



**KOLKATA:
BAD AS ITS REPUTATION AND SMART GROWTH MODEL**

BASIC INFORMATION: 2001		Similar To
Urban Area Population*	13,200,000	Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Shanghai
Urban Land Area: Square Miles	380	Istanbul, Belo Horizonte, Berlin, Vancouver
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	990	
Population per Square Mile	34,700	Karachi, Bogota, Kinshasa
Population per Square Kilometer	13,400	
*Continuously built up area.		

20 November 2006

It is a shame to have to put it this way. But, Kolkata (Calcutta)¹ is as bad as its reputation. This is even more evident after having traveled to India's other two megacities (urban areas over 10 million population), Delhi and Mumbai. It is not that Delhi and Mumbai are attractive; it is rather that Kolkata is so bad. Admittedly, this is being written by someone who lives in the relative luxury of the United States. Moreover, the people of Kolkata are most polite and helpful and Kolkata is very safe.

It's just not a nice place to visit. The author has been to most of the world's largest urban areas. Nothing, except perhaps Lagos, competes with Kolkata.

Arriving in Kolkata

It begins with arriving at an international airport as backward as any ever experienced in a major world urban area. The customs and immigration officials were every bit as efficient as and more helpful than would be expected everywhere but France (where the efficiency and helpfulness of such officials is beyond compare).

No one need be concerned about transport from the airport to the central area. The pre-paid taxi desk, located as one leaves the customs area, provides a reliable means of paying for the ride and

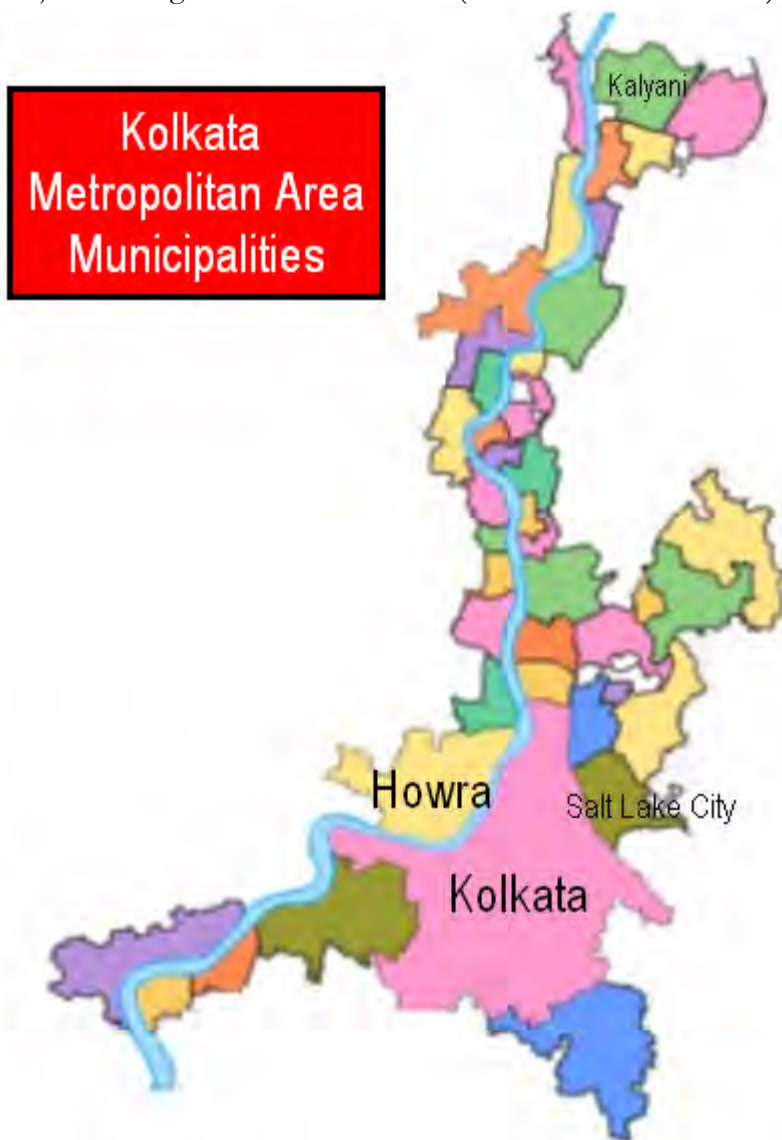
¹ Like Bombay (now Mumbai), Madras (now Chennai) and most recently, Bangalore (Bengaluru), Calcutta has changed its name (to Kolkata). Nonetheless, the urban area's principal daily newspaper, *The Telegraph*, continues to refer to its location as Calcutta.

traveling to the hotel, albeit probably in an Ambassador taxicab that rides and sounds like it was built when Mahatma Gandhi was perplexing the British.

