



## Realities and Myths of Public Spaces: Conflict and Participation in Kolkata

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**ABSTRACT:** Built environment since the inception of mankind is coded through contest and participation, more so if it represents a public space meant for heterogeneous occupancy and multiple activities. Public space in a city transforms itself along with the ever changing social, cultural and economic realities as well as modes and mediums of interpretation and can be considered as the representation of urban dynamics and processes which are the actual lifeline of the city. This research paper proposes to interpret the public spaces of Kolkata, a bustling metropolis of Eastern India with reference to contestation and participation of its citizen and their engagement with the material spaces of public domain and various negotiations and mediations that has been at play for over 300 years of its existence. Kolkata has grown to the first imperial capital of India from a cluster of villages and surfaced as the cultural and literally capital of the country by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. City's public spaces also behaved in consonance by travelling from dingy lanes and small clearings of indigenous settlements to vast recreational open spaces created by colonial rulers in pre-independence era followed by present day modern landscapes dictated by changed concern at the same time maintaining unique connotations. This paper scrutinizes public spaces of Kolkata through literature study and narratives of selected sample and tries to understand the prolonged struggles and negotiated juxtaposition of public spaces with every day civic life and sentiments through the lens of time and appropriation in order to establish its importance and concludes with pointers about the future of public space interpretation which may guide the city planning visions and paradigms.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Public spaces since the ancient times were places meant for gathering for public for political, commercial or recreational purpose though its definition is yet to be concreted. The idea behind their genesis, nature and usage has always been dependent upon the particular political, social, cultural and economic contexts in which they were situated thereby making the comprehension and perception of these public spaces unique to their locales. Public spaces reflect the citizen's daily life rituals, as well as tourist fascinations and their nature denotes the values which the city holds close to its heart as well as shape the impression and perceptions of the city. Particularly so, in case of cities like Kolkata which has been layered through multiple reminiscences, events and transformations. Since, public spaces are the marker and garb of urban form and often relays the story of genesis of urban realm by soaking up all transformation and evolution, they provide the most apt framework and tools to study the course of urban transitions the city has undergone and also help to infer

the associated contextual forces. Kolkata's public spaces apart from colonial ideals were inspired by the neighbourhood or para culture of frequent literally get-togethers and community football games among others, later on serving the cause of nationalistic movements. Post-independent Kolkata continues to derive comfort from its past evident by the continuance of public space heritage while at the same time aspires to equal the romp and pomp of global cities amidst its penury through borrowed concepts of sleazy attractions and lifestyle.

### II. AIM

This paper looks into the path traversed by public spaces in terms of interpretation, roles and challenges when appropriated and negotiated by various forces. It then establishes the relationship between the public spaces and the urban realm and proceeds further to magnify these links by correlating them with the cultural and social contexts of Kolkata, a modern metropolis of India housing 5 million inhabitants.

The public spaces of Kolkata are explored through the narratives specific to the locale and an effort is made to chart a future pathway to achieve a context specific urban common.

### III. URBAN COMMONS: VARIED INTERPRETATION

Public spaces have many definitions and have acquired newer classifications according to ownership, control, access and use over the last decades. Some literature define public spaces as those which are in public ownership and open to all public while other researchers use access condition and use features and term publicly accessible places as true public spaces. So privately owned spaces that are accessible ones were qualified as public spaces and publicly owned spaces were not qualified as public spaces if they are not accessible to the public (Mehta, 2014). Being 'visible and accessible' is considered as the core of publicness by some (Madden, 2010) whereas common expectations from public projected by various sources are that they must accommodate social life, encourage diverse activities, provide convenient access and linkage, and aid to the formation of unique identity and image of the urban landscape to which they belong and most importantly must be inclusive irrespective of gender, religion, income level, and ethnicity (Karacor, K.E. 2016). But the biggest challenge to this definition is exclusion which is actively practiced in contemporary public spaces such as shopping malls, gated communities, private city clubs through various control mechanisms and consumerist means and method of operation. Public spaces and urban culture is also intricately related. Thus, when the cultural practices and social norms (from which the physical elements of public spaces were derived in the first place) are transformed a renovation occurs in public realm too. The relationship between public realm and urban culture is an important one and must form the basis of urban landscape planning so that the city can thrive by way of its original fabric.

