

## **THE PORT, THE CITY AND THE WORLD**

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I am here today to speak as a stakeholder in the city of Kolkata and, more particularly, in the port city of Kolkata. I am not an expert on shipping or commerce or engineering or river management. I had therefore to look for some way in which my particular expertise, such as it is, could afford an entry into my subject. I found it in the word 'port'.

'Port' in our present sense, meaning a harbour, harks back to the same remote origin as another word 'port' meaning a door or gateway. This links it also to the word 'portal' – an archaic or poetic word for a door or gate, now given a new context in 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology. A portal is the gateway through which your computer can access a world of knowledge and activity located in cyberspace. Interestingly, there is a third word 'port', apparently distinct in origin, which means a city.

Combining these meanings – though etymologically, they are not closely related – a port appears to be a city brought into being by its harbour facilities; but it is also the gateway or entry point into a country. It is where a nation welcomes its visitors and commences its interaction with them. More fundamentally, it is where a nation decides who or what to let in, and what to exclude; what charge to exact for letting something in or out; how easy or difficult to make the process; in a word, the terms on which a country engages with the world, and the face it presents to the world.

This implies that the nation in question does wish to engage with the world. No nation today can entirely cut off contact with other nations; but as we know, some countries are more restrictive than others, as regards both the physical entry of foreigners and travel abroad by its own citizens; both foreign trade and exchange of information with the rest of the world. Countries that openly follow such a policy are getting rare. But a much larger number – arguably all countries – place insidious difficulties of countless sorts to free interaction with the world outside their borders. They have not fully opened their doors to the world, no matter how many millions of tonnes of goods pass through their ports every year.

What is true of ports is also true of port cities. A port city, by definition, is a city turned outwards to the world, meeting certain worldwide norms of supplies and services, friendliness and practical support. This does not mean that such a city sacrifices its distinctive character and culture to a faceless uniformity; on the contrary, a port city – let us from now on say a world city – is one that projects its very special personality through an internationally attuned infrastructure. It presents itself – if you like, markets itself – to the world on its own terms; it never prostitutes itself. It simply takes care to ensure that the terms are acceptable to the world.

Another important point follows from this. A world city is not one that caters to foreigners at the expense of its own citizens. The tourist resorts in Indonesia, Thailand or (to our national shame) Goa, where the country's own citizens are formally or informally denied entry, might be dollar-earning foreigners' ghettos, like the white men's enclaves in Middle East oil countries; but they mark the sordid reverse of true internationalism.

Hence too no colonial city could truly be a world city, though most major colonial cities were ports. A chain of such ports garlanded the Indian Ocean from Hong Kong to Zanzibar, with Kolkata almost at its centre. If some of these cities have become world cities today, it happened after they cast off the colonial yoke. The Raj nostalgists – many of them Indians, remarkably enough – who lament the decline of the ‘second city of the Empire’ are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. If Kolkata has the potential to be a world city, that potential lies in the future, not the past.

But does it have such potential? The gut response of all too many Kolkatans – as of denizens of every Indian metropolis not excepting New Delhi – would be to say ‘No’. This is true not only of the common citizen but, perhaps even more, of people in positions of privilege and authority – people who might articulate such a change, but who are too busy flaunting a second-hand internationalism, derived from the West, to do so. Many years ago, a former Chairman of the then Calcutta Port Trust observed to me about the history and prospects of the port, ‘Past glorious, present dismal, future hopeless.’ I admired his skill in epigram; but given recent figures of Kolkata Port’s performance, we might happily conclude that his prognostication is wrong. Yet few of us would generalise on that basis to assert a bright future for the Port, or anything else in Kolkata, or the city as a whole. When visitors observe that the state of the city has improved, we protest that we know better.

This demoralisation is sometimes judged special to Kolkata; but it seems present to some extent in every Indian city. Even residents who are obviously doing well, and getting more out of the city than they would do elsewhere, keep themselves mentally aloof from their wider surroundings. For the civil servant in Delhi, the swarming tracts beyond the NDMC boundaries are a wilderness. For the young technologists of Bangalore, the Kannadiga city surrounding them might be on a different planet; and I would be curious to know how many of them have made a trip to Mysore. Secure in their mental and professional cocoon, they can either ignore or castigate the city that ensures them a good living, but from which they are psychologically alienated. It may not be an accident that neither Delhi nor Bangalore is a port.

