Postcolonial global cities: The Indian experience

Grappling with the facets and nuances of postcolonial cities is a daunting task fraught with complexity, given the much contested nature of the ‘post-colonial’ concept. The colonial experience has often been taken as a hegemonic, unifying category. This ill-equals one to deal with, or account for, societal or experiential differences. It leads us inevitably to reduce the manifold divergences and diversities present in the colonial experience to the oversimplification of a domination–subjugation relationship played out by the two actors (the colonizers and the colonized).

‘POSTCOLONIALISM’ CAME INTO USE and has traveled a long road to respond to earlier unanswered questions regarding colonialism. However, many commentators have gradually brought to light and unfolded the dangers of its ‘monolithic’ and ‘totalizing’ tendencies (Gandhi, 1999). A large body of postcolonial literature has woven itself around the study of this dichotomy of either a completely smothering European colonialism or of movements and practices resisting colonialism or opposing it. This poses difficulties in identifying similarities across the constructed divide separating the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized. Generalizing tendencies pulled to such extremes make postcolonialism vulnerable to its much criticized bent towards euro-centrism.

Thus, we believe that such an isolating understanding fails to grasp the totality of the phenomenon. It goes without saying that the colonial encounter was usually marked by the massive domination of the colonizer; however, we contest that this picture is complete without the narrative of the intermittent defeat and moments of subjugation of colonizers themselves.

Fractured identities

Colonization was not an absolute wherein colonizers dictated, hegemonized, directed and controlled while the colonized emulated, resisted or suffered. The experience of the colonizer too was marked by that sense of ‘victimization’ that is more often not attributed, attributed to the ‘villain’ of the colonized. What has often been obscured in accounts of the colonial encounter is the fact that colonizers in several instances felt like the colonized. Thus, colonization was not just a uni-dimensional act in which the colonizer dominated the colonized. No, colonialism was characterized by the frequent crossing of boundaries in the ‘given’ roles of the colonizer and the colonized where even the formerly experienced ‘gnomy’ and the latter experienced ‘glory’.

Thus, we identify postcolonial identities as fractured identities entailing moments of ‘domination’ by the colonizer and ‘subjugation’ of the colonizer and not as monolithic identities of colonizers as rulers and the colonized as ruled over; the terms domination and subjugation are subject to qualification, as domination by the colonized is always highly limited and subjugation of the colonizer never meant a total collapse. This fracture is further influenced by the proximity of both groups to the centre of colonial power, implying that postcolonial identities are far from being rigidly homogenous or uniform. Rather, they present a mixed bag of similarities and dissimilarities.

These variegated identities were inherited by postcolonial cities and, as we shall see, came to bear upon the destinies of these cities and to guide their development. The postcolonial city is a site of vibrant contestation wherein innumerable antagonisms and negotiations are played out in the bid to turn global. Here, we shall demonstrate how postcolonial identities came to formulate the global destinies of two important Indian cities: Delhi and Kolkata.

Below, we first deal with understanding postcolonial identities and subsequently aim to understand the nature of the two postcolonial global cities Delhi and Kolkata based on inherited fractured postcolonial identities. We do not just recount well-known historical details; rather we focus on analyzing and comprehending these events in context, as a means to understand the postcolonial global city more comprehensively.

To dominate or to be dominated

 Prevailing literature on postcolonial identities suggests that the colonizer was a controller and that the colonized were sufferers, emulators or resisters. The identities of colonizer and colonized are defined in black and white, as the suppressor and the suppressed (active or passive) respectively. However, this is a partial truth. Postcolonial identities are fractured. The intermittently ‘domination’ of the colonizer over the colonized has to be recognized.

Thus, the colonizers’ identities as being controllers throughout were not monolithic—they were fractured with bouts of ‘defeat’ as well. The same is true of the identities of the colonized. Their identities were not restricted to being active or passive subjects. There was a fracture here as they also ‘dominated’ at sanguine points in time. The colonizer faced such ‘suffering’ and on many accounts ‘resisted’ the colonized, which suggests that we need to break out of earlier totalizing accounts of postcolonial identities on the basis of arguments in support of fractured identities that successfully debunk the notion of a single identity.