#### A. Transformation of Public Realm

Historically public spaces emerged as a response to need and were spontaneous e.g. a large space with clear sightlines was needed for a large number of people gathered to hear their leaders speaking, priests giving sermons, kings wanting to make a spectacle out of public executions, spotting approaching enemies, conduct of weekly market and leisure visits including social meet-ups and play activities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century parks were accorded the title of 'lungs of the city' by Frederic Law Olmsted (Schmidt, 2008). After industrial revolution, public spaces were no longer designed based on concerns of health, lighting and ventilation as

industrial blight overpowered the city, cars took over street space and modernist planners and architects tried to make amends by building 'towers in parks'. But most of these spaces were totally foreign to the citizens and as a result became symbols of exclusion. These new age public spaces also perpetuated contest for access and usage rights as they ended up alienating the original communities due to magnified scale, illegible layouts and attachment of price tags to earlier affordable spaces. In addition to commoditization, fear of crime and insecurity actively promoted various regulatory practices in public spaces thereby excluding a large chunk of citizens from the benefits of public spaces (Davis, 1992; Zukin, 1998; Boyer, 1994; Iveson, 1998) and this departure from original definitions was so complete that animated discussions and questions about the future and need of public spaces arose with 'End of public space' being proclaimed by Sennett (Karacor, K.E. 2016). As a response to these sentiments, starting from 1950's most cities saw large scale efforts aimed at resurgence of public spaces with the ultimate intention to rebrand them as 'people's places' enthused by the work of multifaceted planners and designers like Jane Jacobs, Mumford and Gehl in conjunction with the 'right to city movement' and 'ethics of social justice' but eventually got caught between two contradictory approaches of whether to follow the dictates of 'Laissez-faire economics or the 'cause of social good'. On one hand, Publicly accessible spaces were recognized as anchors of economic growth and development raising the value of adjacent properties and spearheading local retail development (Carr et al, 1993; Garvin, 2002) whereas on the other hand, they were intended to serve as an agent of social cohesion by allowing diverse populations to meet and interact (Miller, 2007). The dual forces of contest and participation arose as the moderator of modern public spaces and were manifested through state policies and the citizen's effort to negotiate and appropriate these spaces according to their needs and choices.

#### B. Contest and Participation: Sculptors of Public Space

Public spaces have always existed as integral pieces of the urban physical fabric and often spoke the language supporting democratic value and civic virtue (Benhabib, 1996; Habermas, 1984). Today in the face of ever increasing social inequality and disruption, public spaces have once again become significant as they are often the glue that hold the different urban patches together in a heterogeneous city. Contest and participation which are the two major forces shaping the public realm today owe their genesis to the trend of commoditization of every available urban space and increasing divide between the have and have-nots.

Modern public spaces are often the breeding ground of contest due to selectively extending privileges to certain sections of the society (exclusivity) whereas at the same time act as a potent tool of inclusive development through citizen participation. In many cities, particularly in the global south, public spaces are not principally used for leisure but they accommodate local informal retail economies and provide respite from crowded living environment and by doing this they formalize and validate the right of the inhabitants to live in that area and so perpetuate contest with forces looking for profit from land.

