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Dreaming of Diasporas: Urban Developments and Transnational Identities in Contemporary Kolkata

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contested nature of diasporas and their complex involvement in dynamics of international development by focusing on the recent construction of luxury condominiums on the fringes of the Indian metropolis of Kolkata. These new housing projects are built and marketed with a self-consciously global aesthetic and are actively promoted to both overseas Indian communities and local elites as spaces in which one can take up an explicitly “international” identity. This paper argues that these discourses and developments regarding life-space and lifestyle are part of a broader project intended to help Kolkata regain its glory as a “world city.” Furthermore, it is suggested that the deployment of the heavily mythologized figure of the global Indian is a crucial element for mobilizing key actors and constituting material transformations in the postcolonial city.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte examine la nature contestée des diasporas et leur implication complexe dans les dynamiques de développement international en se concentrant sur les récentes constructions de condominiums luxueux en bordure de la métropole indienne de Kolkata. Ces constructions nouvelles sont bâties et mises sur le marché en valorisant un esthétisme consciemment global. Elles sont activement promues, à la fois aux communautés Indiennes outre-mer et aux élites locales, comme étant des espaces dans lesquels un individu peut acquérir une identité « internationale » explicite. Ce texte argumente que ces discours et ces développements au sujet de l'espace de vie, et de style de vie, font partie d'un projet plus large visant à soutenir Kolkata pour regagner sa gloire passée comme « ville du monde ». De plus, il est

suggéré que le déploiement de la figure lourdement mythique de l'Indien global est un élément crucial pour mobiliser des acteurs principaux et pour constituer des transformations matérielles dans la ville post-coloniale.

I would like you to reach out and invest in a new India. Invest not just financially, but intellectually, socially, culturally and, above all, emotionally ... come engage with India. (NDTV.com 2007)

With these words, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh welcomed participants to the Government of India's annual celebration of the Indian diaspora. Like many other national as well as regional governments and municipalities, today's Indian state is deeply involved in efforts to capitalize on the wealth and resources of its overseas communities. For many others—including scholars, international financial institutions and social movements—the diasporic desire to participate in re-imagining and reshaping former homes remains a topic of keen interest. Such attention is warranted by the long-distance nationalism expressed within diasporic communities, which has supported a variety of political causes, from Ireland to Israel and from the Balkans to South Asia.

In recent years the interest in diasporic political connections and economic relationships has only intensified. In part this reflects ongoing debates regarding global migration, as evidenced by arguments concerning “illegal immigration” on the one hand and “brain drain” on the other. But it is also evidence of the sheer size and volume of diasporic capital in today's global economy. Remittances—money sent by workers back to their “home” countries—grew from US\$66 billion in 2000 to over US\$268 billion in 2006 (Ratha 2005: 42; 2006: 3), with some observers estimating a further 35 to 250 per cent of these amounts transferred through informal channels (Freund and Spatafora 2005: 1). For governments in developing countries and international financial institutions in particular, such figures represent a lucrative and what they consider untapped source of funds. Attracting and using diasporic capital—including investments, remittances and property or business ownership—has become an especially important strategy for a number of national governments in an era of declining foreign aid and unstable foreign investment.

Political and economic linkages, therefore, tend to dominate much of the research and literature on immigrant, diasporic or expatriate communities and development in putative or ancestral homelands. This paper argues, however, that a much broader reading of both capital and cultural flows related to diasporas is necessary to understand the implications of invitations to “engage” with one's homeland. As Kapur suggests, “it is worth asking whether a less visible, quantifiable, and tangible form of remittances—namely social remittances and the flow of ideas—have a more critical impact than their pecuniary counterpart” (2005: 357). It is

the flow of ideas, in the context of the global Indian diaspora and development on the subcontinent, that is the focus of this paper. In particular, I am concerned with how certain dominant political and economic discourses have helped to produce a monolithic vision of the Indian diaspora. Buttressed by government policy, and reinforced through a range of cultural texts, this unitary view of the Indian diasporic experience—as primarily transnational, wealthy, successful and professional, and often narrow in its portrayal of gender, sexual and religious identities—has been deployed for a variety of purposes both within India and its various diasporic communities.

This paper examines the use of the figure of the non-resident Indian (NRI) in the design and marketing of luxury condominiums on the fringes of the Indian metropolis of Kolkata. These new housing projects are built and marketed with a self-consciously global aesthetic that targets both overseas Indian communities and local elites. The projects are promoted as spaces in which one can embody a transnational, cosmopolitan, modern and quintessentially urban lifestyle. Such projects are a crucial element in the promotion of Kolkata as a global city, one that can be an attractive destination for both foreign multinationals and successful sons and daughters overseas. While these new housing developments have engendered significant local criticism regarding their social and ecological impact, opposing their construction has been made especially difficult due to their symbolic importance as emblems of “the new India” heralded by much of the dominant political and cultural discourse.

