

‘A city to look at’ and ‘presenting the world to the city’: ‘Worlding’ New Town, West Bengal¹

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Through a reading of two spatial configurations, the Biswa Bangla Gate and Eco Park, in New Town, West Bengal — a planned city being developed east of Salt Lake City, east of Kolkata — this article argues that a lack of engagement with the designed and planned spaces promoted by the state has led to New Town being framed within a ‘dystopic’ and ‘ghastly’ register. The article contends that such architectural punctuations are the state’s concrete interventions in the urban fabric to mark its arrival on the global stage while simultaneously legitimising the urban development process and the ruling party. The discussion addresses the Biswa Bangla Gate — an elevated viewing deck and cafe maintained by a state-owned limited company — and the Eco Park — which houses miniature versions of the seven wonders of the world—as architectural interventions to assemble ‘a city to look at’ and to ‘present the world to the city’. Through a reading of the above two spatial configurations, the article conceptualizes the aesthetic field of New Town as a field that spectacularizes the cityscape to assemble networks of affective, material and discursive linkages from the urban to the global through its peculiar worlding practices.² The development of New Town links the global with the urban in a particular way by enacting Bengali identity with global aspirations and claims, staging the arrival of the twenty-first century urban in West Bengal.

Keywords: New Town, West Bengal, urban, global, architecture, worlding.

‘This society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation.’ (Guy Debord 1977: 167)

Introduction

New Town is a planned and developing city east of Salt Lake, east of Kolkata. As one traverses New Town, whether to visit it or to enter Kolkata or Salt Lake City, one is greeted with broad roads punctuated with various kinds of state-sanctioned installations, sculptures and architectures. Among a seemingly scattered and thinly populated town, these state-led designed spatial punctuations stand out as markers of intent to develop and transform the landscape into a particular form of urbanity. This article focuses on two such spatial punctuations in New Town, which are planned and managed by state bodies: the Biswa Bangla Gate (Global Bengal Gate) (see Figure 1) and the miniature replicas of the seven wonders of the world in Eco Park (see Figure 4).

Such state-sanctioned spatial punctuations are not a novel phenomenon but have been characteristic of planned cities in India, which is clearly visible in Chandigarh, the paradigmatic planned city of postcolonial India. What differs across these postcolonial cities is the precise

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² Worlding is the ‘art of being global’ (Ong 2011b: 3). In urban studies ‘worlding’ is evoked to shed light on the limitations of the conception of ‘world cities’ which foreclose a study of various other claims to or processes mobilizing the local and the global. To that extent, ‘worlding is both an object of analysis and a method of critical deconstruction’ (Roy 2011: 314).

configuration of such designed spaces and how they invoke certain values to ground the legitimacy of postcolonial urban projects. Postcolonial urban projects in India have had diverse trajectories. As urbanisation and urban planning of new cities in India is an ongoing process, new planned cities are legitimised through certain discursive, material and affective configurations. For example, the Open Hand Monument in the Capitol Complex, in Chandigarh, evokes a precise relationship between the new city and the world by evoking the value of altruism (Moos 1977, Kalia 1999). In the case of New Town, the spaces and built environment under consideration spectacularize urbanity and globality while evoking a Bengali cultural past to announce universal fraternity.

In both contexts, the values espoused by the ruling political parties and their leaders are mobilized to legitimise the planned urban development. In the case of Chandigarh, the Nehruvian Indian National Congress legitimised both the secular paradigm and the city of Chandigarh (Kalia 1999). In the case of New Town, the Left Front's neo-liberal adventurism in the 1990s and 2000s was replaced by the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and its leader Mamata Banerjee's left populism, which reconfigured New Town as global while being resolutely Bengali.



Figure 1. View of Biswa Bangla Gate from the road. January 2019. Source: Author.

New Town was planned and developed on agrarian land acquired under the stewardship of the Left Front government. This transition of New Town has been argued to be a process of primitive accumulation, in the sense described by Bhattacharya and Sanyal as 'the transformation of non-capitalist means of production into capitalist ones' (2011: 42). This shift from a subsistence agrarian economy to a service economy has been 'reshaping and restructuring urban space in post-colonial societies' (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011: 42). Land acquisition for New Town met a different fate than land acquisition in other parts of rural Bengal. While the Left Front government's demise was sealed by anti-land acquisition protests led by the leader of AITC, Mamata Banerjee, the victory of AITC did not mean halting the

planning and development of New Town. Instead, as we shall see in the following case studies, New Town emerged as a site to legitimise a particular form of urbanity by punctuating a text by Mamata Banerjee at a central monument of New Town.