This may be understood through two historical articulations: spatial (organization and social organization). Though spatial (organization) was carried out so as to give way to colonial aspirations of unbound control over the colonized, it was badly shaken and gave way to negotiation between spaces earmarked for the colonizer and for the colonized.

Colonial space

In both the cities of Delhi and Calcutta, the colonial desire for strict boundaries to separate the rules from the ruled led to the creation of separate spaces that were manifested in clear architectural symbols of imperialism and a distinct geographical separation. In Calcutta, the White and Black towns resulted, whereas in Delhi the result was a ‘tale of two cities’ with Old and New Delhi—the latter being the imperial capital separated from the former by the Red Fort. The idea was to maintain a distinction between the colonized and the colonizer and to indicate the superiority and homogeneity of the latter.

However, colonizers’ desire for exclusivity and separation was severely constrained because of the very contradictory contours of colonial life. The colonior had a desire for virgin native territory; however, the indispensable role played by the natives in colonial life made this desire impossible to meet (Chattopadhyay, 2000). Although having the natives constantly within visual range was often distasteful to the colonizers, they were unable to cope without them in foreign lands. The great protective walls around mansions in the White town and the huge masonry gates and iron come enclosing their compounds while appearing to exclude the natives and emphasize strength and superiority over them, were in reality negotiated as a result of the presence of the natives, as secondary, peripheral spaces. The articulation of servant’s spaces (as in European houses) could not be accomplished here because of the constant fear of disease. The building of servant’s quarters, though an architectural afterthought, breached the perceived imperious border between the spaces of the server and the served (Chattopadhyay, 2000). The very perception of ‘servitude’ was made in relative to position them at the centre of colonizers’ attention.

Secondly, the fetish for exclusivity led colonizers to use their homes as recreational spaces. They accommodated large numbers of visiting friends and relatives within spatially limited zones of comfort. The colonizer thus had to withdraw from spaces in which he had expected to tread freely. This was another stark rebuttal of their aspirations for unlimited control over the colonized.

Thirdly, though the residences seem at first sight to have been built on a European pattern, a closer examination reveals that they were in fact developed more along the lines of native housing patterns, which were characterized by scant regard for privacy. Not only in their geographical space, but also in their personal lives, thoughts and emotions did the colonizers compromise on privacy. For example, almost all conversation took place within earshot of native domestic servants.

DeSTRUCTION OF THE NATIVE CITY

Fourthly, but most importantly, declaring the walled city of Delhi as a ‘vill’ by the colonial authorities (Majumdar, 2001) may be read as a violent reaction to and a protest against the perceived ‘inferiority’ of the colonizer and hence their ‘defeat’ in the face of well-organized, disciplined, urban, civilized and, by virtue of these qualities, an ominous colonized people. The total destruction of existing structures and buildings of public utility and civic facilities (Priya, 1993) such as the closing of large drinking water storage tanks, sewers and drainage systems and the conversion of clean drinking water canals to sewer pipes, bear testimony to the colonizers’ reaction to and their fervent attempts at remedying their ‘defeat’ vis-a-vis the colonized. These phenomena are clear negations of the idea of uni-linearity inherent in accounts of both plain domination and plain resistance.

This indicates clear reasons for the haphazard nature of spatial development in the native sections of colonial cities. The ‘chance erected, chance directed’ nature of these cities is good proof of fractured colonial identities, wherein original plans formulated by the colonizer assumed a different form on the ground post-imposition because of overt as well as covert pressure from the colonized and subsequent reactions from the colonizers against them. Such cities also draw attention to the irony of the ‘Civilizing Deed’ of the colonizers, when it was actually their actions that brought about chaos and disharmony.

