6,7</sup> In this framework of evolving economic and political forces, the urban centers of India – cities such as Ahmedabad – have emerged as the growth engines of India’s economy. They are also growth engines of inequity: spatial and distributive injustice leading to deliberate ghettoization and sites of apartheid urbanism.<sup>8</sup>

## **AHMEDABAD: A FRAGMENTED CITY**

*Bright lights, big city...for everyone?*

Ahmedabad is the largest city in the prosperous state of Gujarat, and is home to several ghettos such as the Dalit Ghetto of Azadnagar, Fathewadi, and the Minority Ghetto of Juhapura. The ghettos of Ahmedabad demonstrate spatial confinement, segregation, and marginalization of half a million people. They also have other stories to tell.

The discourse that portrays Ahmedabad

as India's best city legitimizes the violence perpetrated on the residents of its ghettos and normalizes their exclusion from the city. To understand how this dominant narrative works and whose interests it serves, it is important to historicize contemporary political and economic relationships. Historicizing contemporary political and economic relationships will shed light on who has power – power to legitimize certain narratives and delegitimize and silence others. It will also enable us to look at the broader picture, from India's colonial past and 'democratic' present, to the dynamics of evolving political and economic forces, to the apartheid that constitutes and reinforces the Indian caste system, particularly in the states of north and central India.<sup>9</sup>

## **VIOLENCE AND ITS LEGACY: THE 2002 GUJARAT RIOTS**

Following the burning of a train coach in Godhra in 2002, in the state of Gujarat (the home state of Mahatma Gandhi) rampaging mobs belonging to the dominant castes targeted the lives, homes, and businesses of minority community members. The mob violence against minorities continued unchecked for several days. The number of those killed is disputed, with some sources putting the figure close to 2,000.<sup>10</sup> Ahmedabad, the state capital, also bore its fair share of riot politics.

One scholar observes how riot violence enables the dominant castes to intimidate and subjugate lower castes and minorities.<sup>11</sup> Of those who are not part of the Aryan created caste hierarchy, Dalits are the most numerous (around 200 million), followed by Muslims (170 million), Christians ( 27.6 million), and Sikhs (20.4 million). The Sikhs faced riot violence in 1984, while the Dalits and other minorities have been subjected to it more often. It has been observed that the most numerous 'others' are more often the

target of orchestrated riots. Riot violence thus enables the upper and middle castes to enjoy the lion's share of the economic rewards of globalization, as well as the ability to subjugate Dalits, lower castes, and other minorities. Riot violence, besides reinforcing caste hegemony, is an exercise in excluding 'others' – those within lower castes or outside of the caste pyramid, such as minorities. Unsurprisingly, this exercise was also carried out on a major scale in the city of Mumbai, the financial capital of India, in 1992, a year after economic liberalization started in India. Alluding to the economic liberalization which began circa 1991 in India, writer Pankaj Mishra points out how economic globalization in India has bolstered the rise of xenophobia and authoritarian populism. Political parties that support domination on the basis of this historical Aryan stratification of society have increasingly been rewarded with electoral victories in the states where this caste hierarchy is observed. However, states in the Southern part of India, which tend to not ascribe to this Aryan classification into castes as much as their Northern counterparts, are more inclusive by comparison.

While some of the ghettos in Ahmedabad were created in the wake of the 1992 riots, after the 2002 riots and the subsequent electoral victory of apartheid-steeped ideology, Ahmedabad experienced a tremendous increase in deliberate ghettoization. The ghetto of Juhapura began to transform from an enclave of 50,000 residents to a cramped, infrastructure-deficient settlement camp of over 500,000 today, comprised of minority community members.<sup>12</sup> The riots, in both 1992 and 2002, created a ghetto. What followed was a reinforcement of the ghetto through legislation, threats of violence, and the complicity of political leadership.

## THE DALIT GHETTOS OF AHMEDABAD AND THE MINORITY GHETTO OF JUHAPURA

Research has shown that a large number of Dalits were forced into living in Dalit-only societies.<sup>13</sup> Most of those societies appeared after the 2002 Riots when people moved away from Gomitpur, Bapunagar, and the Dani Limda areas. Besides residential segregation, trade across caste lines became restricted; for instance, there are Dalit builder-contractors who only cater to the construction needs of the Dalit community, as Dalits are often denied by upper-caste builders.<sup>14</sup> These patterns reveal deep lines of division on the basis of caste, and this ghettoization is not just confined to the Dalits.