The ride from the airport, especially late at night, is dreadful. Even in the dark, the intense filthiness of the buildings is evident. Generally, the buildings are low rise, three stories or less. Taxicabs and other vehicles are under repair along the roadway, even late at night. The roadway itself would have long since been condemned for its potholes in most urban areas.

Urban Form

Kolkata has a unique urban form (Figure). The metropolitan area is situated along the Hooghly River, which is one of the main mouths of the Ganges River. The largest of the Ganges mouths is in adjacent Bengalesh. The urban area (continuous urbanization) itself stretches north to south for at



least 40 miles (60 kilometers) along the Hooghly. The urban area is generally very narrow, often extending only five miles (eight kilometers) from one side to the other (west to east).

The city of Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal state. The city of Kolkata is located in the southeastern portion of the metropolitan area and has approximately 4.6 million of the metropolitan area's 13 million people. The commercial core occupies considerable space, with office buildings and markets along the east side of the Maidan, the central city park. This area also has the stately Victoria Memorial and St. Paul's Anglican cathedral, both structures that would be as at home in London as Kolkata.

The commercial district continues north to Mahatma Gandhi Avenue, an east-west thoroughfare ringed with some of the most decrepit multi story buildings imaginable. The street is a virtual beehive of activity,

with cars in the street, people in the street and people on the sidewalks. At the end of the street is the famous Howra Bridge, built during before and during World War II. The Howra Bridge is one of Kolkata's most famous landmarks. It leads from the core of Kolkata, on the east bank of the

Hooghly to Howra on the west bank and the Howra railway station, which is the principal railroad station in the Kolkata area. From the automobile approach to the Howra Bridge, there is a classic view downward onto Mahatma Gandhi Avenue in the core of Kolkata that resembles the street scenes of immigrant sectors in New York in the late 19th century. The Howra Bridge is unusually approached by traffic from both the east and west sides. Traffic makes a 90 degree turn to join the bridge, rather than directly.

The walk along Mahatma Gandhi Avenue is highly recommended. It is safe and exhilarating, though perhaps not all that healthful. The air pollution is so intense as to burn the eyes. Not even Los Angeles in the 1960s or 1970s could compete with the eye-burning air pollution of Kolkata (and Mumbai). I had traveled across the Howra Bridge by taxicab and noted that a large volume of people walk across the bridge, on both sides of the traffic. I enquired of hotel staff whether it was safe to walk across the bridge. They strongly recommended that I not do so. I did, have no regrets and recommend the experience.

Outside the core of Kolkata, there are principally low rise residential buildings. Farther to the north, the buildings become simply one or two stories. Even in the commercial core, there are few truly high rise buildings. The tallest building in Kolkata is less than 30 floors, and, with the exception of some new construction in the Salt Lake City area, there is little high rise development of recent vintage.

Is Kolkata a Metropolitan Area?

It might even be argued that Kolkata is not really a metropolitan area. It may, in fact, be a series of adjacent metropolitan areas or labor markets. There is no high speed road network, so that even those who have cars would find it difficult to commute very far because of the intense traffic congestion. Unlike Mumbai, the commuter rail system is very limited. It drops people off across the Hooghly River from Kolkata. Perhaps the most important reason to question whether Kolkata is a metropolitan area is the fact that it seems impossible to purchase a street map, whether in book or sheet form, that provides detailed information for the metropolitan area. In this regard, Kolkata is similar to Cairo, though at least in Cairo there is an out-of-print road atlas of the metropolitan area.

Then there is the livestock --- cows, goats and more, cohabiting with the human population at an intensity not to be found in the other Indian megacities. In some respects, Kolkata may be as much farm as city.

Comparatively Slow Growth

Kolkata used to be the principal urban area of India. Before the British established New Delhi as the national capital, they governed from Kolkata. However, for decades, Kolkata has been losing ground to its two principal competitors, Mumbai and Delhi. Both Mumbai and Delhi are larger, and both are growing considerably faster. In addition, as in the case of the other Indian megacities, most of the growth in the Kolkata area is in the suburbs, rather than in the central city.

