

The Kolkata Imageries: Images and Imaginations of City Spaces

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Abstract

A city manifests not just space that is inhabited, but the one that is desired and represented. A city therefore is as much material as it is not. The location of an individual within a city in turn has a direct bearing on the image of the city one is likely to build. However, the very location to begin with is anything but random. Therefore, one's identity, one's inhabitancy and one's imagination exist within networks of each other. The reality of the whole, which is the city and the everyday lives of the city dwellers are expressions of the above networks. Therefore, to take the city towards the desirable one, it is required to mould the action-imagination interrelationship less exclusively than otherwise. This study therefore is an attempt to explore these interrelationships taking the city of Kolkata and a few of its urban spaces (economic cores, economic peripheries and spaces of religious and racial peripheries) as a case.

Keywords: city space, images, Kolkata.

Introduction

‘Cities are not simply material or lived spaces – they are also spaces of the imagination and spaces of representation... Ideas about cities are not simply formed at a conscious level; they are also a product of unconscious desires and imaginations... Cities might act to constrain the imagination or to consolidate it in collective imagination as tradition and authority’ (Bridge and Watson, 2000).

In countries like India, nobody belongs to a city, yet everybody does. Most urban Indian families can, without difficulty, trace their roots back to some village of this country or a neighbour. Narratives of belongingness in India situate the urban within times that are recent and establish it as space that spells opportunities first and loyalties later. Everybody, by this argument is an outsider to the city. Each one, at whatever point in time had walked

into the city to take more and give less. In fact, take as much as possible. The city space emerged to be that ideal platform where Social Darwinism could operate and be tested. Belongingness to the city has been circumstantial for the fittest (who could manage prolonged survival) and organic for their off springs. The counter argument which in fact has evolved as a branch of the above breaks its confining walls and opens the gates of the city for one and all. Just by virtue of the fact that nobody belongs to the city, the city belongs to everybody. Therefore perceptions of oneself as native and the other either as lesser native or a complete outsider are only illusions.

In fact, one is so caught up within a maze of such arguments and their counters that one tends to forget that the city itself has, or rather develops a perception of its own. However, the city is not what it is, but what

it emerges to be. The inhabitants characterise the city, using which the city interacts further with the very inhabitants. As more and more people get included into the city, the character evolves and the city faces its people adorning an evolved character. This is what time does to the city. If one is able to surpass these temporal perception laden debates regarding who belongs to the city and to whom the city belongs, others like who can enter the city and who can inhabit the same, one can arrive at isolated points in time enabling one to understand dynamics which are more spatial. This is because, standing at one point in time, space finds character and meaning through imaginings of those who are the current inhabitants of urban life and the images of the same they harbour, nurture and circulate. These images in turn reveal perceptions and illusions of belongingness at that instant, however implying the embeddedness of the past and the predictabilities of the future.

Periphery within Core

Perception to a city varies because variations persist. A city is believed to canvas the life humans have always desired to portray. And it quite successfully does so, but not for everyone. For those desires it fails to fulfil, it ends up creating an all the more entrenched hollow through the very act of perception. In simpler words, the poor feels poorer in a city because the rich displays riches explicitly before their eyes. The 'one' and the 'other' live in close proximity to each other within the urban spaces which can be distinct, overlapping, networked and so on. Imagine a shining-sprawling mall and dingy-dirty slum co-existing beside one

another, one growing richer by the day, the other (therefore relatively, if not absolutely) poorer. Such is the story of people living in one of the least served slums of Kolkata (according to 2011 census figures) beside the magnificent *Mani Square* shopping mall on the city's Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (Map 1 see page 20).

The two sides of one of the broadest roads of the city, where once sprawling fields are gradually getting replaced by multi-storeys – homes, hotels, malls, office buildings and so on with irregularly intercepting poverty. Services of the best quality as per the standards of the city exist in the absolute vicinities, but the non-gated and older residents of the area emerge as the most poorly served citizens of Kolkata. An irony indeed, isn't it? (Plate 1 See page 20)

Irony or not, such an existence definitely defies deterministic geographies. People's belongingness stands terminated the moment they step outside the circumference of the slum. There exists some sort of a centrifugal force of confinement – a sense of non belongingness. They cross the mall at least ten times a day and see 'others' enjoying good (much more than adequate) clothes, good cars, good food at all times of the day, yet they have to wait for a Durga Puja or a Diwali or any other special date on the calendar to enjoy a trip only (absence of any purchases) to their most adjacent spaces of existence.