The Kolkatan’s castigation of his city is qualitatively different, for he is often deeply attached to the place. His strident civic pessimism I would put down to civic indolence. My own impression – it can be nothing more than a general impression – is that the more active and dynamic part of our citizenry (yes, there is such a part: how else could the city be different from what it was till the 1980s?) think of Kolkata as a place where things are happening, because in their own ways, big or small, they are helping to make them happen. Too many of us, whatever we may say, do not want to make them happen. We have too much vested interest in retaining our old ways in the old milieu: in throwing rubbish on the roads; in patronising pavement hawkers while we complain of encroachment; in boarding buses anywhere and everywhere; in turning up late for work; in delaying projects and fouling up public services by indolence, bribe-taking and inane paperwork; in illicit transactions with the taxman’s complicity; in pleading the shareholder’s interest, to public detriment, in companies where we hold most shares; in raising pollution to genocidal levels by every domestic and industrial activity. There is no innocent party in this game, just as there are no winners – whether in our private identities as citizens or our public identities as ruler, functionary, manufacturer, trader, big or small cog in the wheels that turn what William Blake, over 200 years ago, called the dark satanic mills of a blighted city of his own times: the city of London. Today

London offers its inhabitants a quality of life we tell ourselves, inwardly if not openly, we cannot reach. But as the very example of London shows, there is hope for us yet.

I seem to have passed into moralising. None of us likes being preached at. We are adults after all, even if we act like self-destructive children when we are most worldly-wise. Let me shift to a more sophisticated vein, though that means a more ineffectual one if we do not face the crude disconcerting realities I have just listed.

These collective wrongdoings have one thing in common: they all place some narrow or immediate interest over the general good. In the feeble old-fashioned phrase, they show a lack of civic sense – the understanding required of a *civis* or city-dweller. A city runs on a vastly complex system of human co-operation, where each individual contributes only a minute fraction of the inputs required for the survival of the entire community. This in turn depends – let us never forget – on a still more complex nationwide (ultimately worldwide) system where the country feeds the city. Cities could come into being only in an era of surplus agriculture, when farmers began to grow enough food not only for themselves but for city-dwellers who grew none of their own. Presumably they did so in hope of benefits in return, such as protection, planned rule and, ultimately, financial and industrial inputs needed for still more productive agriculture. Each of us supports the rest; and because most human beings are humble, faceless, underprivileged, it is that underprivileged majority that, by the sheer bulk of their contribution, most extensively supports the empowered minority. This is received wisdom in most societies including our own; but that wisdom has never prevented the folly of depriving, oppressing or demeaning the majority. This is true at every level from the boondocks village to the United Nations.

How does this relate to my argument about the city? Let me pick up the thread I lost some time ago. City life suffers when we forget that it relies on a system of interaction and mutual support – among its own inhabitants, and between the latter and the outside world. Robinson Crusoe on his island had to fend entirely for himself; but that also meant he could do exactly what he chose. If we of Kolkata consider ourselves marooned, we shall remain confined to primitive, makeshift methods of survival for which the tin-and-plastic pavement stall and the autorickshaw-turned-microbus will be apt visual symbols.

The visual symbols of a true civic order, what we may call a metropolitan order, are very different. All Indian metro cities are deficient in them to more or less extent – Kolkata, perhaps, still most of all. This is most glaringly so with respect to road behaviour: in Kolkata we stop, we park, we cross, we board and take on board, we impede, we pollute more visibly and brazenly than anywhere else. By a common rule of thumb among urban assessors, the quality of life in a city is reliably indicated by the quality of its traffic movement and public transport. In this respect, we could scarcely hold up a more abject report card. We may be more on a par with other Indian cities in visible dirt and undisposed waste; but all Indian cities score dismally here, and Kolkata has less filth lying about than before.