Poverty

The most pervasive thing about Kolkata is the poverty. Unlike Delhi and Mumbai, nearly everything wrecks of poverty. There are few signs of life in Kolkata. Shantytowns, shacks and tents line the

major streets. People sleep in the streets in large numbers. People make their homes under roadway overpasses, in numbers inconceivable even in areas of the West where there is a homeless problem. Women can be seen keeping house under trees in parks. Similar scenes are found in Delhi and Mumbai, which certainly have their share of poverty. Indeed, the shantytowns of Mumbai are far larger than in Kolkata. However, Delhi and Mumbai have small islands of middle-income and high-income development. Much seems to be happening in Delhi and especially Mumbai.

A long-term professional associate and friend who grew up in India told suggested that the nation really is a number of parallel dimensions of society --- groups of people, perhaps separated principally by income, who co-exist and have little contact with one another.

Nearby Salt Lake City is the only place in the Kolkata area that shows signs of progress. There is a new town development (New Town), which has an emphasis on English language call centers. The *communist* West Bengal government also has developed an entrepreneurial reputation due to its strong competition for information technology investment. The benefits, however benefits appear to be concentrated in the new town area.

The Garbage

Kolkata and the other Indian megacities are also notable for their garbage. Litter and garbage is evident virtually throughout the urban area, again at least partially reflecting the intense poverty.

Traffic

What are called expressways would not qualify as arterial streets in high or middle income world urban areas. One illustration below shows the bridge over the Hooghly River in the northern suburbs (Kalyani), which is an “expressway” route. India does have high quality highways, but the best roads are between cities, in the national expressway system. The national expressway system, a toll road system is of high quality, though with grade crossings and generally no speed limit. Even so, cows and goats will be found grazing in the median and the shoulder. This is probably an effective speed limiting mechanism.

Kolkata drivers have a habit of honking their horns incessantly. Seriously, it seems as if drivers honk their horns at least every 15 seconds, if my taxi drivers (and the other cars in traffic) are any indication. Generally, horns are honked more frequently in India than would be expected elsewhere, but nowhere among the three megacities are horns more taxed in their use than in Kolkata.

Luxury in Filth

One of the most striking features of India’s urban areas is the filth. This is evident throughout. However, it is perhaps most surprising on middle market and luxury high-rise condominium buildings. There are many buildings of not very great age that are covered by dirt on the outside. It is as if no attention is given to the commonly owned space of these buildings. Shaashi Thoroor, in his classic book on India since independence (*India: From Midnight to the Millennium*) details this phenomenon, saying that middle and upper income Indians maintain spotless private spaces (apartments and condominiums) in these buildings, surrounded by filth, not only on the outside but also in interior common spaces.

Detached Housing

The Indian megacities have single family detached housing, but it must be searched for (and can be found in Salt Lake City). It is largely the province of the rich and may be in less than good repair. The contrast with Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, which has a similar income level to the Indian megacities could not be more stark. In Jakarta, there are many new, attractive detached housing developments throughout the suburbs. Not so in Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai.

The Food

One of the great delights of India is the food, especially if one likes spicy food. The biggest problem is understanding what is on the menu. There are restaurants where one can choose a great variety of food cooked behind a counter resembling a Western fast food restaurant. There are also many stands selling hot food on streets and so long as it is cooked well, there should be no difficulty. Of course, the water should be avoided, except bottled. Haldiram's is highly recommended. This chain of restaurants has a number of locations in Kolkata. I frequented Haldiram's location that is a short walk from the Hindustan International Hotel (see below) every day. There is a long counter with cooks and a great variety of food. Tickets for the food are purchased at a central location. Everything is in English, except I had no basis to connect many of the names with the food. Again, Kolkatans are kind and helpful, so it is always possible to get help, and in English. This is different from China, where I am often relegated to walking around a restaurant and pointing at food to place my order.

Newspapers

India, like Great Britain, is a Nirvana of daily newspapers. There are the local daily newspapers, such as *The Telegraph*, but there are also significant national newspapers, such as *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *the Hindu* and the *Indian Express*. This panoply of journals makes it easy to spend too much time each morning in the hotel reading the morning news.