However, not all is so grim. The presence of the mall runs their little cigarette shops, pan shops, shops selling packaged water, wafers, and soft drinks and so on. Their auto services bring in a lot of people to this area where less public buses run and so on. Most women find lucrative, yet proximate

jobs in the homes of the rich either in the gated communities or in salt lake – an area with mostly rich Bengali residences and just across the Bypass. Because most imaginations of the city are reflections of images of the neighbourhood, especially when mobility is confined to the familiar alone, or a push experienced from the unfamiliar, inequality is the clearest image perceived by these peripheral sections.

However, neither the gated residents nor the mall goers lend character to the area when aggregated at the level of an urban ward for governmental estimations and policies thereafter, in fact the very slum residents do. That is exactly why the area emerges as one that is poorly served. This makes their majority most obvious. And it is this majority that has been the older native residents of the area. Yet they live with the abject fear of eviction with every passing second and compensations are an out of the question expectation. Eviction in fact is more than just fear; it forms a part of their past experience. They fear created accidents like a major fire (also a part of their past experience) that would turn their homes into ashes and nothing or nobody to be blamed thereafter. Also, promises vary with political parties; better housing was something promised by the ex-rulers, with the political turnover that the state experienced, earlier promises stood broken. Quite ironically, it is the majority here that feels vulnerable. That in turn definitely spells inevitable conditions for unrest.

Political turn overs however are sometimes desired; for if one visits the same slum today, it would be difficult to agree with the census conclusions that it is one of the ill served wards (ward 32), as their exists

many an amenity absent in many other slums of the city. However, one has to wait for a decade to see these changes register in the governmental figures. Do these bring down the vulnerability feeling? It does not. This is because a feeling of inequality, absence and lacking that develops through a perception of not the self, but the other, the surrounding, will not come down, especially when the two (at least one) end(s) are progressively moving away from each other, vulnerability shall only get more entrenched making unrest most obvious.

Core within Periphery :

The poor clearly feels quite miserable when confined to an island of poverty with displaying extravagance all around. How do the rich feel when forced to exist in the proximities of poverty? Do they feel equally miserable? Yes, they do. This is the overarching perception that echoed through the narratives of the residents of *Merlin Warden Lake View* – a gated residence, adjacent to the Bidhannagar railway station – a dirty crowded noisy place for sure and simultaneously home for many a homeless (Map 2 See page 21). Contrary to the above, what is on display here is a shameless exposure of extensive failure. Human bodies blackened with dirt, hungry naked children, uncontrollable sobs, begging cries and illicit abuses and more lay strewn anywhere and everywhere within the crowds and noise of a railway station. The vision and the sensation of such an urban space is nothing uncommon to any Indian; so is possibly the dread of residing beside one.

Merlin Warden is a well maintained, clean, disciplined and regulated residence. No complains there what so ever. However

neighbouring sounds and sights percolate through. In fact the higher one is placed on one of these high rises; the clearer is the vision of the 'down'-trodden (Plate 2 See page 21). The connectivity marketing strategy of a railway station mostly catering to local trains has little or no meaning when the sights and the sounds are so disturbing (to all human senses). This is more so because, somewhere humans are aware of 'an imagination of the city as vibrant and exciting and a space where the play of senses and bodily pleasures can be celebrated and explored' (Bridge and Watson, 2000). In times when investments promise privileges of life that is not conventionally urban, instead more rural or probably neo-urban, mainly with respect to the physical-geographical environment, proximity to a plaguing soar like poverty generates images of a neighbourhood that is dirty, crowded, diseased, non-peaceful and unsafe.