#### IV. KOLKATA: THE URBAN CONTEXT

Kolkata, capital of the Indian State of West Bengal also known as "The City of Processions", "The City of Palaces", and "City of Joy", is located on the east bank of the River Hooghly and is the economic and cultural centre of Eastern India with a population of 4.5 million (Census, 2011). Job Charnock, a British merchant came to Kolkata on 24 August 1690 (Cotton 1909; Deb 1905), amalgamated three villages on the east bank of the river Hugli called Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur and seeded the British Empire in India. After that the city started to develop along the existing villages and grew along the River Hooghly. Growth was concentrated in two parts, the native or 'Black Town' mostly occupied by the Indians in the North and the 'White Town' along with the British Fort occupying the geographical centre around which the city of Kolkata grew with Chitpur Road, connecting the two. After the defeat of the King of Bengal (*Nawab Siraj-ud-Doullah*) in the battle of Plassey (in Murshidabad) in 1757, British acquired administrative rights from the newly appointed King for territorial expansion of Kolkata (Cotton 1909). It became the capital city of British India in 1773 and remained so up to 1911. The earliest colonial attempts to plan the city were formulated in the form of 'Wellesly minutes on Calcutta' in 1803 followed by recommendation of Lottery Committee in 1817 and 'investigation of the Fever Hospital Commission' in the 1830s. A new spatial order inspired by the various ideologies of town planning and multiple concerns of health, policing, and commerce, largely in the guise of 'improvement' was imposed on Kolkata's urban fabric. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kolkata continued to expand in patches along the river and spread gradually outward from the core and slowly, emerged the present city. Various planning initiatives were undertaken by Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT), Kolkata Municipality, Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) but the perils of undeterred urbanization and uncontrolled growth of population overpowered these planning

initiatives. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India called Kolkata a 'Dead City' but the city has not only lived on and survived on its implacable spirit but grew to represent past, present, future all at the same time while exhibiting an exhilarating desire to embrace everything modern and this thesis believes that public spaces have played an important role in continuance of Kolkata's spirit and identity.

##### *A. Public Space Idioms in Kolkata*

Supremacy of public space has never been debated in Kolkata, even though neither citizens nor the state machinery took particular effort to create and maintain it, public spaces just arose as a matter of fact where more than two people congregated and discussed anything from daily knick knacks to highly intellectual subjects. *Adda* (Bengali word for informal chit chat between more than one people, without any predetermined agenda) just came naturally to Calcuttans, as an inevitable event of daily living, whenever and wherever they could pause, may it be the long queues for bus or meetings the neighbours in the street corners while returning home from work or daily Sunday visits of Bengali babus to the fish market and has become synonymous with the Bengali identity and continues till today almost as a sacred religion. Though the spirit, interpretation and practices associated with publicness has changed keeping in tune of the expanding experiences and influences and spaces associated with them has transformed in response, Calcutta has displayed implacable resiliency in assimilating these changes within its fabric. Kolkata's Public spaces dynamics have taken in the specific local inputs along with intermittent doses of catalytic inputs that evolved in parallel with the turns and twist of history, like the fiery splinters of nationalist movement, unprecedented paucity of resources during frequent famines and migrant influxes, widespread violence and romanticism of Naxalite movements and the dominance of literally and art movements on the public consciousness. So, public spaces play a different role here, it not only provides for recreation, but acts as a womb where literature and art is born and nurtured amidst countless cups of tea in *bhars* (clay pots). Contest for space is often not among classes, but among types of art and intellectual capability of users. Participation is total as it is nearly impossible to find a citizen in the city about which once it has been rightly said by Gopal Krishna Gokhale 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow', without an opinion about all and sundry.

**Public spaces in Pre-Colonial Kolkata.** Pre-colonial Kolkata served the mercantile interests of a lot of European countries by being a significant port of trade and was a cluster of prosperous village on account of possessing the richest water system and fertile land. Public spaces in the villages existed in the form of ghats, Village markets, temples and playgrounds which strictly enforced caste and gender segregation. Movable artisans like bioscope-men, monkey handlers, and street performer's etc .would command a sizeable public thereby turning every opening or small clearing into public spaces. Social order and norms were reflected in the public spaces and the concepts of contest or participation were non-existent.