Juhapura is the largest minority ghetto in Ahmedabad. At the time of the 2002 riots, its population was around 50,000, and it was more or less described as a slum.<sup>15</sup> There has been a lot of migration from mixed neighborhoods within the city and the city center to Juhapura. Migrants include minority members from different economic levels of society: former bureaucrats, advocates, professors, doctors, and businessman who have started to look for safety in Juhapura.<sup>16</sup>

Juhapura falls outside the boundary of the city, seven kilometers away from the city center, within the boundaries of Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA). It sprawls over the boundaries of six adjacent peripheral villages. Twelve-foot-high walls surround Juhapura on all sides. Geographically, the minority population of the city was pushed to areas outside the municipal corporation limits. The residents of Juhapura not only face employment marginalization but also are required to purchase their own basic services and physical and social infrastructure, as the city does not provide resources for

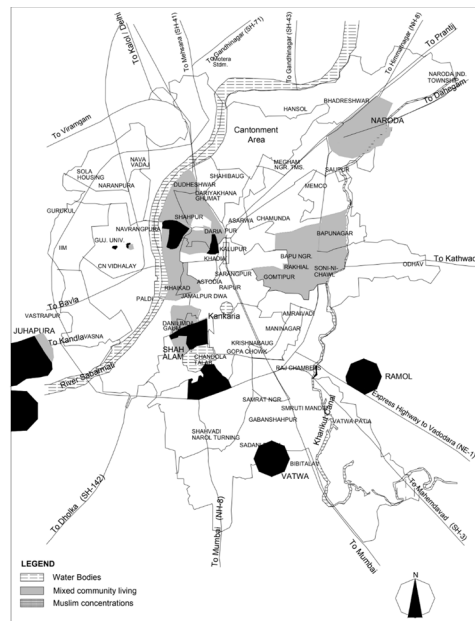


Figure 1: Muslim-Dominated Areas in Ahmedabad [Darshini Mahadevia, 2007].

their infrastructural development. Within the ghetto, schools, supermarkets, and healthcare facilities have been built through the philanthropic and entrepreneurial efforts of its more progressive residents. Juhapura's location seven kilometers west of Ahmedabad's city center inhibits its residents from interacting with other communities.<sup>17</sup> The creation and reinforcement of the ghetto are thus an effective tools for the dominant castes not just to gain control over the political economy, but also to preserve the purity of caste by preventing the "abhorrent pollution" caused by intermixing, even spatially.<sup>18</sup>

## COLORING THE CASTE LINE: CASTE AND THE APARTHEID CITY

*“Jo nahi jati, woh jati hai.” (What can never be changed is the caste into which one is born).*

– Hindi Proverb

In many ways, a person's caste can be as unalterable as the color of a person's skin. While millennia have passed since the Indo-Aryan Invasion, the belief in the hierarchical caste system persists, along with an abhorrence of the “pollution” caused by caste mixing.<sup>19</sup> Chauvinistic nationalism in India is based upon this apartheid ideology. In the last quarter of a century, this form of nationalism has gained political and economic ascendancy; it has aligned itself with the concerns of upper and middle castes to secure the benefits of economic globalization. This right-wing populism, rooted in differences of caste and creed, seeks control not just over the political economy but also over human relationships.<sup>20</sup> This ideology seeks control over basic freedoms – from whom one can love to where one can live. This is facilitated through either the threat of violence or disguised legislation, or both.<sup>21</sup>

The ghettos that result from violent riots are sites of precarity where vulnerable communities seek shelter. These vulnerable communities have exchanged the violence of the riots for the everyday violence of deliberate ghettoization. The protection that comes with residing within these ghettos comes at a cost: spatial confinement, inadequate infrastructure, and exclusion from the centers of economic and political power in the city. Yet perhaps the most profound loss is unquantifiable: seventeen years after the 2002 riots, an entire generation has grown up in Juhapura. Though this ghetto lies within the boundaries of AUDA, those living and growing up in Juhapura have effectively been prevented from interacting

with the rest of Ahmedabad.

According to the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, the term “the crime of apartheid” includes similar policies and practices of racial segregation and discrimination as those practiced in Southern Africa and includes “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”<sup>22</sup> The act also describes any measures, including legislative measures, designed to divide the population along racial lines by creating separate reserves and ghettos for the members of a racial group or groups as constituting the crime of apartheid. The resulting ghettos are thus sites of apartheid urbanism. In the Indian context, racial segregation and discrimination can be substituted with segregation and discrimination grounded in a hierarchical caste system. Are legislative measures such as the Disturbed Areas Act designed to divide the population along caste and creed lines, colluding in the creation of an apartheid city? And do the resulting ghettos qualify as sites of apartheid urbanism?