Pardo and Prato (Pardo and Prato 2019: 9) note the necessary distinction between legality and legitimacy calling for ‘a sociological analysis of its diverse sources...everyday-life apperceptions...of legitimacy’. They note that ‘apperceptions of legitimacy are not static, but are subject to constant change...due to changes in the values, norms and needs within a specific socioeconomic and cultural context at a specific historical juncture’ (Pardo and Prato 2018: 4). In the case of West Bengal, the demise of the Left Front government which ruled the state for thirty-four years and the rise of AITC signified a radical reorientation of state legitimacy.

Mamata Banerjee and AITC’s construction and production of legitimacy invoke a range of disparate concerns; as Chaudhury notes, ‘Banerjee’s populist self-making claims legitimacy by combining her performance of political asceticism with other cultural constructs, such as nativist political rhetoric and Hindu religious iconography’ (Chaudhury 2021: 6). While Chaudhury’s analysis is valid, it misses out on AITC and Banerjee’s legitimacy-making that also invokes the global in a particular manner while simultaneously drawing on nativist constructs across time. Such a diverse mobilization of cultural constructs and morals reflects Pardo’s cautionary remark that ‘morality and legitimacy [...] is often informed by, or interacts strongly with, complex frameworks of thought and beliefs — religious, political, legal, etc.’ (Pardo 2000: 3).

The process of legitimacy-making in New Town mobilizes a set of worlding practices; that is, practices that are ‘constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living’ (Ong 2011b: 13). As it will become evident through the case studies, ‘they articulate disparate elements from near and far; and symbolically re-situate the city in the world’ (Ong 2011b: 13). In his study of Bogotá, Montero (2017) notes the link between processes of worlding and legitimacy. Montero argues that in the case of Bogotá, worlding manifested ‘through the elevation of a particular urban policy or planning mechanism to the category of international “best practice”.’ (Montero 2017: 112). This reflects an invocation of the international or the global to legitimise local urban policies in the post-colony; as Montero notes, ‘world recognition...legitimizes certain models as appropriate ways of governing, organizing, and managing urban space’ (Montero 2017: 112). Likewise, Pardo and Prato (2019: 2-3) indicate ‘international legitimacy’ as one of the sources of state legitimacy.

The case of New Town demonstrates the entanglement of legitimacy-making and worlding processes in a particular manner. Manifesting spectacle is central to this entanglement. Through the spectacular spatial configurations in New Town, a particular relationality of urban and global is enacted, worlding New Town and legitimising New Town, the ruling party AITC and its leader.

Debord (1977) conceived ‘spectacle’ as a *separation, through representation, language, images, party, urban, etc.*, wherein they come to attain a life of their own and in the process

determine the matter they emerged from in capitalist modernity. As we shall see below, this separation opens up a space for the mobilization of a range of affects, discourses and materialities. The spectacular architectural punctuations in the urban landscape of Asian cities promoted by the state mobilize a range of discourses, materialities and affects which announce the arrival of Asian cities on the global stage. Ong argues that a

‘dynamic approach to spectacular cities...shows that the stakes in urban spectacles go beyond mere capital accumulation to include the generation of promissory values about the geopolitical significance of the city and the country that it stands for in metonymic relation. The skyscraper megalomania of Asian cities is never only about attracting foreign investments, but fundamentally also about an intense political desire for world recognition.’ (Ong 2011a: 209)

It is important to stress the phrase ‘never only’ in the above quote. This is not to suggest that spectacular architectures are not assembled to attract capital investment. As Malzer (2020) notes in the case of Yinchuan, the Chinese state assembled an Islamic city to attract capital from the Middle East. It is important to point out that accompanying this desire to attract capital was the desire for ‘domestic and international recognition’ (Malzer 2020: 147).