Kolkata: Sierra Club Smart Growth Model

In 2001, the Sierra Club published an "Environmental Impacts of Sprawl Calculator," purporting to illustrate the advantages of very high population density and so-called "smart growth." Randal O'Toole and I noted that the preferred density exceeded that of the "black hole of Calcutta" (Kolkata). Within days, the Sierra Club had moderated its density thresholds down materially and eventually withdrew the page (see <http://www.demographia.com/db-sierraclub500.htm>).

They should have left it on the internet. One thing is clear from visiting Kolkata --- it is a model smart growth principles in operation. For example:

Mixed Use: Smart growth tells us that separation of uses between residential and commercial has led to all sorts of problems. No such issue exists in Kolkata. A large share of Kolkata's population lives in the same neighborhoods in which they work. Low income citizens simply set up shantytowns or tents along roads and railroads and walk in the same neighborhoods as businesses. Many people simply run their own retail businesses out their shacks and tents. Kolkata is thus a model of the smart growth mixed use principle, in which there is no artificial separation between residences and commerce.

Jobs-Housing Balance: Smart growth favors a strong balance between housing and jobs. Kolkata may be the ultimate example. This is due to Kolkata's success in mixed use development. Many people who do not have cars and cannot afford public transport select their residential locations based upon its convenience to their employment, using informal housing.

Walkability: Another value of smart growth is the development of walkable communities, in which people can conduct their lives and businesses by walking, rather than by automobile. This has been achieved to a science in Kolkata, where most people have no means of personal mobility. This means that they have no choice but to walk. Western urban areas have much to learn from Kolkata in this regard.

High Density: This is the "black hole of Calcutta" issue. Smart growth favors high density, even though interests such as the Sierra Club sometimes try to camouflage their ardor for density. Kolkata is certainly dense. It is not the most dense urban area in the world, but few of the largest urban areas are more dense. Perhaps its somewhat lower density relative to Mumbai (the most dense megacity) is because of its much more intense role as an agricultural area. Perhaps Kolkata has the highest mammalian densities in the world.

Preservation of Agricultural Land: Specious as it is, one of smart growth's recurring principles is the preservation of agricultural land against urbanization, despite the fact that production is increasing even as land is being taken out of production at rates far beyond any expansion of urban areas. Kolkata represents perhaps the apex of agricultural land preservation. Indeed, it might be argued the Kolkata is as much rural as urban. Throughout the city there are all manner of livestock, in a variety and quantity not to be seen in Mumbai and Delhi. Cows are tied to shanties and even tents. Goats are kept and herded in the Maidan, the main city park. This use of urban land for agricultural doubtless works to preserve agricultural land outside the city.

Housing Choice: Smart growth complains that the market does not provide sufficient housing choice. Kolkata has no such problem. It is hard to imagine an urban area with greater housing choice than Kolkata. Imagine, for example, trying to live in a tent in Portland's Pearl District? Where is the choice of shantytown living in Stockholm or Nagoya? Kolkata provides housing choices for lower income residents that are simply not available in other urban areas less committed to smart growth.

Leap-Frog and Infill Development: Smart growth tells us that leap-frog development is bad and that infill is good. There is virtually no leap frog development in Kolkata, with nearly all development being contiguous with the rest of the urban development. Because so many people have no alternative to walking, there is a market premium for housing that is close to activities. At the same time, the same transport limitations lead to intense infill --- shacks and tents along major roads, in front of condominium buildings, and for the somewhat less fortunate, places to sleep, en masse, along the streets in front of the same buildings.

Light Rail and the Metro: Kolkata has the obligatory light rail or tram system. The tracks run, for example, through the Maidan (city park), where the trams compete for space with goats and goat herders. The trams are also very old. Kolkata also has a Metro (underground or subway) system. Even Rome's is not as filthy. While one might catch a whiff of urine in the New York subway from time to time, one catches the pervasive smell of excrement in the Kolkata Metro. It would not be

unfair to label the Kolkata Metro the “ExcreMetro.” The Kolkata Metro also competes strongly with new rail systems around the world, perhaps having set a record at carrying only 10 percent of its projected ridership. That it was built and moves, however, is sufficient for it to be declared a success by rail cheerleaders everywhere.