**Colonial Kolkata: Regularizing the Public Spaces.**

Political power and their ideals along with social, cultural and literally influences have been the major moulders of Kolkata's urban landscape starting with the British lending their Midas touch to convert it into the semblance of London itself .Colonial rule used the dictates of health planning and infrastructure planning to separate the white and the native parts of the town and controlling the lifestyle of the subjugates so that they could rule without trouble. Early British lived with the natives but after the battle of, in 1758 the land was acquired for building fort in Govindapur and original inhabitants were driven out with compensatory land in north Sovabazar, Kumartuli, Burrabazar etc. First planned public space was the Maidan which still serves as the most inclusive public space in Kolkata was created not with the intent of serving as a public place but was necessitated by the need to have a clear line of fire in case the Fort is attacked. The 'White Town' around the Fort with extension in Dalhousie and Chowringhee areas and the 'Black Town' displayed distinct rhythms of public space genesis and continuation.

- White Town was intended to represent the imperial capital, akin to London with monumental buildings open spaces and wide boulevards whereas North Kolkata fabric was majorly disturbed and torn apart by way of building roads and bustee improvement in order to provide ventilation ,sanitation and get rid of miasmas.
- Scale of public spaces varied in both parts with white town displaying monumental open spaces and buildings like the Town hall (built in 1814) to be used for public meetings(definition of public only included Europeans and notable Indians) , wide roads ,large tanks and Squares whereas roads and tanks were constructed in native parts only with the aim of transforming the illegible city(Chaotic, haphazard environment) into a social text that was integrated, knowable and ordered (Dutta, P, 2012).

- Public space in two parts of Kolkata represented different sets of belief. The British swore by clean, well ventilated and spacious norms in public spaces whereas in Indian quarters, throwing filth outside ones clean house on the road was perfectly normal. In the white town public spaces were designed, uniform and sanitized whereas in native quarters public spaces were defined based on activity and participants and spatial qualities like size, shape, cleanliness and adequacy were inconsequential.
- Public spaces in British part of the city were used for recreation like evening strolls, shopping and eating out but Native kolkata's public spaces served the cause of daily activities. Traditional public spaces like rocks(an elevated plinth extending outside houses),tea-shops, one room para(neighbourhood) clubhouses, byayam samity(association for exercise), Mahila Sammilani (ladies association) ,local playgrounds and other everyday spaces continued to be popular among the citizens. Streets facing the densely built houses were the park here where adults would take a stroll and children would play free of any contest and fear of exclusion.
- Contest and participation in public spaces of native Calcutta was not in spatial terms but in terms of exclusion of classes which were not thought to have enough refined cultural and social background.

**Post-Independence Kolkata.** Though the cultural and social milieu of the city has gone through incredible transformation in the past decades and has been exposed to varied ethos of colonialism, nationalism and paribartan (change), Kolkata has managed to hold on to some unique determinants of its public realm .Everyday public places based on activities, literally and cultural inheritance still dominate the public sphere and are revered more than the malls and other temples of modernism. Contemporary public spaces in Kolkata can be categorized into following types:

- (i) Traditional public spaces reliant on para culture like the club house, vacant lots, grocery shops, rocks in front of houses etc. No concept of contest exists here and participation is total.
- (ii) Everyday spaces accessed daily like the public thoroughfares, street temples around trees, bus stops, which function as public spaces solely based on participation not spatial attributes. Contest is based on economic and social background manifested and appearance and participation arises out of regular use and presence in the space.
- (iii) Public places specifically serving cultural and literally meet-ups like the Nandan complex, Fine Arts Academy, Madhusudan Mancha, Dakshinapan where frequent literally and cultural shows are organized

which attract the layperson as well as cultural connoisseurs. City wide Participation can be discerned in these spaces and contest is non-existent.

(iv) Quasi-public spaces like malls, shopping centre, paid entertainment zones and parks etc. which render public services but is under private ownership or

control. These spaces are highly contested as they impose limitations on who can enter and avail services available here. Participation in these places happens mostly in two categories, the consumers and the staff like sales person, security guards etc who would otherwise be excluded.