'Perception is perhaps even more important than reality...the illusion of safety is as vital, or even more so, than its reality (Hazel 1992: 28)' (Goss, 2005). Are these images of vulnerabilities of 'one' arising from those of 'the other' real or only illusionary? Perhaps real; this is because just like life, even the city becomes impossible to imagine from someone else's viewpoint which is so radically the opposite, no matter how close the encounter may be.

'Robert Sennett sees the modern city as reflecting the divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, or between the self and the city. Thus cities reflect the great fear of exposure, and are constructed instead to protect our inner (even spiritual) selves from the threat of social contact and from differences...

which plays on fear of "the other" and of violence to entice people into private gated communities' (Bridge and Watson, 2000).

Segmented Periphery :

Questions on belongingness, identities and loyalties that were left unanswered towards the beginning of this discussion can be taken up once more right now. There remains little doubt about the fact that the poor perceives and imagines the city differently from the rich. But within each of these broad class categories, there could exist feelings of us and others on grounds like race, religion, region, language, caste and others. In fact an image that is finally churned out from the layered perceptions of an individual, conceived and fine tuned through the layers of one's own identities is most likely to be different from another. The attempt to extract generalised impressions could sometimes emerge to be too ambitious. In fact 'collective imagination might be held in place through the exercise of discipline and authority' (Bridge and Watson, 2000) alone. Therefore, going by this argument, there are as many images of a city as there are 'city'zens.

What images are expected to emerge when a small cluttered slum, adjacent to the Jadavpur Railway Station, experiences a second order division – into two neatly demarcated segments of space – one for the Bengalis and the other for the Non-Bengalis (precisely the Bihari in-migrants through decades)? (Map 3. See page 21) The demarcation is neat but non material, there exists no fence in between, yet the limits of accessibility and mobility are drawn clearly in the minds of one and all. The distinctly different drinking water sources form the

most conspicuous evidence (Plate 3. See page 21).

What image would people identified as others (Non Bengalis) by their very neighbours, who, though as poor as themselves but are part of the larger cultural identity of the city (Bengalis), draw of the city? It is one of non acceptance, unfamiliarity, othering and alienation. Prolonged existence is believed to erase divides. However prolonged segmented existence is seen to entrench divides. The city in such instances never succeeds in generating imaginations of loyalties; imaginations of the city remain stuck at opportunities forever.

Compacted Core :

‘The sense of a place is also a political fact. What can be done to the look of a locality depends on who controls it... People can be excluded, awed, confused, made acquiescent, or kept ignorant by what they see and hear. So the sense of the environment has always been a matter of moment to any ruling class’ (Goss, 2005) or category.

Golf Green – an old, planned, elite, arty and extremely ‘civilised’ Bengali neighbourhood – an economic residential core and a cultural one as well (Plate 4. See page 22). The image of this particular neighbourhood in the minds of an average Bengali is most ideal, so much so that a lot of Bengalis love to associate the entire city with an identical image, thereby ignoring peripheries of all kinds in the process images they probably portray (Map 4. See page 22).

It is one of the best served wards of the city (ward 95) and each resident appears satisfied with what the government

representatives have done for them and they have done for themselves. Each is opinionated, aware of the existing peripheries of the city, both economic and otherwise and of the conditions and Simultaneously thankful for the privileges they are enjoying and possibly of the non dilution of their share of city space both culturally and economically. The absence of both Non Bengalis (in large numbers) and slums and squatters in the absolute vicinities pleases them beyond expression.

Also, in more ways than one the Golf Green inhabitants are aware that more than they drawing up an image of the city, the city most gratefully draws up an image of itself from neighbourhoods of this stature. However, it must be mentioned at this stage that an area of this kind is quite different from the new and upcoming elite neighbourhoods and gated residences. This particular neighbourhood is in a position to flaunt an aura of tradition that concretises the native culture of the city. The image that they draw of themselves is that of pride and of their counters, one of either criticism or neglected acceptance or simply sympathy.