Derelict Highways: Smart growth calls for highway investment to be avoided, in the hope that more people will walk or take public transport. Kolkata represents a smart growth example in this regard as well. Kolkata’s roads are generally very poorly maintained, poorly built and far below the capacity required to handle traffic volumes. (Yes, despite all of the people without cars, Kolkata has intense traffic congestion). Kolkata’s supreme accomplishment with respect to roads, however, is the near absence on many routes of any directional signs at all. Any seeking to tour Kolkata by car would do well to hire a driver who knows how to get around.

Emphasis on the public realm: Kolkata is a model for emphasizing the public realm over the private realm, consistent with smart growth principles. People seem to simply set up their houses and businesses wherever they like. There is no necessity for private property, just the will to squat. This is, of course, to be expected in such a dreadfully poor place.

Poverty: Poverty is an implicit goal of smart growth. Smart growth strategies routinely destroy wealth and wealth creation, by over-regulation, especially through land rationing. As was noted above, few urban areas exhibit the poverty of Kolkata. For smart growth, it is what the city looks like that counts, not how well the people live. Smart growth is in the process of reducing the standard of living in places like Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, California, Portland, Denver and Florida, as its land rationing policies artificially raise the price of housing. Smart growth is well on the way to driving millions out of the home ownership market and the mainstream of economic life (See *War on the Dream: How Anti-Sprawl Policy Threatens the Quality of Life*: <http://www.demographia.com/wod1.pdf>). It is, of course, unlikely that western urban areas will become remotely as poor as Kolkata.

Salt Lake City: Before Orenco Station by 40 Years: Kolkata has its own version of Orenco Station or Kentlands --- the “well planned” community. Salt Lake City was built in the 1960s out of land recovered from a salt lake. This planned community has a regular street pattern, with grid and diagonal streets. There are many filthy luxury condominium buildings. There are decrepit commercial areas. However, there is an attractive new shopping area and there are single family dwellings --- something rare for Kolkata ---, which are nicely maintained, exhibiting little of the filth to be found on the collective buildings. What everyone owns, no-one owns. The Wikipedia Encyclopedia claimed that Salt Lake City was a “well planned” community. If Salt Lake is well planned, one shudders to think what poorly planned would be. There is no argument that Salt Lake City is more attractive than most of Kolkata. That is not saying much. “Well” has been removed from the Wikipedia article (The urban planning clergy would do well to learn that terms of value have no place in encyclopedia articles).

Smart Growth Model: Overall, it is hard to imagine a better model of smart growth than Kolkata.

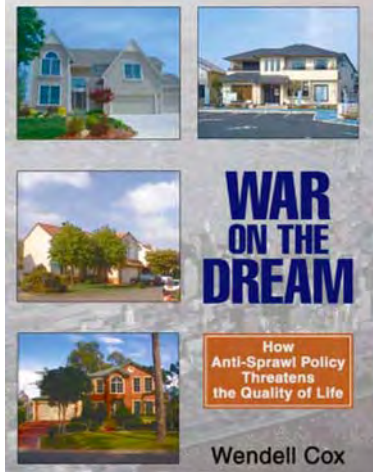
Note on Hotels

Hotels in the three megacities of India are outrageously expensive --- perhaps two to three times what would be expected for the same quality in China, Indonesia or Thailand.

We stayed at a purportedly “5-star” hotel in **Kolkata**, the **Hindustan International** near the Maidan. Our impression was that it might have been a 5-star hotel at one time, but a long time ago. Worse, the hotel more than doubled the price that had been agreed for a sightseeing driver, and attempted to collect more than \$100 for *toll-free* telephone calls. The basic, local per call charge was more than \$3.00 (Rs 150). *Our recommendation is to avoid the Hindustan International Hotel in Kolkata..*

We decided to try lower rated hotels (2-star and 3-star) in Delhi and Mumbai, reasoning that we could always move to a more costly hotel if unacceptable. The results were quite pleasing. In **Delhi**, we stayed at the **Clark International Hotel** near Connaught Place. The service was at least as good as at the Hindustan International. Drivers were provided at the agreed price, which was considerably less than the rate agreed in Kolkata (much less the higher price actually charged). In **Mumbai**, we stayed at the **Midland Hotel** in Santa Cruz (near the airport). The service was also at least as good as at the Hindustan International and drivers were provided at prices well below the agreed price in Kolkata (much less the higher price actually charged). The price of a telephone call was Rs. 4 per minute, meaning that one would need to talk for more than 35 minutes on the phone at the Midland Hotel to be charged as much as the Hindustan International charges simply for connection. Both hotels were completely safe.

