

FRI 24 APRIL

16.00 CET

**SHARED AND CONTESTED SACRED  
SPACES  
IN SOUTH ASIAN COLONIAL CITIES:  
European Presences and the  
Architecture of Religious  
Encounter**

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This lecture examines how the built environments of South Asian colonial cities, constructed, modified, and contested over five centuries of European presence, produced an extraordinary laboratory of shared and contested sacred space. Through four distinct colonial formations such as Portuguese Goa, Danish Tranquebar, French Pondicherry, and British Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, it traces how the spatial logics of churches, temples, mosques, and hybrid wayside shrines were simultaneously imposed, resisted, appropriated, and reinvented. Drawing methodologically on the intersection of architectural history, urban morphology, and the anthropology of religion, the lecture argues that colonial urbanism in South Asia did not produce simple hierarchies of dominant Christian space over subjugated indigenous space. Instead, it generated a far more complex and dynamic landscape in which sacred spaces became sites of negotiation, mimicry, tactical occupancy, and creative hybridisation. Each European colonial power carried its own theological geography — its own instinct for where the sacred should reside in the city, how it should be demarcated, monumentalized, and insulated from competing claims. Yet in every case, the Indian city proved recalcitrant: older spatial logics of the Hindu grāmadevatā system, Muslim dargah networks, and Tamil temple urbanism persisted beneath, beside, and within the colonial overlay. The result, across the entire subcontinent, was a proliferation of liminal sacred architectures — shrines at crossroads, chapels at highway margins, mosques embedded in colonial quarters, Hindu temples inserted into European street grids — that neither colonial nor nationalist historiography has adequately theorised. This lecture proposes that these liminal, hybrid, and often contested architectures constitute the most honest record we possess of how ordinary South Asians experienced the colonial city and negotiated its spiritual geography.