Here lies the sadness of our much improved condition: the things we have left undone are precisely the ones that most strike the eye, even of the casual newcomer. Our water supply may be the best among India's metro cities; our power supply and telecom may have been transformed; but you might drive up and down Kolkata all day without registering these blessings. I wrong our self-respect by suggesting that the outsider's

impression should be the chief criterion. Much more important is the insidious effect on us who live here – on our morale, productivity and well-being. Imagine a Kolkata where everything else remained the same, but *traffic rules were observed and enforced*: what a miraculous transformation of image! But I am being too restrained in my fantasy. Obviously, everything else would not remain the same, they too would be transformed in consequence. Sadly, this does not seem to hold in reverse. Much else in our city is being quietly but radically transformed, but with no effect on our road and transport culture, except where a flyover locally and mechanically improves traffic flow, or a hand-operated toy light masquerades as a traffic signal.

Indian cities are not user-friendly, our public institutions still less so. The first trial of an intending patient in a state hospital is to find out where to go. That is where the tout first appears in the indispensable role of a facilitator. The same is true of most government offices – including, truth to tell, the Port Trust. I have more than once cleared personal baggage through Kolkata Port. I am yet to understand why a process that takes a day and can be conducted in my absence in certain other countries should on my home soil take one or more weeks, involve one or more personal visits, and require payments that the clearing agent bills as ‘incidental expenses’. Let me not spare my own professional turf either. Universities have no touts, except where the students’ union assumes the role; but they swarm with visitors trying to locate a department or obtain information – on my own campus, the joke goes, trying to locate the information office.

So too Kolkata has no street-name signs or bus-stop signs. Its suburban railway timetable is impossible to obtain. Changes in bus routes, traffic directives, public tariffs and timings go unannounced. Most amazingly, there is no handy, reliable, decently printed street map, let alone a street-by-street guide even to inner (let alone Greater) Kolkata. Nor is there a magazine, news-sheet, helpline or website laying out the city sights or cultural events in which we take such pride.

A hundred or more years ago, Kolkata began to see the decline of its river-front. Turning its back to the world’s ships, it chose to look inward towards its own creeks and marshes. We seem to have repeated the process on the mental and social plane. Here, either you belong and know, or you stand in puzzlement beyond the pale. You know when a road is one-way, even if the sign saying so is unspottable. You know when and where a show will be staged, because you mix in the right cultural circles. You know when a rally will halt your movements, though the party staging it hasn’t told you because it wants you to suffer its might. If you don’t know, you don’t belong, worse luck.

So I come back to where I set out. A world city caters to the world. It ensures that anyone from anywhere can more or less readily negotiate it, use its services, meet his practical needs within it without delay, harassment or exploitation. Such a city might (and almost certainly will) nurture a deeper mystery of spirit, a mystique that eludes one to the end. That has nothing to do with boorishly withholding its street names and bus timings.

Some of you may be telling yourselves, ‘This man has come back where he started in another way too. He set out by censuring those who criticise and dismiss Kolkata, but he has done nothing else himself for the last ten minutes.’ A fair charge, but an unfair one too, I would argue.

The object of my criticism is not to dismiss Kolkata. It is to mark certain factors impeding full growth of a great city coming into its own after many decades. For the best part of a century, war, riot, famine and partition had dogged Kolkata, the last event sparking off the biggest mass migration in human history. In its train came poverty, dereliction and political extremism. A city that has endured this ordeal can accomplish much; that potential is reasserting itself at last.

Sadly, the upswing is most readily apparent in mammoth flyovers and obscene shopping malls. But it shows more soberly in a new desire to take on the world: hence the confidence to adapt to it, whether or not rightly in a given instance; a readiness to prove oneself by doing something, rather than by claiming a futile and rarefied virtue that could achieve nothing in this bad world.

This new readiness to achieve has in its turn led to certain expectations of efficient service, technological advancement and public accountability. These expectations are often not met: as I stated earlier, too many of us, too much of the time, feel it is better not to meet them. Yet more and more of them are coming to be met in some measure, or at least admitted in principle. We can think of them, or even demand them, without being foredoomed to frustration. That is hardly good enough, but it is something. Given what has been inflicted on us, and what we have inflicted on ourselves, it is much.