The role of capital and the invitation for further capital investment does not exhaust the affective, material and discursive mobilizations in a city such as New Town where state intervention in punctuating the urban landscape with architectural designs is considerable, especially on the Major Arterial Road. It is important to note that ‘worlding cities are mass dreams rather than imposed visions’ (McCann et al. 2013: 585). By focusing on spaces designed by the state, I am not suggesting that the state is an actor above and beyond the social (Latour 2005).

This article is about two state-sanctioned spatial configurations, Biswa Bangla Gate (Global Bengal Gate) and miniature replicas of the seven wonders of the world in Eco Park, developed over and along the Major Arterial Road in New Town. The article reads these spectacular spatial configurations as sites of worlding where urbanity and globality are spectacularized. By doing so the article challenges existing literature on New Town, which frames New Town primarily within the registers of the ‘dystopic’ (Dey et al. 2016) and ‘ghastly’ (Roy 2011). The article argues that if one considers the intent of state-led designed spaces in New Town, there is a necessity of breaking away from scaffolded narratives of New Town that paint it in a ‘dystopic’ and ‘ghastly’ register. Through the above two architectural and designed punctuations, New Town links the global with the urban in a particular way, enacting Bengali identity with global aspirations, announcing the arrival of the Bengali urban in the twenty-first century.

A growing body of literature on New Town has been published in recent years. These works have approached New Town from a range of perspectives ranging from concerns of land acquisition (Mallik 2018, Dey et al. 2016, Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011), place-making (Kundu 2016), the information technology sector (Mitra 2013), state-market relationship (Sengupta 2013) to the concern of primitive accumulation (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011). Due

to a lack of precise readings of state-sanctioned architectural and landscape configurations, the dominant articulation paints the town as ‘ghastly’ (Roy 2011) and ‘dystopic’ (Dey et al. 2016) without engaging with the intent of state-led planned and designed spaces.

In this article, I deploy the worlding lens to make sense of these state-sanctioned punctuations to move away from the static and rigid notions of world-class cities. To approach a city through the worlding lens is to unpack the discourses, practices and aspirations that are mobilized to construct and produce global city futures. However, as Connolly (2019) notes, the existing literature on worlding requires a significant amount of nuance and specificity to chart out various particular strategies. Recent literature deploying the worlding perspective has followed this trajectory of unpacking specific worlding practices while retaining a comparative spirit (Connolly 2019, Beier 2019, Burte and Kamath 2017, Nkula-Wenz 2019, Ruez 2021). The spectacular has also emerged as a significant mode of worlding accompanied by re-articulation of history and anxiety over cultural identity (Chu 2015) and with the ‘ascendance of the experience economy’ (Chu and Sanyal 2015: 400).

By doing a material-semiotic reading of the above two spatial configurations, the article conceptualizes the aesthetic of the visual field in New Town as being a field which functions by spectacularizing the cityscape to create networks of affective, material and discursive linkages from the urban to the global. Here, aesthetic is a process which foregrounds certain processes and effaces others (Rancière 2004: 12-19). New Town’s aesthetic is that of a city to look at from an elevated deck, foregrounding the landscape of high-rise apartments and the mobility of automobiles and the metro (see Figure 2), while at the same time foregrounding the presence of the world in the city. By locating the above assembling of spectacle, it becomes possible to locate worlding processes and legitimacy-making that accompany spectacle such as above.



Figure 2. View of the road heading towards Action Area I from Biswa Bangla Gate. July 2019. Source: Author.

Before moving on to a reading of the spaces, some clarification is due regarding Bengal and its specific relationship to culture to make sense of the architectural interventions. Also, a short history of New Town is provided to locate and contextualize the sites.