Cores of Religious Peripheries :

Muslims in India stand out for three distinct characteristics: one, they are a minority group with an overwhelming population, two, they are largely urban and three, they successfully form ghettos in Indian cities. Kolkata has many such areas which, if not ghettos in the strict sense of the term, can at least be called Muslim dominated areas or ‘Muslim areas’ in popular lingo. Two most obvious ones among them are Park Circus and Tangra – the two together along with Tiljala, Topsyia, Beniapukur and others form

a huge chunk of Muslim domination towards the eastern margin of the city.

Religion confers very distinct images to the city space through its unique architectural forms, places of worship (Map 5 See page 22), language used on sign boards, dress codes (Plate 4 see page 22) and food habits of its inhabitants among many others. The vision, the sound, the smell, the light, the dust, the heat – everything together builds up an image of the city or a segment of its space.

Because Kolkata has this overarching image of a Bengali-Hindu-city, images of this nature appear mismatching, distinct, different and distant. Sadly, these very areas (among others of course) are also imagined as poverty stricken, dirt filled, congested and unsafe.

Unfortunately, most of these imaginations are realities. Therefore, circumstantially the inhabitants begin perceiving themselves as mismatching, distinct, different and distant from the others – largely implying the Bengali Hindu population of the city, whose majority existence is reason enough for the city to develop an overarching image.

What Kolkata needs to realise is, an umbrella should be able to shelter more than just one and failing of which shall lead to further distancing, othering and unrest.

Cores of Racial Peripheries :

Yes, racial. No matter how improbable it sounds, there are two segments of city space in Kolkata that have been bearing the testament of racial differentiation for over centuries together. They are the city's Chinatowns.

Very much like the religious core, the Chinese architecture adorns the areas, the Chinese temples, churches and restaurants. But that is about it. No distinct image gets constructed in terms of clothing etc. The Chinese language is visible at places; but they are less of statements and more of decorations possibly – at least that is how they get perceived by the others. In fact most of the Chinese grandeur lay buried in Kolkata's past. 'Drawing on memory, learning from the past in one's relationship is part of [this] self-development and self-actualization. Memory plays a part in the way cities are imagined' (Bridge and Watson, 2000) in the present context.

In fact, the perception that emerges stronger is the absence of any urge to establish a statement what so ever – at least visibly. There the greater under currents of distress and deceit which refuses to emerge as images. What is extremely unfortunate is the whole attitude of ignorance or rather indifference towards all of this.

And this has sadly been the story always. There is not just a difference, but a divide – most obviously and conspicuously visible in the form of huge, tall sinuous walls protecting the Chinatown (in Tangra) (Map 6 See page 23) and exerting an imaginary push for everyone else (Plate 6 See page 23).

Therefore, for an average Bengali, Chinatowns exhibit no image other than those of exciting eating places and unsafe (both environmentally and socially) tanneries at the most. Basically an average Bengali possibly does not realise the need to even develop an imagination more concrete than this.

And as far as the Chinese are concerned, the city paints a picture of the unfamiliar, one of distrust, perhaps alienation as well. In fact the community is so walled, that it is difficult to imagine the imagination it possibly harbours. Their narratives are not open spirited story telling, they imply a lot of caution, calculation and suspicion. It is probably not the narratives but the narration that paints clearer pictures of existing perceptions.

Homeless in the City :

A 'city'zen builds up an image of the city principally because the city acts as one's home and workplace. The imagination of a city develops because one is able to construct a niche for oneself within the same. What imagination can therefore develop for an individual for whom the city has failed to serve as either? Only inhabitants can have imaginations, the homeless cannot because they are not inhabitants. Homelessness, though an outcome of economic classification, cannot actually be called a class, neither are they a non-class category. They are invisible though most obviously visible. In fact, it is rather impossible to categorise the human lives which are spent on the city streets. What is all the more impossible is to imagine an imagination or an image of the city on their behalf; for anybody who has a roof to sleep under cannot have any idea as to what it might possibly feel to sleep without one. It is also equally awkward and rude to ask for an opinion of this nature from people living these lives everyday for years. Decoding their responses and narratives is all the more difficult and disturbing. Rethinking on the contrary, it