The lower driver rates in Delhi and Mumbai are all the more surprising, given that it is obvious that Kolkata is far poorer than the other two and should have *lower* not *higher* rates. The hotels with a lower star rating (2-star or 3-star) are recommended, though it is useful to examine reviews, which are on the hotel booking service internet sites. In all three places, there was also the advantage of being located in the midst of local street life, which is indicated by pictures on the respective rental car tours. While one must be careful in any crowded environment, there appeared to be no safety problem, day or night.



War on the Dream

How Anti-Sprawl Policy Threatens the Quality of Life

By Wendell Cox

To order:

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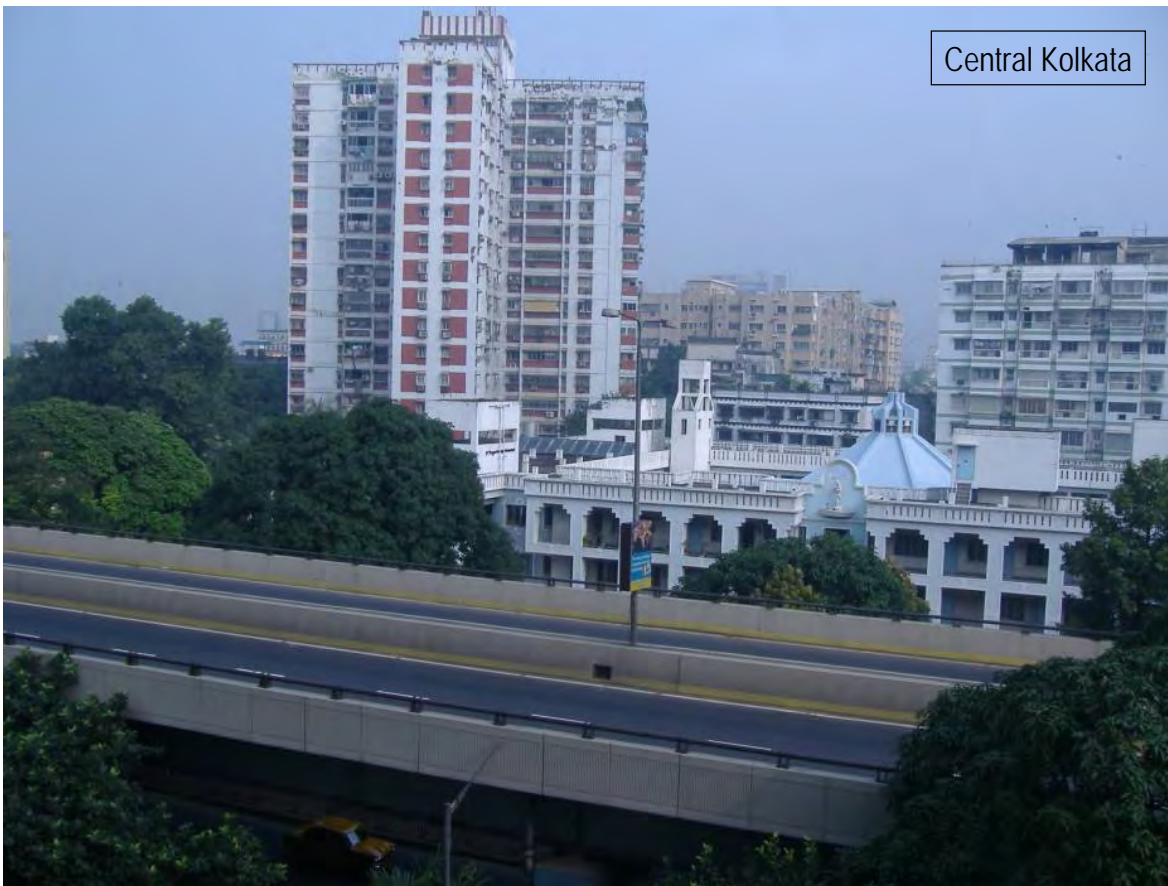
Urban Tours by Rental Car: About the Series

Urban Tours by Rental Car offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety --- not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, *Urban Tours by Rental Car*