## DISTURBED AREAS ACT: APARTHEID LEGISLATION IN DISGUISE

The Disturbed Areas Act in Gujarat is a law that restricts the sale of property between different communities in ‘sensitive’ areas. The Act was introduced in 1991, the year economic liberalization started in India, with the stated objective “to avert an exodus or distress sales in neighborhoods hit by communal unrest.” Seven years after the 2002 riots, the State Government extended the reach of the Act and amended the law to give local officials greater power to decide on property sales. Only if the state-appointed

official approves property transactions in disturbed areas are the transactions approved; otherwise, they are rendered null and void.

Thus, the Disturbed Areas Act is a legislative tool implemented to divide the population along caste lines by creating separate reserves and ghettos for members of vulnerable communities. This act is a tool for the state to ghettoize the vulnerable communities in Gujarat and in the City of Ahmedabad. The state is complicit in the creation of disturbed areas and deploys legislation to decide which community is barred from which neighborhood. This legislation is one means of restricting interaction across caste lines. As a tool for social engineering, how effective has it been in protecting the purity of caste, spatially as well as otherwise? Is Ahmedabad an apartheid city? Here it becomes important to understand what an apartheid city is. The apartheid city has been described as a system that protects and enhances the interests of apartheid nationalism and draws upon policies of discriminatory segregation and spatial management to restructure and entrench divided city form.<sup>23</sup> It is imperative to distinguish sites of apartheid urbanism from the more generalized residential separateness that exists in most cities. While generalized residential separateness is often based on more commonplace causes such as socioeconomic or cultural factors, the ghettos of Ahmedabad are the homes of internally-displaced persons who were – and still are – systematically targeted on account of their dehumanized status as per dominant apartheid ideology. These sites of apartheid urbanism must be distinguished from generalized residential separateness. If the two continue to be conflated, the protection needs of the vulnerable communities, as well as the responsibilities that accompany such protections, will be overlooked.

The Disturbed Areas Act is a policy of discriminatory segregation. The city reflects the apartheid political ideology of the

state through the deployment of violence and policy designed to exclude Dalits and minorities from the centers of economic and political power in Ahmedabad. Through violence, policy, and widespread disregard for constitutional provisions, the state remains complicit in their ghettoization.<sup>24</sup> By ignoring provisions designed to protect the rights of lower castes and minorities, the state prohibits those at the bottom of the apartheid hierarchical structure from permanently settling in certain urban areas, in essence dictating their access to urban residential rights as well as economic and social opportunities.

## STATES OF EXCEPTION OR THE NEW NORM?

The narrative that celebrates Ahmedabad as the best Indian city to live in is built upon the premise of exclusion. In this case, the narrative acts as a tool that normalizes the erasure of a violent past and present. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued that the “state of exception” is a powerful strategy that can facilitate the transformation of democracies into totalitarian states.<sup>25</sup> Agamben’s work asserts that an exception is the exception until it becomes a norm. The ghettos of Ahmedabad are states of exception that are included in the city through their very exclusion from the city; they satisfy Agamben’s assertion regarding the relation of exception by which something is included solely through its exclusion.<sup>26</sup> The normalization of dominant narratives, such as the one used to describe Ahmedabad, holds a particular power. Shaw’s work appears to prophesy the future of Indian cities.<sup>27</sup> She discusses a trajectory that begins with the normalization of a dominant narrative, followed by its popularization through mainstream thought, then its idealization, and finally calls for its replication. Thus, the ghettos of Ahmedabad may serve as an indicator of what can happen

to Indian cities in the coming years.<sup>28</sup> The question arises: what does the future hold for the ghettos of Ahmedabad? Or, if Ahmedabad is the model as the narrative contends, what does the future hold for other cities?

The ghettos of Ahmedabad are the offspring of an alliance between unbridled capitalist interests and an ideology rooted in caste purity, power, and privilege. As mentioned earlier, these ghettos need to be acknowledged as distinct from de facto residential separateness. There is a need for narratives that counter the dominant celebration of Ahmedabad as the best Indian city to live in; there is a responsibility to push back against the blatant celebration of the exclusion of lower castes and minorities and to challenge the casting of Ahmedabad

as a role model for replication. The existing literature on the ghettos of Ahmedabad is woefully inadequate, and the ghettos of Ahmedabad have also been largely invisible in popular discourse for more than a decade and a half.