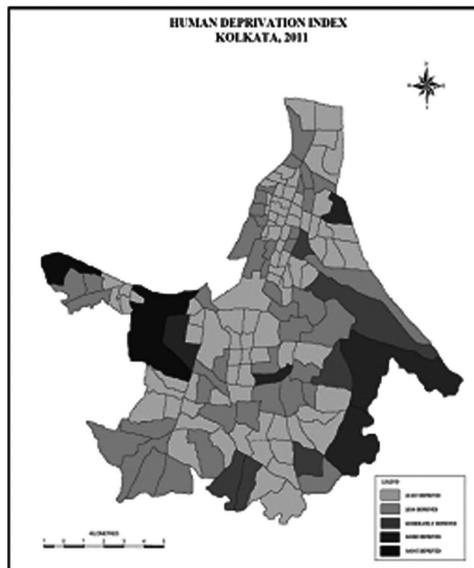
is these imaginations that emerge to be the simplest – they are neither statements nor fantasies, they are void.

From the collage of city images 'Missing are those 'homeless voices' describing the personal experiences of homelessness and providing insights into how individuals cope with life in the street' (Wolch, 2005). Kolkata's homeless (Map 7, Plate 7 and Plate 8 see page 23 and 24) have neither an image nor an imagination what so ever of the city. In fact they find neither the leisure nor a reason to develop one.

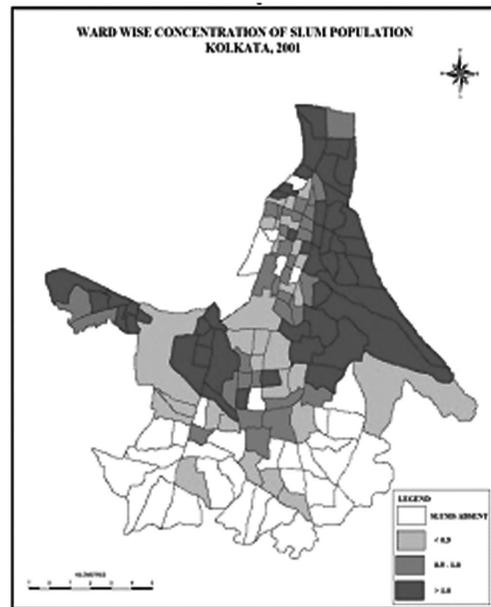
What takes people to the places where they are found?

The population within an extensively complicated urban space of which Kolkata is an example, is often conceived of as an 'amorphous agglomeration' of masses as compared to the organised community of a village or a small town. This conception is based on the ideal character of a predominantly secondary form of interrelationship attributed to the life in a large and complex urban centre whose social structure is built up by an arrangement of multiple groups or communities. Also, there develops a relationship between the community and the space they occupy within the confines of a city socially, culturally, economically, politically and so on. Therefore, the city exhibits various forms of functional 'zones', 'sectors' and 'areas'. These again are further subdivided into smaller units of named or designated localities which in turn are broken down to the extent of households and the so called localities thus are in comparative proximity or distance with each other (Maitra, 1982).

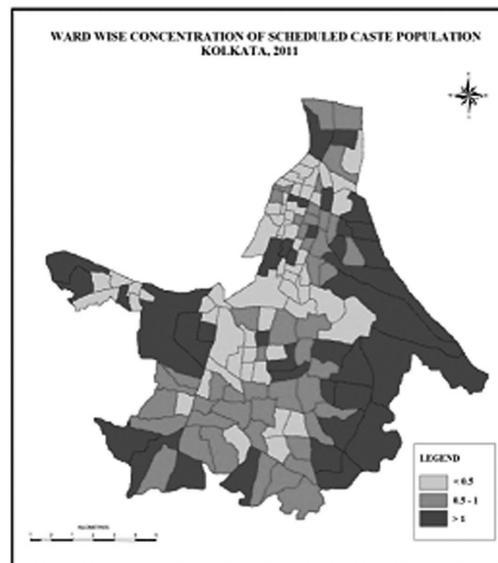
The nomenclature of urban spaces in Kolkata, for example *kumortoli*, *kosaitola*, *sovabazar*, *burrabazar*, *cheenapara*, *shahebpura* and so on through time and to date explicitly speak of distinctive image building through functional clustering of communities, uses city spaces had been put to and ethnic/racial clustering for comfort respectively. There is little doubt in the inference that it is only human to concentrate according to comfort and convenience and that in turn is most likely to generate differential city spaces and images of otherness. In fact there existed a pattern to this puzzle. However, the injection of uncontrolled capital into cities has disrupted the existing patterns and has generated brand new ones. It is said to have created first world spaces within third world cities, making a slum adjacent to a shopping mall and a gated residence adjoining a railway station feel increasingly awkward as a result. Capital however demands an interpretation beyond just the economic, into the realm