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata

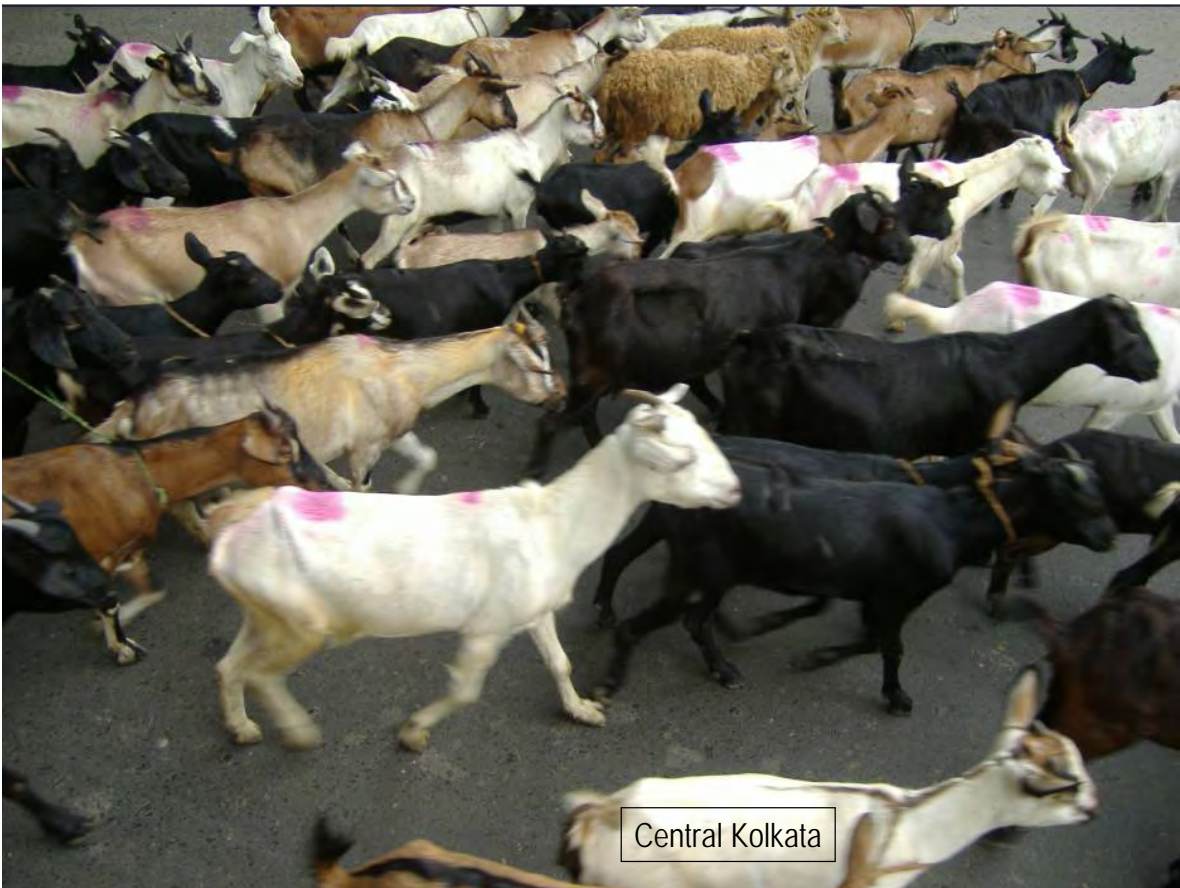


Victoria Memorial



Maidan







Dwellings Under Road Bridge
Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Kolkata North



Auto Rickshaws



Northern Suburbs
East Bank Ganges (Hoogly)



Northern Suburbs
East Bank Ganges (Hoogly)

Northeastern Suburbs



Northern Suburbs

Northern Suburbs



Northern Suburbs



Northern Suburbs



Northern Suburbs



Hindu Temple
Northern Suburbs



Kalyani (North)

Kalyani



Kalyani



"Expressway" Bridge, Kalyani



Mouth of the Ganges Crossing (Hoogly River) Near Kalyani



Northern Suburbs
West Bank Ganges (Hoogly)



Northwestern Suburbs



Northwestern Suburbs



Northwestern Suburbs

Northwestern Suburbs



Delhi Expressway





Western Suburbs



Howra



Howra



Howra

Trains at Howra Station



Howra Bridge



Howra Bridge



Howra Bridge



Mahatma Ghandi Street



Central Kolkata





Mahatma Gandhi Street



Mahatma Gandhi Street



Mahatma Gandhi Street



Mahatma Gandhi Street



Mahatma Gandhi Street



Central Kolkata

Mahatma Gandhi Street



Howra Bridge
Pedestrian Photos Prohibited)