This paper explores the contested nature of diasporas and the distinctions among connections to place, nation and home and the construction of the “Mythic Global Indian” through selected cultural texts and government policies. An overview of urban development in Kolkata, and the dominant representations of the city that have necessitated for some the desire to achieve (or reclaim) a global status, provides insight into how these two forces—the idea of the global Indian diaspora on the one hand and the ongoing urban development in Kolkata’s peri-urban fringes on the other—have come together through planning, design and marketing of luxury condominiums.

Defining Diasporas and the Making of the Mythic Global Indian

The label diaspora has in recent years become sought-after and contested. Communities that might have formerly referred to themselves as a cultural association, heritage group, philanthropic organization or political action committee are increasingly self-identifying as an explicitly ethnic or national diaspora. Such groups are also being brought into larger intra-national and international diasporic structures such as the global Chinese “Huaren” (Ong 2003: 82-83). National authorities like the Government of India are also actively targeting wealthy diasporic individuals and organizations for fundraising and investment

purposes and they continue to promote the concept of a distinctly Indian “overseas identity.” Diasporas have become a popular subject of study for development agencies as well as for academics within a number of disciplines.

Gilroy suggests that “[the] idea of diaspora offers a ready alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging. It rejects the popular image of natural nations spontaneously endowed with self-consciousness, tidily composed of uniform families” (Gilroy 2000: 23). Hall offers a notion of the diasporic experience as defined

[not] by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall 1994: 396)

But the diasporic turn in the study of so-called ethnic communities has not been without challenge. Many critics complain that the idea is too often conflated with concepts such as transnationalism and more general processes of migration and population movement (Mishra 2004: 171-72). Some argue that the concept of the diaspora as a term that defines communities of hope living through exile and dreaming of home must be recovered (Brazier and Mannur 2001: 8). For writers like Gilroy, diaspora is a useful concept in opening up the question of identity beyond the particularities and atavisms of static, essentialized Selves. Diaspora can be a starting rather than an ending point, a node of intersection between physical, cultural and economic spaces. Accordingly, the term has been used to describe a vast array of groups, from trading communities to labour migrants, from imperial functionaries to IT professionals seeking education or work abroad. In this paper I follow Gilroy and others, such as Walsh (2004), who suggest that creating exclusionary boundaries around the term is both morally problematic and analytically unhelpful. Ultimately, my use of diaspora is a way of illustrating the contested, shifting and creative relationships between space, place and power.

These debates over what constitutes a diaspora are not readily apparent when one looks at the current imagining and mythologizing of the Indian diaspora—known by a variety of appellations including *desi*, NRI and person of Indian origin (PIO). Where once émigrés were viewed with suspicion and considerable resentment for “abandoning” their former homelands, today large segments of the Indian diaspora are viewed as heroic and they are in this sense integral to the creation of a successful pan-Indian, global identity. To understand how and why this shift has occurred, one needs to look carefully at the constitution of the global Indian diaspora itself. Who is and who is not counted as part of this group? What criteria define membership and exclusion?

The size of the Indian diaspora is variously estimated at anywhere between 18 and 40 million people worldwide (High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora 2002). The wide discrepancy in figures has much to do with how one defines membership; the numbers can include Indian citizens living outside of the country, those who have emigrated directly or recently from India, and those who have Indian or mixed-Indian heritage. Many of these groups do not necessarily claim membership in the Indian diaspora but instead identify more with their more recent “homes.” For example, the descendents of indentured labourers in the Caribbean or trading classes who migrated to east Africa and were then forcibly expelled and resettled in North America, rarely self-identify as Indian. Being counted as part of the diaspora, however, may not be a choice and may indeed have negative consequences.¹ There has also been a tendency to subsume South Asian under “Indian,” when in fact the region produces many national and sub-national diasporas. Prashad argues that

India is present today in the body of the Indians and others from the South Asian subcontinent, who now number 1.4 million in the United States. But these people are not all “Indians.” Many are from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, the Maldives, Africa, England, Canada, Fiji, or the Caribbean, and many are born and bred within the United States. The stain of ancestry and the hegemony of the word “India” remains with us as we seek to make our own way through the morass of the contemporary world. (2000: 2)

It is difficult to know, therefore, whom one is describing when speaking of the Indian diaspora. For one thing, the claim that those from the Indian parts of the subcontinent identify with India first and foremost is a tenuous one. Much of the literature on remittances and diaspora-influenced development has shown that many within overseas communities identify much more strongly with regional cultures, hometown associations, neighborhood relationships, and familial bonds than with the nation-state (Chami et al. 2005; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003; Ley 2004). In this sense it is a Gujarati, Punjabi or Keralite identity—rather than an Indian one—that is predominant in the formation of the diasporic self. Locating such sub-national identities through instruments like maps or censuses is therefore not easy, as any search for a Bengali diaspora demonstrates. Diasporas tend to be identified within host country census data by their association with nation-states (e.g., India, Mexico, Italy) or supra-national regions (e.g., Latin America, Eastern Europe). Any potential Bengali diaspora does not conform to such boundaries. The ethno-linguistic culture associated with parts of the eastern sub-continent straddles two major religions (Hinduism and Islam) and national borders (India and Bangladesh), not to mention distinctions based on caste, class, gender and the rural-urban divide. Finding the *prabasi* (overseas) Bengali is therefore fraught with difficulties; this is perhaps why an Indian rather than a Bengali diasporic identity is interpellated in the Kolkata example examined below.