Of Bengal, Culture and New Town

The presence of spectacular configurations in a contemporary city can be read as sites of marketing to attract capital, an obvious feature of ‘world-cities’ (Gordon 1999). However, following Ong (2011), I noted before that it is also important to locate these spectacular configurations within the discursive and affective realm; specifically, the symbolic role that these spectacular configurations play. This distinction allows the possibility of mapping the emergent urban imaginary and the range of discursive and affective mobilizations that scale (Sarkar 2021) these urban landscapes. The lens of ‘worlding’ (Ong 2011a, 2011b; Roy 2011) allows for the possibility of opening up particular processes of claims to ‘instantiate some vision of the world in formation’ (Roy 2011: 312); that is, as Roy and Ong explain, ‘such experiments cannot be conceptually reduced to instantiations of universal logics of capitalism or postcolonialism. They must be understood as worlding practices...the art of being global’ (Roy and Ong 2011: xv)

The literature on New Town, be it the book-length work of Dey, Samaddar and Sen (2016) or remarks made by Roy (2011), frame the city within an affective register of the ‘dystopic’, ‘standing still’ and ‘ghastly’. These writings are based on fieldwork, visits or reports of New Town from close to a decade before my fieldwork. This feeling of desolation that the above authors allude to can be one of the ways of making sense of New Town but they fail to grasp the role of the spectacular configurations such as Biswa Bangla Gate and the miniature replicas of the seven wonders in Eco Park play. Though New Town remains relatively unpopulated which has also resulted in it not attaining municipal status, the New Town that Roy writes off is a far cry from what exists there today.

‘Today, New Town is described as a “nightmare without an end” — bad roads, dirty water, poor drainage, insufficient electricity. In many of the housing complexes, there is no water supply or no connection to the power grid. Residents are quickly moving out and the area is becoming deserted. Those who remain survive in the ways in which slum-dwellers and squatters do in poor, informal settlements — by buying water from vendors, using diesel generators, and making do with unpaved streets (Mitra and Chakraborti 2008). New Town is the ghost town of homegrown neoliberalism, one where the ruins of the suburban middle-class dream are starkly visible.’ (Roy 2011: 275)

Roy’s description of New Town reads like a time capsule from another era. New Town today registers a significant number of business parks housing various service sector organizations, universities, think tanks, art galleries, etc.; it is now well connected with the larger urban agglomeration with buses and a metro system is under construction.

One finds a different New Town when one focuses on the state-led designed architectures. These architectural configurations, following Ong (2011a), are not particular to New Town but

are a feature of emerging Asian cities. In order to read these architectures and the peculiar mode in which they mobilize certain affects and discourses, it is important to locate how the idea of ‘culture’ has played out in Bengal.

Bengal is not just West Bengal in its territorial extent since the very idea of ‘Bengal’ has far exceeded a territorial notion over the years and has become a linguistic sphere which can aptly be evoked by the term *Banglaphone* (Bose 2018). This move away from the territory to a linguistic sphere (which is also undoubtedly exclusionary) can be linked to a range of processes by which the Bengali identity has been reshaped through migration, partition and also its peculiar relationship with colonialism and capitalism. Despite this broader notion of Bengal, the spectacular architectural configurations which concern this article are concrete acts that display the intent of the state of West Bengal in marking out, enacting and evoking a particular configuration of the urban imaginary in the twenty-first century. Among the generic architectures of the residential buildings, business parks and more mundane infrastructures of roads and lights, these spaces stand as intents of marking out difference by evoking a particular relationship to ‘culture’ and its relationship with the ‘world’. This is in no way to suggest that the other sites of New Town do not display processes of ‘worlding’. It is rather to suggest that it is in these spectacular configurations developed and planned by the state that one can unequivocally map the intent of the state and the range of affects and discourses mobilized to engender the processes of ‘worlding’ New Town.

Bengal’s relationship with the category of ‘culture’ has been a fraught terrain with engagements and articulations situated in a conservative imaginary, a cosmopolitan imaginary and a Marxist imaginary (Sartori 2008, Roy 2014). In Bengal, ‘culturalism’ — that is, the elaborate manoeuvres to articulate and signify ‘culture’ — emerged in the late-nineteenth century as a response to the failures of liberalism and its precise interaction with capitalism in the colony. Sartori argues for a rather non-intuitive classification of the post-Swadeshi moment (1905) as the ‘post-colonial’ in Bengal; specifically, the power and the possibility of certain formulations, articulations functioning in Bengal with or without the presence of the colonizer. For example, Sartori argues that ‘the conceptual structure of Tagorean cosmopolitanism would largely be unaffected by the fact of British withdrawal; and the same could certainly be said of M. N. Roy’s Marxism’ (Sartori 2008: 230). Sartori’s argument is fundamentally premised on articulating ‘the cultural as socio-historically constituted subjectivity’ wherein the ‘culture emerges [...] as a subjective moment of capitalist society’ (Sartori 2008: 233).