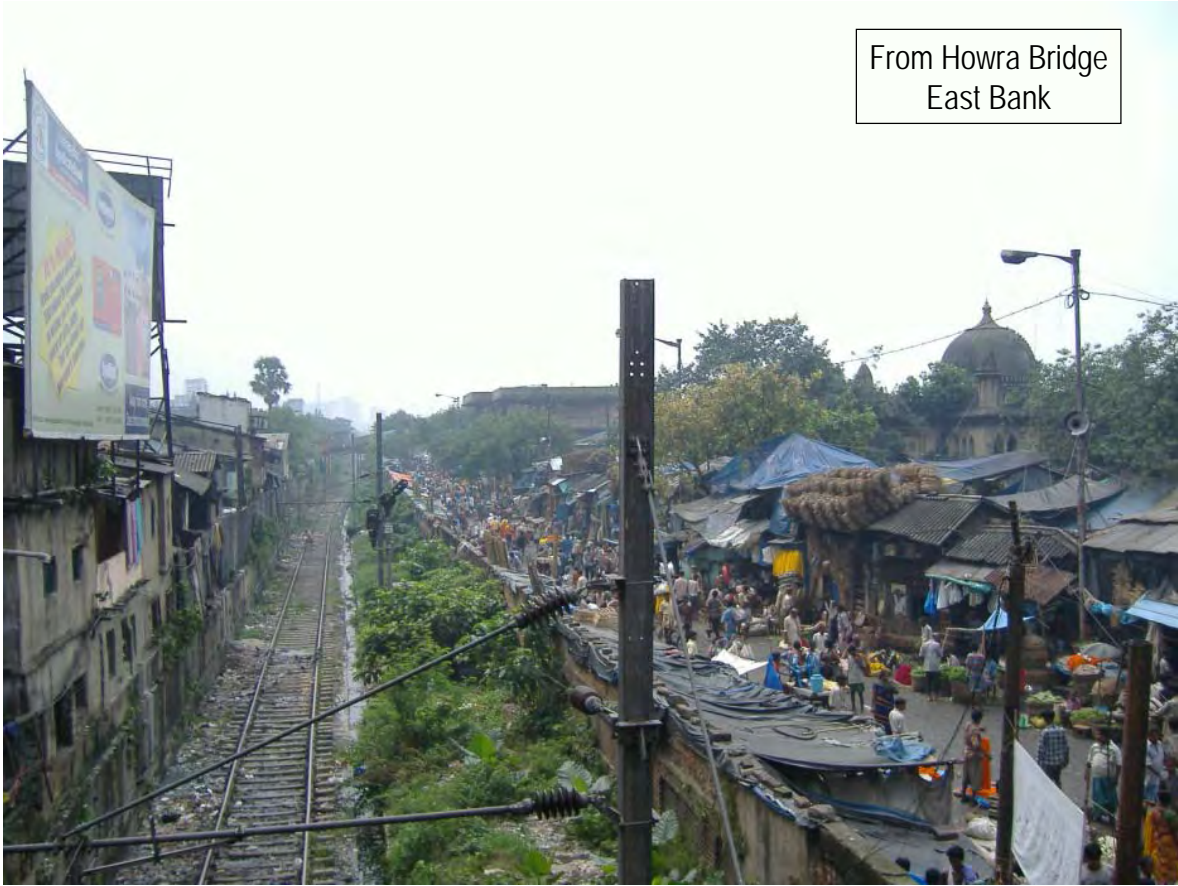
Dwellings at Howra Station



Waiting for Bus at Howra Station



From Howra Bridge
East Bank



Ramp to Howra Bridge



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata



Central Kolkata

Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Shopping Mall, Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



Salt Lake City



New Town: Call Center



New Town

Salt Lake City
Filthy Condominiums



Salt Lake City





Salt Lake City:
Detached Housing



Salt Lake City:
Detached Housing



Salt Lake City:
Detached Housing



Salt Lake City

New Town: Call Center



New Condominium Complex





Howra



Northwestern Suburbs

Kolkata
Metropolitan Area
Municipalities