Map 8



Map 9



Map 10

that is social, cultural and of course political. Therefore, a struggling slum does not hesitate to struggle further by segmenting itself along linguistic lines and the city along religious and racial.

An analysis of the three maps (Map 8,9 and 10) provides evidence for the discussion above. They reveal if there are places where the poor concentrates, it automatically leads to the emergence of those where the non poor does. Second, if there are areas where the slum dwellers concentrate, there are those where they do not and third, social divides largely coincide with economic divides. Therefore, the three above inferences answer that one basic question, which is, even if human clustering (the obvious reason for collective image and imagination building) is age old and instinctive, they are certainly not unreasonable and/or random.

Conclusion :

So what if human beings cluster? So what they build up images and imaginations as a result? Why does one at all need to ponder upon the images one is constantly breeding? Does it have any impact at all in the real every-days of a city dweller? Possibly it does. One's space of inhabitancy explains one's position within the city society for this is the space one has been allotted and the rest (both spaces and persons) denied. This is also because images finally mould interactions (with respect to both spaces and persons) and interactions mould everything else. More often than not, image production is an unconscious task humans are undertaking every moment and everything else gets judged accordingly and judging is an act

human beings cannot help but perform. Sometimes the act can of course be entirely conscious and purposive.

Therefore, 'Imaginations of cities are powerful and have their effects. In some instances they may represent an attempt to overcome our sense of alienation from the city; in others they are an outcome of that, and no doubt these responses exist in some kind of tension' (Bridge and Watson, 2000) ... 'All these tensions – between imaginative innovation or constraint, between actualization or remoteness, between the individual or the collective imagination – emerge not just in the effects of the city on imagination but in the way that the city is imagined, the way it is *represented*' (Bridge and Watson, 2000) ...one's imagination of the city 'can be either an escape from the problems of cities, or an act of resistance, or both. Any representations and imaginaries are bound to be in a state of flux and will also be subject to contestation by those who feel excluded or on the margins of the dominant imaginary' (Bridge and Watson, 2000).

However to conclude on a positive note, 'we can restore the lost sense of commitment and belonging; we can counteract the phenomenon of alienation, isolation and loneliness and achieve a sense of identity (Gruen 1973: 11)' (Goss, 2005). If image production is as conscious as it is unconscious and if perceptions influence actions as much as actions influence perceptions, then churning out images of positivity, of tolerance, of acceptance, of harmony, of logic and reason shall help one take oneself and the city towards the ideal it is supposed to personify.

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Endnotes

The first map shows variations in ‘Human Deprivation Index’, calculated and plotted using data from the Census of India, 2011 and a method taken from Human Development Report, Uttar Pradesh, 2008, Planning Department, government of Uttar Pradesh, Planning commission of India, United Nations Development Programme. This map is the basis for claiming the slum on E.M. Bypass to belong to a ward that is poorly served (ward no. 32) and for golf green to be one of the best served wards (ward no. 95). The second one shows variations in ‘Slum Concentration’, calculated and plotted using data from the Census of India, 2001. This map is the basis for claiming the slum along Jadavpur railway station to be located within a ward that is reported as slum free (ward no. 104). The third map shows ‘Concentration of Scheduled Caste Population in Kolkata’, calculated and plotted using data from the Census of India, 2011. For the second and the third map, the Location Quotient method has been used.

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