There is another story to tell which is not elaborated here and which Sartori keeps open. It is the role that culture comes to play in Bengal with the shift of the capital of British India away from Calcutta to New Delhi and the later movement of economic activity from Calcutta to Bombay. It is within this context of deindustrialization that Calcutta has often come to be painted in a narrative of decay in the late 20th century (Majumder 2018). It is within this narrative of decay, of loss of stature, however, that Calcutta becomes Kolkata, and West Bengal has been trying to become Bango or Paschim Bango. This process of regionalization is parallelly accompanied by violent land acquisition drives of the Left Front government for

creating world-class cities and special economic zones (SEZs) and its eventual demise followed by the rise of a left-populist government of All India Trinamool Congress.

What does ‘culture’ become in this moment and how does it position itself within a ‘worlding city’? Through the following two case studies, I argue that the Bengali cultural past from the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ onward is reframed within a register of cosmopolitanism and is also spectacularized, that is, it is separated from its initial moment to re-articulate an assemblage of an ‘urban’ in New Town where a city is unequivocally assembled to look at while also presenting the world at home. This evocation of the Bengal Renaissance is not particular to New Town but is a broader tendency ‘to redefine a “new Bengal” — one that draws on the nineteenth-century tradition of Bengal Renaissance, religious tolerance, and local pride’ (Basu 2019), which is accompanied by other configurations evoking globality through a replica of the Big Ben and a comparison of the Kolkata waterfront with London’s waterfront.

To evoke the tired Tagorean phrase, the city is ‘the home and the world’ (Chakraborty 2016) both near and far. This configuration of the home and the world is achieved through concrete governmental interventions and the state’s planning apparatus by assembling architectures and landscapes where flow, mobility and the rising skyline coupled with the symbolic and material presence of the world contribute to the worlding of New Town.

Context: A short history of New Town

Post-1990s, there has been an eastward expansion of the urban agglomeration of Kolkata. This is not to suggest that developments did not take place in the south or north, but there has been a concerted shift of the planning energies eastward during this period. East of Calcutta, east of Salt Lake were and still are filled with swampy lands which go by the name of East Calcutta Wetlands. These regions remained for much of twentieth century a natural boundary of the city of Calcutta but, following Salt Lake’s execution, the eastward expansion of the city slowly began (Chattopadhyaya 1990), with the construction of the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011) that connect the northern and southern parts of the city by going around the city and with the development of smaller townships such as Patuli and East Calcutta Township (Roy 2002).

A smaller settlement by the generic name of New Township had already been planned in the early 1980s east of Salt Lake City (Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority 1982). A concerted mobilization of intent began in the mid-1990s. A New Town was proposed in 1996 by the Department of Housing, Government of West Bengal. By 1999, a state-owned private company West Bengal Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation (WBHIDCO) was set up to plan and execute projects and the process of land acquisition began at the turn of the millennium. The land acquisition process led to wide mobilization and protests by the villagers and the civil society; however, it could not mobilize public support or capture the public conscience in the same the way as the land acquisition in the hinterlands had led to the electoral defeat of the Left Front in West Bengal and the rise to power of the All-India Trinamool Congress (Samaddar 2016, Dey et al. 2016).

The new town was supposed to be named after the longest-serving chief minister of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Jyoti Basu, as Jyoti Basu Nagar — this would be akin to the official name of Salt Lake City as Bidhannagar, after the former Indian National Congress chief minister Bidhan Chandra Roy — but the electoral defeat of the Left Front in 2011 led to the place being named with the generic signifier of ‘New Town’ (Dey, Samaddar and Sen 2016). New Town has a distinct morphology compared to the older planned city of Salt Lake. The city is divided into four ‘Action Areas’, three of them are under development at the moment. The city houses various Information Technology (IT) and business parks dotted across the city with a large density in the Central Business District (CBD). It displays certain characteristics of compact cities with multiple-intensive land use, which results in a mix of residential, commercial and industrial complexes in close proximity (Lau et al. 2006).