Nevertheless, Indian diasporas, variously defined, form significant minority populations not only in advanced industrialized countries such as the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia, but also in the Persian Gulf and throughout Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and the South Pacific. Such a diverse presence may indeed suggest a truly global reach for the Indian diaspora—situated in multiple locations, leaving from diverse trajectories, working in different occupations and assuming a range of identities. I argue, however, that the dominant representation of the diasporic Indian is of the successful NRI/PIO, who is the exemplar of the “model minority.”

The overseas Indian who inhabits such an identity is characterized as hardworking, entrepreneurial, intelligent and willing to be educated; in other words, the antithesis of those troublesome “immigrants and minorities who have long been depicted as lazy, grasping, and needy” (Prashad 2000: 3–6). This representation has lost much of its lustre in the post-9/11 era, as discourses of racialized securitization have to some degree overwhelmed the celebratory chords of globalization, and diasporic Indians often find themselves lumped into the category of threatening dark-skinned Others. Yet it is hard to deny that significant sections of the Indian diaspora across the globe have indeed been highly successful and prosperous in their new homes (Motwani, Gosine and Barot-Motwani 1993). Indian IT engineers rank second in number only to Chinese immigrants in Silicon Valley and they make up a sizable proportion of today’s high-tech millionaires across the globe (Saxenian 1999). Some have estimated the combined gross assets of the Indian diaspora at around US\$300 billion (roughly equivalent to India’s GDP), with a combined net worth of between US\$40 and US\$60 billion (High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora 2002: 417). Nor have these successful émigrés been stingy with their good fortune; in recent years remittance flows to India outpaced Mexico as the country receiving the largest volume of remittances in the world, totaling over US\$16 billion (IMF 2003). The Gujarati diaspora alone, which makes up less than 0.01 per cent of the population of the U.S is estimated to control more than 5 per cent of that country’s wealth (High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora 2002: 169–77).

The apparent success of this group is also reflected in a wide variety of cultural texts, both within the sub-continent and in many diasporic Indian communities. In films and literature, radio documentaries and community newspapers, television dramas and soap operas, news programs and Internet blogs, the dominant narrative that emerges tends to privilege the migration and settlement experiences of affluent, highly educated and highly skilled émigrés. Such representations tend to obscure the histories and contemporary experiences of numerous other groups who also left the sub-continent and identify with it. *India Today*, a magazine with global circulation, featured special issues in 2003 and 2004 devoted to the diaspora, and it now includes a “Global Indian Report” in each issue. One editorial showed a

particular understanding of who comprises the Indian diaspora and of why they should be celebrated:

Last year, *India Today*, which shares a sense of adventure with these intrepid Indians, saluted their achievements in a special Global Indian issue. This year, we celebrate the second generation, or overseas-born Indians (OBIs), who may not call India their home but who are nevertheless more than the sum of the fragments of their parents' lives. Born in the two great migrations of the 1960s and 1980s to largely educated professionals, these navigators of the New and Old Worlds are slowly rising to great prominence in their homelands, often in areas their parents would not have dreamed possible. (*India Today* 2004: 3)

This statement is interesting not only for what it says but for what it leaves out. There are, in this interpretation, only “two great migrations” which have spawned the Indian diaspora. Such a reckoning leaves many out of the picture, such as descendents of indentured servants in the Caribbean and traders in Africa, Sikh labourers who established themselves in farming and forestry sectors in North America, and the millions who continue to labour as taxi drivers, domestic workers and janitors, and in many other non-professional occupations in North America, Europe and especially the Gulf states. These people have not disappeared, as the distribution of diasporic populations illustrates, but in terms of the myth of the global Indian diaspora, they may as well not exist.