Herscher asserts that architectural history has played its own role in the exclusion of marginalized groups and their spaces from disciplinary memory.<sup>29</sup> Their invisibility in architectural history is linked to their political exclusion by nation states. The question arises: will architectural history acknowledge the ghettos of Ahmedabad and the apartheid ideology that they manifest, or will it lend itself to repetition – silent, complicit, and servile to hegemonic structures? ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Trained as an Architect and Engineering Management Professional, Ayesha Wahid has worked as a consultant, orator, researcher, and educator in the fields of Project Management, Building Engineering, and Architecture. As a doctoral student at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, her research interests lie at the intersection of urbanism and policy and are motivated by the goals of urban equity and inclusion. On a side note, she enjoys stimulating conversations over Kashmiri Chai – “Chatting over Chai,” as she calls it – and is an enthusiast when it comes to learning about other cultures and discussing the cultural legacy of her hometown, Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, India.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Several millennia ago, the Aryans invaded South Asia and introduced the hierarchical caste system as a means of controlling the population. In the Indian caste system, there are four levels of castes. Dalits comprise people who were excluded from this fourfold hierarchy and were seen as forming the fifth level. According to the hierarchical caste system, Dalits are considered untouchables.
2. "Ahmedabad Best City to Live in, Pune Close Second," *Times of India*, December 11, 2011, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Ahmedabad-best-city-to-live-in-Pune-close-second/articleshow/11066689.cms>. Social Space?."
3. Jean-Philippe Dequen, "Review of Domination, Resistance, and Violence in Ahmedabad," *Dissertation Reviews*, February 29, 2016, <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/12876>.
4. Christophe Jaffrelot and Charlotte Thomas, "Facing Ghettoisation in 'Riot-City': Old Ahmedabad and Juhapura Between Victimisation and Self-help," in *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, eds. Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
5. "Religious Census 2011," Census of India, accessed March 16, 2019, [www.census2011.co.in/religion.php](http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php).
6. Rollo Romig, "Railing Against India's Right Wing Nationalism Was a Calling. It Was Also a Death Sentence," *New York Times*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/magazine/gauri-lankesh-murder-journalist.html>.
7. Gandhian principles traditionally endorse economic policies that advocate for concepts of pluralism, welfare, and upliftment for all.
8. Rina Chandran, "Housing Bias Against Muslims, Single Women Turning Indian Cities into Ghettos," *The Wire*, January 24, 2017, <https://thewire.in/uncategorised/housing-bias-against-muslim-single-women-turning-indian-cities-into-ghettos>.
9. In *Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change*, John Markoff (1996) points out that a place can legally be termed a democracy but may not be a democracy because of its anti-democratic practices. Applying this line of argument to India's present raises the question: how democratic is India? The current political regime has been accused of unprecedented levels of interference in the statutory institutions of the country such as the Supreme Court, the Reserve Bank of India, the Election Commission, etc.
10. Charlotte Thomas, "What Juhapura Tells Us About Being Muslim in Modi's India," *The Wire*, May 28, 2015, <https://thewire.in/culture/what-juhapura-tells-us-about-muslims-in-modis-india>.
11. Ward Berenschot, *Riot Politics: Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Indian State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
12. Tarique Anwar, "Gujarat Polls: Juhapura, The largest Ghetto in Gujarat, Is a Picture of Deliberate Neglect," *NewsClick*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.newsclick.in/gujarat-polls-juhapura-largest-muslim-ghetto-gujarat-picture-deliberate-neglect>.
13. Sanjay Hegde, "Separate but Equal Ghettos," *India Today*, November 12, 2013, <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion/story/muslims-hindu-colonies-ghettoisation-dalits-castes-religion-discrimination-217151-2013-11-12>.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Dequen, "Review of Domination, Resistance, and Violence in Ahmedabad."
17. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sharik Laliwala, "Inside Ahmedabad's Juhapura: What It's like to Live in a Ghetto," *The Wire*, September 12, 2018, <https://thewire.in/communalism/juhapura-ahmedabad-ghetto-muslims>.
18. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).
19. Ibid.
20. Romig, "Railing Against India's Right Wing Nationalism Was a Calling."
21. Intercaste marriages (marriage between persons belonging to different levels of the caste pyramid) or interfaith marriages are one of the reasons behind honor killing. The pervasiveness of caste lines can be seen in its incorporation into both popular media and art. The popular Indian 2018 film *Dhadhak* deals with issues of caste purity through its depiction of the love story of an upper-caste girl and a lower-caste boy that ends with an honor killing. Media figure Trevor Noah's memoir *Born a Crime* discusses his upbringing as a mixed-race child in apartheid South Africa. Both cases discuss the dehumanizing effects of apartheid ideology on those who cross caste and color lines.
22. United Nations, "International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid," *Treaty Series* 245, July 18, 1976, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%201015/volume-1015-i-14861-english.pdf>.
23. Doug Hindson, *The Apartheid City: Construction, Decline and Reconstruction* (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1995).
24. "India's Dalits Still Fighting Untouchability," *BBC*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-18394914>.
25. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
26. Ibid.
27. Mahadevia, "A City with Many Borders - Beyond Ghettoisation in Ahmedabad."
28. Ibid.
29. Andrew Herscher, *Displacements: Architecture and Refugee* (Germany: Sternberg Press, 2019).