New Town displays a poly-centric topography with the Major Arterial Road housing key cultural centres but curving in and out of New Town to provide it with a distinct structure. As I have indicated earlier, New Town caters to the service sector by attracting and housing service sector workplaces, financial institutions, universities, think tanks, research institutions, art galleries, hospitals, and so on.

Biswa Bangla Gate: A City to Look at

‘A group of young friends are taking a selfie. After being unable to frame the gate and themselves in one frame, they settled for a picture of themselves with the larger gate in the background as a fragment.

A family takes its picture more traditionally where one of the younger ones is asked to take the picture of the group under the gate.

One of the girls adjusts her hair while looking into the selfie camera.

One of the boys sits on the grass and poses for a picture to be taken by a friend with a camera on a tripod.

Cameras are everywhere. People want to be seen, and see this place. They want to see and present themselves here and in this place. Landscape pictures are rare. The developers/architects know what an important role selfies play; hence, they have designated signs for selfie zones anticipating the act, ‘knowing very well the spectacular function that this piece of architecture and the landscape behind would play.’³

Before I began my fieldwork, on my visits to the New Town to get a sense of the spatial structure of the city in early 2017, an acquaintance who worked for one of the corporations housed in an information technology (IT) park in New Town made a passing remark that a ‘skywalk’ over the Narkel Bagan intersection in New Town was being constructed. The Narkel Bagan intersection in many ways is the locus of New Town. This locus might not be the mathematical locus of the town but symbolically it remains the centre of the town as it is at the centre of the three Action Areas, three major modules of the planned city. The very thought of a skywalk in New Town intrigued me, so the following day I took a bus to visit Narkel Bagan

³ Fieldnotes, 25th July 2019.

to see how the construction was progressing. A ‘skywalk’ brought to my mind the elaborate network of skywalks in Mumbai that connect various local rail stations with the neighbourhoods and particularly the roads and intersections around it (Harris 2018). In New Town, the metro was nowhere near completion and the town was still sparsely populated so it sounded odd to me that a skywalk of any sort would be constructed at this point.

When I visited Narkel Bagan, I noticed large white tubes and various other parts of the structure and construction equipment lying around. The construction work in no way resembled a skywalk. Faced with disappointment, I forgot all about it until I returned for my fieldwork in 2018.

It is important to note that the structure that was eventually erected and named Biswa Bangla Gate went through a series of planned locations in many different parts of Kolkata before finally being erected at the Narkel Bagan intersection. It was previously planned to be erected on the VIP Road that services the Airport; then, in another spot in New Town, and also near Chinar Park, on the way to the Airport. All these proposals were scrapped due to legal problems of land, logistical concerns of not having enough space on the road, considerations of elevated metro corridor and flyovers and aesthetic concerns about what the view from the elevated viewing deck looked like. In older designs, a globe was supposed to hang in the centre of the circular viewing deck which met with an accident and the plan was eventually scrapped.

The Gate is managed by a state-owned organisation, West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation (WBHICO), which also played a key role in its development. A state-owned café chain known as Café Ekante provides catering services inside the structure.

I first visited the Biswa Bangla Gate in mid-2019 towards the end of my fieldwork. During my period of fieldwork through 2018, the Gate was always a towering structure, which acted as the counterpoint to oftentimes mundane everyday life and the generic buildings and apartments that crowded the residential neighbourhoods. The Gate is visible from quite a distance when approaching the intersection of Narkel Bagan, whether travelling in private vehicles or public transport; the future, elevated metro route that will pass and curve close to the Gate is meant to provide a view of the Gate to the metro users, at the same time, the visitors at the Gate will be able to view the metro run pass on the corridor.

I visited the Gate by booking an afternoon time slot in mid-2019, towards the end of the monsoon. To gain access to the viewing deck, the visitors must pay and book one of the available timeslots other than lunch and dinner time. The lunch and dinner slots are priced much higher and include buffet services for the customers. At 100 INR or 1.3 USD), visitors are allowed to walk around and observe from the viewing deck for 45 minutes. 100 INR is a significant barrier to entry for most working-class people for a casual visit. A significant number of visitors that I encountered were either tourists or had travelled from nearby suburbs. The visitors were mostly accompanied by friends and families.