One of the most heartening remarks I have ever heard about Kolkata was made by a foreigner who knew the city to another visiting it for the first time. 'It's just like any other city,' he said. 'You can get around and work and live there same as anywhere else.' That 'just like any other city' was not dismissive: it was profoundly reassuring. Too long have we asserted our distinctiveness by self-castigation, by inaction and stoppage of action. The Bengali intellectual, that formidable yet pathetic creature, has proved his worth by voluble abstraction from the realities around him, the realities on which he notionally bases his cerebrations. In practical terms, this has meant a suicidal refusal to engage intellectually with the ground-level conditions of city life – a disengagement that allows much comfort and escape to our civic administrators.

Let us moderate our suicidal individuality. At best, such individuality marks the tragic hero; more often the yokel who cuts at the branch he sits on. Let us have the humility to admit we are like other peoples, other cities. Then and then only might we catch up with the rest or even surpass them.

Let me turn again in my tracks so that you may not mistake my meaning. As I said at the outset, to engage with the world is not to lose one's individuality. Rather, one faces the world better if one has the confidence of one's individuality. A world city is always uniquely itself. But it presents itself in a way the rest of the world can access and absorb. If it cannot fully achieve this – because of restrictive immigration, hyper-security, high cost of living, non-global language, or even an extreme climate – it is that much less a world city.

No city on earth meets world-level standards one hundred per cent. But what are our special assets for even beginning to meet them? We are an open city: culturally parochial in many ways the Bengali does not realise, but in day-to-day life almost too admmissive of alien practices, impracticable demands and non-local languages – sometimes (especially in the English-language press and the high-level consumer market) to the point of

offensive, even racist attacks on Bengali culture. Over-tolerance can be a fault, but it harbours a great strength and a great practical advantage in our intolerant world.

Again, we are exceptionally liberal among Indian cultures as regards caste and community (the besom of the Partition swept out all that rubbish once and for all) and, on the whole, towards gender. The riots that figured annually in my childhood calendar, and still do in other metro cities, ceased here decades ago. No village headman of Delhi has told our women that if they go out after nightfall, they deserve what they get. Personal freedom does not guarantee economic freedom as the consumer corporates would have us believe, or political freedom for that matter: China stands as a glaring instance to the contrary. But we still like to think there is a link between all three types of freedom.

Of course, there is a level of subsistence below which all freedom appears an unaffordable luxury. Kolkata has traditionally sheltered such people and, at street level though often not much more, offered them the means of an upward start in life. Kolkata, we may say, has traditionally been the nurturing-ground of the upwardly mobile destitute. Wave after wave passes through its pavements, parks and public places; some individuals and families sink without trace, but most grope upward by a few notches at least, to be replaced by the next wave. The city does not change to view, but it is transforming the lives of thousands of humble, even desperate people.

Today the city wants to change its image, and is changing before our eyes. Not only its secure and articulate classes, but anyone within dreaming distance of security, demands such change. This involves a radically new challenge to those who remain endemically insecure, endemically inarticulate – the dull dumb faces as Rabindranath termed them.

A demography like the Indian faces a special challenge when setting out to replicate the urban structures (physical, social and administrative) of the West. On the one hand, the pressure of population makes such structures even more imperative: it is the only way so many people can survive in so little space. On the other hand, the same pressures make it difficult or impossible to find any space at all. As we have recently had occasion to ponder, we have not even begun to work out a fair, viable and uniform policy to rehabilitate those displaced for urban or industrial development. The car population in Indian cities is increasing even faster – much faster – than the human population. We have made over much space to highways and flyovers, while our public transport languishes and rapid transit systems, which could move more and more people in a clean and controlled way, remain on the drawing board. We emit little pollution per head compared to the US citizen, but our total output of pollutants is immense (though still small compared to that of the industrial West). In a less manageable sector, Kolkata has set about emulating the retail boom of Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. That this may not be an unmixed blessing shows from the recent course of the curiously named ‘sealing’ operation in Delhi. The very citizens patronising the shops petitioned to remove them; while the traders profiting from them, in collusion with a venal administration, felt sufficiently alienated from the latter to throw stones at them and be fired at in return.

On the whole, residents of rich cities are surely happier than those of poor ones. But there are endless ways to be unhappy. The heat of demand and competition can soon melt the bonds that keep a city’s interactive systems in place, and corrupt conspiracy cannot be an indefinite substitute.