If one were to look at Bollywood films and the glut of publications devoted to hybrid identities now popular within the sub-continent and abroad, it would seem that the only successful diasporic individuals are IT workers and yuppies. Consider the categories into which *India Today* groups its overseas-born Indians: the politicians, the trailblazers, the professionals, the hybrids and the entertainers. Those profiled include recording artists, advertising executives, doctors, software engineers, Hollywood actors, stock analysts, scriptwriters, venture capitalists and U.S. senators. This gives a narrow impression of what constitutes the Indian diaspora, an impression that has become reinforced through successive government policies. As Desai suggests, in recent years

[the] deterritorialized nonresident Indians became imagined as crucial to the Indian economy and nation-state in filmic national narratives. Since then, the deterritorialized Indian has been imagined as internal and integral to the Indian nation-state. Consequently, filmic representations, as well as state policies have shifted to reflect this discourse. (2004: 40-41)

State policies that have underscored the cultural importance of the mythic Global Indian include: the establishment of a legislative committee to study the Indian diaspora across the globe; the co-founding with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce of an annual celebration of overseas Indians; the creation of a division of NRI Affairs within the federal ministry of external affairs;

the extension of dual citizenship rights to selected communities (mainly based in affluent Western countries); the granting of special visa privileges (through a PIO card program); allowing diasporic individuals special dispensation to own immovable property and invest in business ventures within India; and even allowing some NRIs to stand for election to the Indian parliament (Yelaja 2006). A former high-ranking civil servant who helped found the NRI division said of the Indian government's initiatives toward its diaspora:

Our destinies are interlinked. The overseas Indians are an excellent resource for us. If today India is shining, then the diaspora is shining too. We say to the diaspora that you have as much to gain from us as we do from you; it is a mutually beneficial relationship. (Sharma 2004)

If, as previously stated, diaspora identities are more often linked to place than to nation-states, how might Kolkata—often cited as a foundational touchstone of Bengali identity—be implicated in the diasporic interpellations and identifications discussed in this paper?

Kolkata: From Colonial City to Imperial Centre to Post-Industrial Wasteland

Kolkata/Calcutta, as Hutnyk once remarked, “suffers from a bad press.” Its reputation as a place of “poverty and despair, of desperation and decline” is nothing new for the city (1996: vii). Kolkata has had many names over its three hundred years of existence, and few of them have been flattering. The fledgling settlement was known as “Golgotha” to the British soldiers, sailors, tradesmen and clerks who accompanied Job Charnock at the time of the city's founding, connoting a Biblical place of skulls with heavy, humid air and high mortality rates due to malaria. To the 19th century urban intelligentsia who first made it a centre for indolence, then one of learning and finally the centre of a vigorous proto-nationalist and anti-colonial movement, it became a “City of Palaces” (Sanyal 1993: 42-44). To the British Empire's scribe Rudyard Kipling, Calcutta was “the City of Dreadful Night,” an oppressive, crowded city blanketed by a “dense wet heat” and the cries of “yelling jackals” (1891). Rajiv Gandhi branded it a “dying city,” bereft of industry, activity and hope. Patrick Swayze's reading of Calcutta as the “City of Joy” turned a bad book by Dominique Lapierre into an equally bad film filled with clichés about a city's need for a white knight to save them. Kolkata's municipal government once attempted to brand the city as the City of Joy. More recently, the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation has extolled Kolkata as “the gateway to the Asian tigers ... offering the shortest distance to the rich treasure trove of the Asia Pacific region” (2006). The many names given to Kolkata reflect the multifaceted history of the city—from a colonial past to industrial decline to a hopeful and self-proclaimed resurgence; all the while facing a situation of wealth and poverty, cheek by jowl, in the city space itself.

The city has also been characterized by what Hutnyk has termed “a poverty of representation,” a tendency to view its life and prospects through the lenses of charity, poverty, pollution and tourism. For Hutnyk, the “rumour of Calcutta refers to that imaginary Calcutta of guidebooks and charitable Western sympathies, but also to the experience of Calcutta which sometimes impinges upon those who visit *despite* the guidebook protocols” (1996: 3). Hutnyk reveals these particularly Orientalist representations and highlights the role that Kolkata has played within local politics and culture in Bengal and India. It is a symbol of many things: anti-thesis of rural land and political reforms, ruins of imperial grandeur, fecund soil for a neoliberal rebirth. It is a crucial node in the construction, maintenance and reformulation of Bengali identity, urban and rural, diasporic and local.

Kolkata has long extended its reach outside of its city limits, encompassing an amorphous and ever-changing “hinterland” over which it exercises primacy. It once was a primate city both nationally and internationally, and it still exerts this dominance on a regional scale. For centuries, migrant labour has been attracted to the city from all across the subcontinent, especially the neighboring provinces, to work in industries, agriculture and as servants. The city was an important point in the extension of 19th-century globalization and imperialism, through its prominent role in the British Empire; indeed, it was once described as the second city in the Raj, behind only London in receiving technological advancements such as city gas lights, or in its concentration of administrative and political power (Chatterjee 1990; Chattopadhyay 2006). The city has also long been a crucial site of resistance and revolt, especially in the anti-colonial and nationalist struggles against the British. Even today its sphere of influence continues to be exercised over neighbouring Indian states as well as countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. It is the third largest urban agglomeration in India, following Mumbai and Delhi—the 2001 Indian census puts the population of the city at well over 13 million. While India may still be a country of many villages, mega-cities like Kolkata are increasingly the sites in which we see many of the problems that confront the contemporary Indian nation as a whole.²