The articulation of social reorganization would help us better understand the friction. Colonial policies brought about far-flung social changes, prime among them the creation of a new class of middle-class Indians who were an outcome of colonial policies and a product of Macaulay’s system of education. It was from the intelligentsia that the lower to middle administrative and managerial core of the empire was drawn. This class stepped into numerous white-collar jobs created by the colonizers, and later also came to fill higher-level administrative positions in the imperial government.

A democratic tug-of-war

It was envisaged that this native-born class would facilitate and consolidate imperialism by working in close alliance with the colonizers while mediating at their behest with the native population. However, the colonial experience of antagonism between European interests and the Indian intelligentsia can hardly be concealed. The records of the Calcutta European Association clearly illustrate that the dominant racial minority of the colonizers felt a strong resentment against the growing native interests in commerce and administration.
The criminal underworld
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and the native elected population was subsequently reduced of the area. The European community appealed to the British because the project would have troubled the native residents was withheld from James Finley, a powerful businessman,

was another outcome of the social upheaval caused by colonial policies. The reports of the Justices was the underworld that was another outcome of the social

Another social entity that often ‘victimized’ the colonizers as it proved difficult for colonizers to get through to these colonizers at the power centre could field against the colonized were fewer given the resources and strength to the power centre gave the colonized greater leeway and compelled the colonizer to give way more frequently.

Both Calcutta and Delhi were centres of power at varying juctions during the colonial experience. Prior to 1912, when the local night court system was established, electricity rates for local consumers were reduced after pressure from the Corporation, while strikes and closures became common. More often than not, the Corporation took pay tribute to ‘martyred terrorists’ through municipal resolutions.

All this intimaded the colonizers who sought to remedy this anomaly by capitalizing on the plurality of the native society and introducing separate electorates.

Left: The Lotus temple, the famous Bahá’í House of Worship in Delhi. Photo by Rashful Shomoy.

Kolkata on its own terms

Another example is the planning and development initiative when the outcomes of ongoing competition between European and Indian interests by various segments of the colonized, and the colonial experience bears many shades. It did not just represent a confrontation of the colonizer, although that constituted a substantial portion of it. It was not a unilateral act of rampant domination by the colonizers or unresearched suffering for the colonial. It was an attempt, at our disposal view the colonized either as active or passive subjects.

This perception must be relegated with the understanding that colonial activities were a complex web, the colonizer and the colonized at several points in time when the lives and ambitions of the colonizers were restrained, frustrated and constrained.

The colonizer was thus forced by the proximity of the colonized and the colonizer, the colonial power centre.

Proximity affected the degree to which their identities would be fractured through a negotiation of their roles. That is to say that the centre of power and the movements of victory for the colonized were fewer given the resources and strength that colonizers at the power centre could fight against the ‘domination’ of the colonized. Likewise, a greater distance from the power centre gave the colonial greater leeway and compelled the colonizer to give way more frequently.

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Towards a global city

Building such exotic locations are also steps towards establishing a cultural space to facilitate interaction with global forces. These spaces are lined with global eating joints, apparel brands, technology stores and so on which help familiarize residents with the various ideas promulgated by global forces.

Kolkata is not so different from Delhi in terms of its degree of fracture. In Delhi identities were less fractured as compared to those in Calcutta.

Delhi vs. Kolkata

Kolkata evolved from being a space carved out by global forces to one carved out for global forces, the city itself keen to cater to these global forces on their own terms.

As we have seen, Delhi is less likely to ‘dominate’ global forces and oblige them to change their stance; indeed, the city has granted them enough space to flex their muscles. It has presented them with few obstacles and hence has been able to attract much foreign investment. However, the enthusiasm has also allowed social and cultural imports that have greatly helped transform its appearance and soul into that of a global city. It fits well in the scheme of global forces.

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The Postcolonial contextualization in Kolkata and Delhi.

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Kolkata and Delhi have different bases in which to cater to the global forces.

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Lahiri, Nayanjan. “The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: Delhi inherited less-fractured postcolonial identities as opposed to Kolkata and has donned the mantle of global city earlier and much faster than Kolkata.