Fig. 1: Adda at para rocks



Fig. 2: Literally adda at 'Nandan'



Fig. 3: Pavement: Setting for Adda



Fig. 4: 'Favourite Cabin': oldest tea stall of Kolkata



Fig. 5: Road as a public space



Fig. 6: Street temple: Everyday public space



Fig. 7: Adda at the para club



Fig. 8: Kolkata Times Zone: Is London here?



Fig. 9: Gariahat junction: Planned intervention

#### Post Independence Kolkata

(v) Planned intervention in pockets to create public space: A 100m stretch of 3m wide median below the flyover at the busy Gariahat Junction of South Kolkata has been transformed into a public space by provide informal seating and amenities which has become a favourite adda spot with a functioning chess and carom club.

(vi) Planned interventions which aims at global import of public space idiom e.g. the replica of the Big Ben in London, a 135 ft high structure, known as "Kolkata Times Zone" at Lake Town and another clock tower 'chota Ben' at New Town. Proposal to build replicas of London Eye, a Sydney Harbour Bridge replica, and an Eiffel Tower are already on. Such mindless import and widespread use of western world signage is pushing Kolkata's public spaces towards a new urban

vocabulary with significant loss of historical connotation and unique identity of the city. These places are pulling people with a consumerist end in mind, which itself is a deviation from original intention behind the public spaces.

#### V. THE WAY AHEAD

Public spaces are the representation of ideals of urban planning. When planning dictates are imposed, public spaces become alien elements of urban landscape, whereas spontaneous places of social meet-ups are the ones where uninhabited interaction occurs. So, public space interventions must be aware of contexts and not merely end up as a means to consumerist end.

The strength of Kolkata's public realm is that the city lives in its traditional para scale public spaces where idea of contest is almost non-existent and participation is near total though like any other city the pull of modern consumerist's spaces is abundant. But the recent trends of public space management and design is guilty of totally sidelining this potential of public realm, in making Kolkata's future sustainable but is pointing towards a different direction altogether. The incentives provided by concerned policies to the public spaces which stand as uniform symbols of consumerism following the global trend have generated considerable stress in the traditional urbanscape, increased contest between the have or have-nots and reduced active participation. The policy makers have internalized the colonial ideals of controlling everyday uses of spaces in order to establish control and in the process the loss of claim on spontaneous public spaces is evident. Conscious visible structures control and direct the community gatherings today –the exact space to gather and exact activity to perform is prescribed, often toned to benefit the commercial interests. Leisurely addas on the street are discouraged with signboards so that vehicle flow can be smooth and instead people are made to congregate in the park with controlled accessed, where taking home food is not allowed but a well stocked food kiosk is provided as an amenity. These physical transformations are contrary to the culture of everyday public spaces as they create systematic, neat, uncluttered spaces catering to handful of pre-designed activities akin to the western culture. As the changes occur, the original interpretation of the term public space, the one which can enable the functioning of public sphere without ever deliberating on the physical space associated, is lost. It is well accepted that change is inevitable and march towards consumer ends cannot be stalled, and Kolkata needs to be clean, organized, rational and beautiful to be able to survive and appeal to onlookers, but at the same time designing of public realm of Kolkata needs original and creative inputs based on the 'locale' to retain the charm and flavour it presents and senseless and frivolous expenditure to erect imported monuments is nothing but a eye-wash which can no longer fool the citizens.

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[19]. Fig.2: Literally adda at 'Nandan'.Source:<<http://www.geocities.ws/kolkatabeckons/adda.html>

[20]. Fig.3.Pavement: Setting for Adda. Source: Author

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Fig.6.Street temple: Everyday public space . Source: Author

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[25]. Fig.8.Kolkata Times Zone: Is London here? Source: Author

[9]. Fig.9.Gariahat junction: Planned intervention. Source: Author