It is in these rapidly urbanizing cities with increasing population growth and concentration that one cannot avoid issues of mass unemployment, widespread illiteracy, the explosive growth of slums, snarling traffic congestion, loss of public and green spaces, alarming levels of water and air pollution and a general deterioration of infrastructure and services. Such problems contribute to the general sense of neglect and decline that has gripped Kolkata for decades, especially in the post-Independence period. In the early part of the 20th century, Kolkata lost its position as national capital to Delhi, and by 1947 the province of Bengal—of which it was the centre—was divided in the Partition that accompanied Britain’s departure from the subcontinent. The eastern, mostly Muslim-populated wing of the province became East Pakistan, in what was a lengthy, traumatic and violent process. Kolkata experienced decline in both economic and political power and

its city services were overwhelmed by the enormous influx of refugees, somewhere between three and six million in the period following Partition alone. Massive population transfers and violence accompanied Partition, but unlike northern India, Bengal saw the effects cyclically and at a lower level, with refugee flows continuing for close to fifty years and spiking during various conflicts (such as the 1947 Partition and the 1971 civil war that created Bangladesh out of East Pakistan).

Calcutta did not, of course, disappear from the political and economic landscape of India. West Bengal in the 1950s was still a leading industrial state in the country with established economic infrastructure and an extensive manufacturing industry (including automobiles, chemicals and consumer goods) and its population at this time still maintained the highest per capita income levels in India. Just as Delhi had replaced Kolkata as the political capital forty years earlier, in mid-century Mumbai began to replace it as the economic capital. The 1960s saw considerable economic stagnation and capital flight from the city, a trend that continued through periods of profound political instability and turmoil. In 1977 an alliance of leftist parties took control of the state and ushered in an era of rural reforms and a measure of stability in West Bengal; for Kolkata, however, the following decades brought yet more flight of capital, the degradation of an aging public infrastructure, a scramble for upper-middle class housing construction and an increase in corruption and inefficiency in municipal governance.

The situation has changed considerably in the last two decades. After 1991, with the introduction of what is known as the liberalization era (following India's acceptance of neoliberal economic reforms on the heels of an International Monetary Fund assistance agreement), significant investment was focused on Kolkata, especially in the city's service sector as well as manufacturing in its industrial suburbs. This period has seen an explosive growth of private and public-private partnerships as a way of redeveloping the city through new urban housing projects aimed at an emerging and global middle class. The state, in conjunction with municipal authorities, has also emphasized a cosmopolitan and business-friendly attitude among young entrepreneurs through educational and trading incentives. It has also instituted long-term plans to ease traffic in Kolkata with Japanese-assisted construction of flyovers in the city, and to implement user fees such as a water tax, notably unpopular with the poorer segments of the population.

As a result of some of these changes and the new "business-friendly" attitude of the Left Front—the governing coalition of leftist parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that has been in power in West Bengal since 1977—Kolkata, like other regions of India, has seen the rapid growth of financial and producer service sectors since the mid-1990s, including the proliferation of call centre firms servicing transnational corporations. The West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation (2007) has prioritized efforts to attract IT

companies, initiatives that are paying off with the increasing location of outsourcing operations in Kolkata. Recent arrivals include IBM, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Tata Consultancy Services, Cognizant, Wipro, and Satyam. The state government has declared IT a utility, thus disallowing strikes in the sector; it has set up a gems and jewelry park in Salt Lake and a toys park to attract investment in these sectors; and it has improved power and phone service across the state and especially in Kolkata itself (Department of Information Technology, Government of West Bengal 2007).

Perhaps most notoriously, the Government of West Bengal along with the municipal government in Kolkata, has initiated a series of urban “renewal” and “regeneration” measures. One of the best known was the euphemistically titled Operation Sunshine in 1996, waged against hawkers and pavement dwellers, which included their forced removal and relocation to urban fringes in order to clean up the streets of Kolkata. A later series of campaigns for the “beautification of Calcutta” (2003–2005) similarly included evictions of slum and pavement dwellers.

These developments have not occurred without problems: social, ecological and economic. As previously noted, Kolkata and Bengal have long been sites of political ferment and agitation, from the nationalist to the Naxalite movement and many other struggles besides. The changes wrought on the landscape of Kolkata have resulted in considerable organizing and opposition, whether against evictions, urban renewal, privatization, modernization or a raft of other neoliberal initiatives. Union movements, environmental groups and popu-list struggles have all challenged these exclusionary visions of the future. But among many middle-class Bengalis and Kolkatans, there is today a great deal of confidence and optimism about the future. Some say approvingly that the “city of joy” has become the “city of flyovers” (Mukherjee 2004). A particular source of pride for many has been the surge in building construction in and around the city in recent years, especially in the number of “international style” luxury condominiums. In these housing complexes and transformations of urban space in Kolkata, the idea of the mythic Global Indian and the idea of the global city have taken concrete shape.