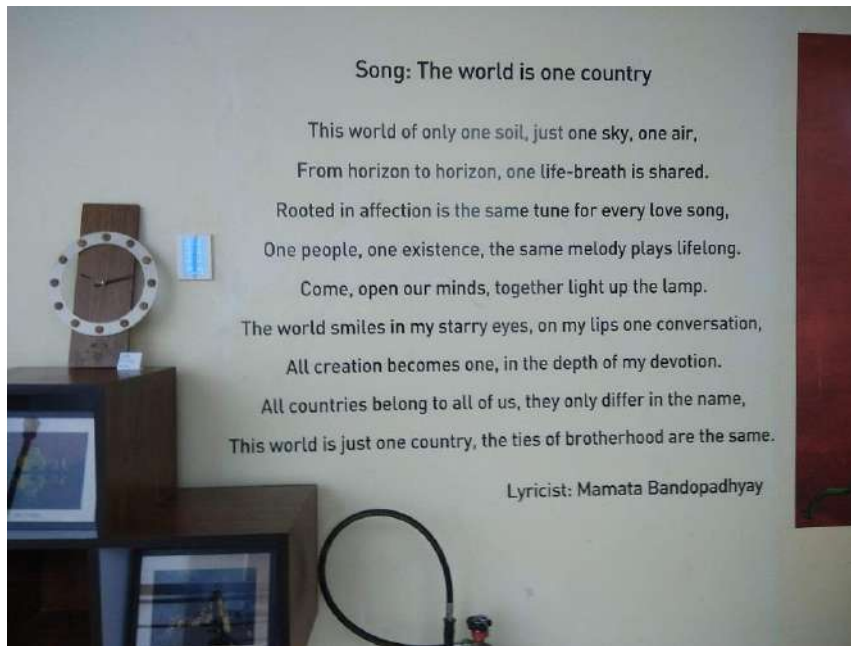


Figure 3: The view when one enters the viewing deck of Biswa Bangla Gate. A poem by the current chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee (in English). A Bengali version of the text is also displayed next to it. July 2019. Source: Author.

Much like buying a seat at a cinema hall for a right to view the screen from a certain angle and distance (Raqs Media Collective 2002), the Gate provides an elevated view of the skyline of New Town, the intersection underneath and the four roads running into the distance, and a view of the elevated metro corridor. When one takes the elevator to the viewing deck, one is instantly greeted with a poem written by the current chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. The poem proclaims an internationalist outlook and the solidarity of mankind (see Figure 3).

Along the interior wall of the viewing deck, portraits of nationalist public figures, historical people from the Bengal Renaissance and other personalities associated with Bengal are displayed. Aphorisms and quotations by Tagore, Ram Mohan Roy, Sarojini Naidu, Vivekananda, Netaji, Ramkrishna and the likes are printed on the walls all around the viewing deck.

Thus, the viewing deck (see Figure 2) provides a view of the roads underneath heading to-and-fro the intersection, a view of the skyline and the elevated metro structure while framing the experience with texts and aphorisms which are meant to convey to the visitor a certain understanding of Bengali modernity with aspirations for the global.

Eco Park: Presenting the world to the city

Eco Park is a large park located on the Major Arterial Road connecting Action Area I and Action Area II. The park is located to the north of the Narkel Bagan intersection. Unlike the parks in Salt Lake and Kolkata, which are open to the public, the park charges an entry fee of 30 INR or 0.4 USD per individual. The park has various attractions ranging from theme gardens to varied simulations of ecological zones and recreational areas. For most middle classes 30

INR is not a significant amount, disposed of without thought, but for a substantial number of working-class people the amount is exclusionary, which means a visit to the park is seen as an event rather than a casual visit. During the times that I visited the park, I witnessed large groups of friends and families visiting the park across classes, some having travelled from distant suburbs.

The plan for the Eco Park was prepared by Bengal Urban Infrastructure Development Limited (BUIDL) and Pradeep Sachdeva Design Associates, and was commissioned by West Bengal Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation (WBHIDCO). The park is currently maintained by WBHIDCO.