The growth path on which Kolkata is set calls for ceaseless vigilance and ceaseless thought, if we are to avoid the errors of our sister cities and preserve the virtues that sustained us in poorer and harder times. The cultural identity of a city consists in more than its art, literature and cinema. It inheres in the physical and political structures whereby large numbers of humans can survive in a limited space in harmony of body and mind. It involves crucial decisions of large-scale planning; can such planning be scaled down to human-sized bytes? Can we have rapid transit systems instead of more highways? Or, wherever possible, septic tanks and local outfalls instead of long-distance mains drainage, the environment-enhancing East Kolkata Wetlands rather than the sewage plant which, when we once tried to install it, promptly broke down?

I regard the Wetlands as a symbol of the special path to growth, civic security and wealth generation in which Kolkata can, if we so wish, set an example to the world. The wetlands form a viable, largely self-contained, miniature biosphere. It is low-tech as technology is vulgarly understood, though it applies profound knowledge of physical, chemical and biological processes. It generates intensive employment. It is protective of the environment. Far from eating up civic funds, it is a productive asset to the local economy. Informed people come from all over the world to see it. Yet the local intellectual still thinks of it as the stinking back of beyond, *Dhapar math*. The administrator and politician, led at last (if pressed) to grant its unique value, do their best to barter it for money and votes. The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, created in an age less mindful of the environment, began a process of destruction that the proposed Barasat-Raichak Expressway seems set to complete in this supposedly enlightened era of planning.

Small is not only beautiful; it might be the only way for the very large to survive. The blue whale lives on minute plankton as there is no other organism plentiful enough for it to feed on. For a behemoth city, building gigantic mega-infrastructure is an endless and self-defeating process, as well as an immensely costly one. As we all realise today, vastly more money than necessary was spent on the Vidyasagar Setu, to allow movement of ships too large to sail so far up the Hooghly. By a similar logic, a sensible proposal to build low-cost humps on the VIP road to ease airport traffic was abandoned in favour of an elevated roadway – for which the money has not been found.

The more flyovers you build, the more cars you will encourage to choke them. The more waste disposal facilities you create, the more waste will be generated to choke them too. If you fill up ponds to build on them, the habitations you create will be sapped by waterlogging. This has happened particularly in the later additions to the Corporation area to the south of the city.

The solution might lie in not thinking of flyovers to move so many cars, but rapid transit systems to move so many people. Instead of a gigantic sewerage system, it may be better to think of draining storm-water into local ponds and creeks, or (thinking big in a new way) creating more urban wetlands on the East Kolkata model. That might encourage more local groups to resist the filling-up of water-bodies, and a few more administrators to pay such complaints some remote heed. One can think small on a grand scale – grand enough to address the civic problems of a megalopolis like Kolkata.

The genius of Kolkata has always lain in its ability to think small. This trend has marked its socio-political ideology – often misapplied to our detriment, but basically an immense

strength that can be harnessed to our benefit in the only way viable in our economic and demographic situation. Among our current projects at the School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University is the recording of eye-witness accounts of the first phase of refugee colonies around Kolkata, especially the pioneering settlement of Bijoygarh. Those trenchant and heroic tales, of building up what are now flourishing settlements in the teeth of state parsimony and national apathy, exemplify what seems to me the distinctive spirit of Kolkata's development.

As so often, it was the people who educated their masters, not the other way about. This model of development was adopted by the state in later years. In the field of urban planning, a crucial period of civic uplift in the 1970s and 1980s – which the middle-class Kolkatan acknowledged only with snide jokes about the CMDA – saw precisely this kind of small-scale but extensive grassroots improvement of slums, colonies and suburbs. Kolkata, along with Cairo, set up a new model for developing depressed urban zones along these lines. So also, the Kolkata Metro was built by the cut-and-fill, pick-and-shovel method, causing great hardship to citizens for many years, but thereby at amazingly modest cost, using largely indigenous technology, in a way that has attracted the praise of experts across the world. We ourselves are unaware of this praise, as we are of the miracle of the East Kolkata Wetlands.

Kolkata is a city of many miracles. But they were not miracles worked directly by God, and we should not now call on God to take direct charge: his hands are full as it is. It is for us to shape our own future, building upon a close and dispassionate view of our present.