Selling the Dream: Advertising Fantasies and the Diasporic Indian

What is it that marks a city as “global”? And why does it seem that so many urban agglomerations today are vying for the designation? Considerable scholarship has been devoted to urban planning and the economic, social and political impacts of world cities in recent years. Particularly influential have been accounts of world-city formation offered by scholars such as Friedmann (1986) and Sassen (2000). Sassen suggests that while some believed that the end of the 20th century would signal a decline in the importance of cities due to the emergence and consolidation of globalization, the reverse is true: the power of transnational capital must be produced spatially, in physical as well as temporal sites of global control (2000: 1).

Within many cities, including those in the so-called Third World, a concomitant phenomenon in recent years has been the explosive growth of housing developments similar to the ones at the fringes of Kolkata (2004). King discusses the development of diaspora-driven/oriented housing and comments on the importance of habitation in our understanding of identity by looking at a series of advertisements selling luxury-style condominiums in Delhi. Place is a crucial associative element for King in that “the location and dwelling where we live is one (important) way of how we either choose to, or are seen to, represent ourselves to others” (129). He suggests, moreover, that “the international advertising and marketing of substantial suburban residential property apparently based on “Western” styles familiar to the residential locations of the Western-based NRIs has, over the last two decades and with other forms of property development, increasingly become a form of globalized practice ... in places as far apart as Australia and California, Indonesia, Canada, Turkey, as well as more generally” (King 2004: 131). There are several questions that arise in such a scenario. If these types of developments are taking place, then what types of identities are being projected by the condominiums and the lifestyles they are offering? Who are the idealized inhabitants? I contend that to a large degree the identity promoted and reified through these projects and their proponents is that of the Mythic Global Indian. It is toward those within India or elsewhere who represent such a formulation that these developments are aimed.

Kolkata has a storied past with many of the features which characterize a world city: a rich cultural heritage, spectacular architecture (colonial edifices such as the Victoria Memorial), a rebirth as an economic and political center, modern transportation infrastructure such as a subway. Yet it has also suffered through a serious decline. My contention is that the urban transformations on the eastern fringes of the city are part of a broader project to recover and build on the past; to transform Calcutta-the-poor into Kolkata-the-rising. Kolkata is viewed by many to be a city on the way up. The American Chamber of Commerce has recently set up a branch in Kolkata, its fifth in India after Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai. Multinational corporations, especially those involved in so-called business process outsourcing have relocated to the city and its environs. Singapore Airlines, Lufthansa and Emirates Air have all recently added direct flights to Kolkata.

Such renewed linkages to the outside world through networks of capital, labour and transportation can help us understand why there may have been such phenomenal growth in Kolkata housing projects that have an explicitly “international” flavour, and which target diasporas as well as local elites. There has been an enormous boom in the creation of housing complexes and new townships to the east of the city, especially along the new highway called the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass which connects Kolkata to the international airport. The largest townships in this region, Rajarhat and New Town Kolkata, are designed to house 500,000 people (78 per cent of whom are targeted as middle and upper income earners),

among high-technology oriented office complexes and open spaces. Luxury hotels have appeared in the area, as well as convention centers, specialty hospitals, condominium complexes, malls and multiplex cinemas. Many of these projects have been undertaken in partnership with state agencies. The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (2006), for example, has explicitly moved away from expertise and experience in “slum improvement” toward projects tied to “significant cost recovery or surplus generation components” focusing on residential middle-class housing, as well as new area and commercial facility development.

The municipality is also in on the act; a prominent figure in local public-private partnerships is the Calcutta Metropolitan Group (CMG), a joint venture between the city and the United Credit Beeline Group. Among their many projects is “Hiland Park,” designed as one of the tallest sets of structures in the city, which includes nine 28-floor towers with close to one thousand luxury apartments and a shopping mall. In addition to numerous other housing developments, the CMG has also been responsible for highway improvement projects, building hospitals, aquatic and adventure theme parks, high-tech and industrial parks, hydroelectric dams, the New Kolkata Township at Rajarhat, hotels and port facilities.

Kolkata’s efforts in these and other initiatives have not gone unnoticed by the international real-estate market. In particular, several agencies who serve NRIs have featured Kolkata prominently in recent years. HDFC Realty (2006), for example, tells prospective buyers that the “[suburban] area in the periphery of Calcutta has generated a fair amount of demand amongst the flat buyers in the middle and lower middle income categories ... a lot many [*sic*] projects are mushrooming in the peripheral suburban areas of Calcutta due to this persistent demand.” Another property development firm says of Kolkata on its website,

[with] a spate of new infrastructural developments properties in Kolkata have suddenly become prime real estate. The city is witnessing construction of international style apartment complexes. The range includes 2 to 5 bedroom flats, villas and townhouses suiting varied budgets. (Axiom Estates 2006)

To the west of the city, an Indonesian company has signed an agreement to build the West Kolkata International Township, billed as India’s first foreign direct investment in real estate. The developers note:

There are lots of rich Indians overseas. We intend also to sell to them. They will invest in this project and bring in the dollars. The NRIs want to buy a second home at home. (Ciputra Group of Indonesia 2006)

Many of these projects are aimed in a similar fashion at the “successful” NRI or those who aspire to be like one, as represented in popular culture and the media. Yet another project—“Rosedale Garden,” initiated by two MIT graduates from

Kolkata now working in Silicon Valley—would be a “slice of Americana on the fringes of the city.” In the words of the developers:

It would offer NRIs the standard of living they are used to in the West. The complex would combine the best of both worlds, a blend of the conveniences of the West and the earthy charm of Bengal. It’s not just about returning to one’s roots, but also an urge, a commitment to make Bengal a better place. (Saha 2006)

The projects in question are marketed through websites, advertisements in prominent local as well as diasporic publications and other forms of media, and through a series of travelling road shows to diasporic locales such as London, New York and Toronto. They are designed by various architects, both local and international. But their imagining conjures very specific and consistent images of home and habitat, from their names, to the amenities they offer, to the clientele they target. Many of these features are not unique to the Kolkata case; one need only look at the global growth in condominium design and marketing to see many of the same trends. The pace and scale of construction in Kolkata rivals developments in other major urban centers. There are more than fifty major projects underway in Kolkata; they are primarily high-rise apartment buildings, although some aspire to be skyscrapers in a city with precious few.

Beyond altering the Kolkata skyline, such massive developments will have a significant impact on the social, economic and ecological environment of the city. Critics worry that rapid urbanization in the areas most favoured by developers will threaten the East Kolkata Wetlands, an ecologically sensitive region that includes fisheries, farms and an ingenious system for managing Kolkata’s waste (Bunting et al. 2002). The wetlands provide approximately 150 tonnes of fresh vegetables daily and more than 10,500 tons of fish for urban markets within Kolkata, mainly serving the working poor. The area has a total population of between 62,000 and 100,000 people living in several semi-rural dependent villages. This includes an extensive workforce: 8,500 are employed directly in co-operative or private fisheries, with another 6,000 working in wastewater-fed rice fields and 4,000 people engaged in vegetable farming on garbage (Sarkar 1990: 173). Additionally, a further 20–25,000 work as waste pickers at the municipal Dhapa dump. Numerous people are also involved in trading produce from the area.

The new housing projects will therefore inevitably displace many of those whose livelihoods are tied to the physical spaces upon which the diaspora-inspired urban dreams are to be built. Yet they—like those made invisible by the myth of the “model minority”—are nowhere to be seen in the planning of many of the new buildings.³ The names of the projects instead often denote a sense of disconnection with the local in favour of allusions to the global or the modern, especially to high-tech futures—Technopolis, Ideal City, Unitech Uniworld City or Infinity Benchmark, for example. A further common theme tying many of these housing

developments together is both their inclusion of numerous attendant facilities including private schools, swimming pools, country clubs and shopping malls and their reliance on images of the diasporic Indian as an ideal denizen for the new homes. The advertising copy for the Sanjeevani Group's "Bengal Silver Spring" promises "just the kind of place you would see in foreign glossies and regret you'd never get" (Silver Spring 2006). Its amenities include landscaped gardens, a shopping arcade, home deliveries for groceries, a beauty parlour, a temperature controlled swimming pool, indoor gyms, roller-skating arena, convention centre and conference hall, library, coffee shops and restaurants. It is, in the promoters' words, "where life resides"; "Five-Star Inside, Five Star Outside." What the developers offer, moreover, with their "Make a World of Difference" campaign is the opportunity to live a lifestyle among these amenities which is self-consciously modern and global.

City Centre, a project with an "architecture that embodies the spirit of Kolkata" is a private-public partnership, designed as an office complex and residential area that includes a multiplex theatre and parking space for 800 cars (City Centre Kolkata 2006). It also privileges North American-style malls, especially in its promotion of food courts and 250 different retailers where multinational branded stores which "rub shoulders with their unbranded cousins." Vedic Village, while not promising towering apartment blocks, appears to be targeting a similar international and diasporic market. A set of condominium-bungalows, a resort and a spa, along with the usual amenities—conference rooms, shopping malls, recreation facilities—comprise the development. It offers the unique ability to purchase "eco-friendly homes," with grass slopes on the roofs to decrease heat and keep homes cool. The bungalows are spaced into arrangements that mimic typical North American suburban subdivisions, with wide, well-paved roads, manicured lawns and a lack of population density. The advertising proclaims that the project "is what reflects the best that Kolkata has to offer to an international audience—a veritable paradise on Earth!" (Vedic Village 2006).

Perhaps the most explicit among these projects in making the connection between apartment ownership and diasporic, global or transnational lifestyles, are the "South City Projects": a self-described mini-township with 12 ha (30 acres) of "eco-friendly design" that "promises a lifestyle of international standards" (South City Projects 2006). The complex includes several residential towers (which the promoters describe as "soaring"), a school, a mall, entertainment complexes and a country club. Most noteworthy about the South City Projects are the giant billboards all across the city which advertise its international appeal. These are in addition to the websites, magazines and television ads that all promoters use. South City's promotion of the ideal global life is difficult to ignore. Besides promising prospective buyers that they can "Own a home with India's biggest swimming pool" and frolic in "A park larger than Eden Gardens,"⁴ South City

offers its residents the opportunity to “Live in the Sky” and to “Live the Way the World Does.”

Interestingly, and perhaps uniquely in the case of Kolkata, the appeal made in such advertising is not to a Bengali diasporic identity *per se*, but rather to a global Indian one. Unlike regions such as the Punjab, Gujarat and Kerala, which have long histories of migration and ongoing connections to places like North America, Western Europe and the Persian Gulf, there has been little attempt by the state government of Bengal to target Bengali diasporas in order to solicit funds or to build business connections. This is unusual because it stands in stark contrast to the non-resident Gujarati and non-resident Keralite programs launched by other state governments in India. Bengali identity is a source of much pride and is subject to considerable reification through popular culture and discourse both in Bengal and in the diaspora. It is curious, then, that in the condominium advertisements such sub-nationalism is eschewed in favour of a global identity. Perhaps this is due to the relatively recent larger-scale migration from Bengal—much of it professional class—beyond the sub-continent. Perhaps it is because the Bengali diaspora is more difficult to locate for a variety of reasons; though cultural associations and business organizations based on Bengali identity abound in various diasporic sites, few attempts have been made to enumerate a Bengali diaspora in concrete terms. In the absence of such connections, the figure of the Mythic Global Indian has taken on an even more prominent role within the context of urban developments in Kolkata.

The physical presence of the overseas Bengali in the condominiums is of secondary importance; it is the idea of them that is crucial. Time and again during my interviews with promoters, developers and residents, I heard that NRI-ownership of flats ranged between 25 and 75 per cent, or that everyone’s neighbour was an NRI (Silver Spring 2004; South City 2004; Vedic Village 2004). I began to suspect that such claims were not only difficult to verify, but that they functioned as part of a marketing strategy themselves, a way of proving the desirability of a project and its provenance as an “international” destination. Whatever the actual presence of NRIs, the idea of the Mythic Global Indian retains a strong significance, embodying the “international standards” to which the city of Kolkata aspires. The symbolic value of the life-world of the global Indian diaspora cannot in this sense be underestimated, helping as it does to blunt criticisms regarding the material transformations that cities like Kolkata are undergoing.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that the category of diaspora is a highly contested and rich terrain, used by multiple actors for various purposes. For some politicians and policymakers the diaspora is seen as an untapped source of capital for development projects. To many developers they are the ideal target group toward whom the

design, construction and marketing of luxury apartments is aimed. On the other hand, for those who might be displaced by the construction of such apartments, the diaspora might represent a foreign elite whose needs and desires supersede those of local, often marginalized populations.

The promises made by the advertising campaigns discussed above of course make no mention of such sacrifices or consequences. Instead, they offer those interested in living in these new developments the opportunity to live a global and transnational lifestyle. The inhabitants may be overseas Bengalis or they may be those who wish to “live like them.” Fundamentally it does not matter that the mythic Global Indian appears in bodily form and takes up residence in the luxury condominiums. The argument remains that regardless of how many diasporic Indians are actually purchasing properties in the new housing developments on the fringes of Kolkata, their symbolic importance and impact cannot be denied. Indeed, it is the *idea* of the diaspora that is crucial for mobilizing key actors and constituting material transformations in the city.

Notes

1. Ong (2003) discusses the case of ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia, who welcomed support from the global Chinese diaspora against attacks from the Indonesian military and media during the East Asian financial crisis, but did not necessarily consider themselves to be Chinese. Moreover, being identified in this fashion only contributed to accusations of disloyalty and national “impurity” along ethnic/racial lines.
2. According to the 2001 census, around 285 million or approximately 28 per cent of the Indian population live in urban areas, with 38 per cent of the urban population residing in only 38 agglomerations.
3. There has been intense opposition to development in the region, for example through the popular ecological and social justice struggles in the East Kolkata Wetlands. Notable events have included the public interest litigation court challenges that helped to declare the area an internationally protected conservation area and popular struggles that oppose evictions and highlight political corruption in land-use allocations. Such conflicts are ongoing in Kolkata as well as elsewhere in Bengal, as evidenced by the recent violence over the building of a Tata car manufacturing factory on agricultural land in Singhur.
4. Eden Gardens is a prominent local cricket pitch and stadium.

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