The northern part of Eco Park is in a small enclave that requires an additional entry fee of 30 INR. It houses miniature versions of the wonders of the world, such as the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids, the Sphinx, Christ the Redeemer (of Rio), Easter Island statues, the Colosseum and The Lost City of Petra. On the website of Eco Park, the design intent of the wonders of the world is articulated in a language of time-space compression. ‘Internet can make the world so close and small’, it argues; hence, ‘Eco Park and HIDCO Authority is also ready to make the people traveller (sic) of world tour through Eco Park Seven Wonders zone near by (sic) their home at New Town, Kolkata’ (“Prakriti Tritha” n.d.).



Figure 4: View of the wonders of the world section of Eco Park with the Taj Mahal and the Colosseum in the same frame. June 2019. Source: Author.

This section of the park is relatively small compared to the overall size of the park, thus, it feels denser compared to other parts of the park, which tend to be thinly populated with people. In a small area, one can glance across the replicas from various parts of the world, with the elevated metro corridor under construction in the background.

The presentation and erection of miniature versions of the wonders of the world link the urban to the global, the local and the global in a condensed manner. The fact that the representation of the monuments and ancient wonders is kitschy is beside the point, because

representational adequacy is not the concern of such a designed space. At a tactile level, for example, the replicas feel like cheap imitations made out of plaster where it represents clay, marble, or stone. It is the mobilization of a range of flows, of affects that frame and allow the city to present the world locally and, in the process, announce the city and the state's arrival on the global stage.

While the Biswa Bangla Gate presents the curated wall, the urban skyline and the mobility of the roads from a particular perspective for a price, the enclave of the seven wonders present metonymically the world to the city of New Town by assembling representations of certain wondrous architectures and monuments for a price. Through a condensed experience of travelling the world in New Town, the contemporary urban in West Bengal is enacted as resolutely global.

It is worth noting that these architectural replicas are visible ephemerally for the vehicles passing by on the Major Arterial Road, especially the replica of the Jesus Christ of Rio, and the back of the Eastern Island statues. The wonders will also be visible from the elevated metro, which will pass over the Major Arterial Road. Though the sites themselves have an entry fee, their sheer presence in the landscape means that the sites and architecture assembled exceed that quantified price of the experience by dotting the landscape with spectacle for the passers-by.

Aesthetics of New Town

The above architectural interventions punctuate the urban landscape with a particular visual economy for consumption and production. The visual infrastructures function as sites where the urban is aestheticized in a particular manner. Infrastructure has emerged as a central driving force of contemporary imaginations and discourses, which produce fields of desires and imagination. This is why infrastructure must be seen not just as a field of politics but also of aesthetics, of poetics, wherein the signifier does not necessarily refer to some direct signified (Larkin 2013).

As assemblages that are ordered spatiotemporally in a certain way, the two visual infrastructures described above assemble a range of affects, discourses and bodies linking the time and space in a particular configuration, aestheticizing the urban in contemporary West Bengal in a very particular manner. The cities of Kolkata and Salt Lake had their share of global histories and linkages from the pre-colonial mercantile era to colonial and post-colonial. New Town remains steadfast in mobilizing a global-urban linkage explicitly by visualizing it and crafting a commodity out of that visual experience.

The Biswa Bangla Gate's walls mobilize the nationalist and modern Bengali history while at the same time announcing the universal fraternity of mankind. While the wall acts as curation and celebration of mankind through a deployment of a particular arrangement of Bengali personalities, the viewing deck opens up to the city's landscape, displaying the skyline of the city with buildings and the elevated metro corridor. Similarly, the deck provides a particular viewing angle above the intersection which allows for a view of the mobility of bodies; in

particular, the vehicles on the roads. The gate, in turn, is a marker in the landscape for the moving bodies and vehicles on the road. The Biswa Bangla Gate then locates itself in the visual field of New Town in a very particular way, wherein it is an architecture *made to look at* and *to look from*. The Biswa Bangla Gate is then a conduit of aesthetic mobilizations which foregrounds itself at the Narkel Bagan intersection while foregrounding the skyline and the mobility of vehicles from the perspective of the viewing deck.

The miniature replicas of the wonders of the world, instead, *present the world to the city*. While, on the one hand, the visitor to the city or a resident of New Town is invited to look at the city from the framing of the Biswa Bangla Gate, the city also offers the residents and visitors another framing where the world is presented in the city, accessible and nearby.

The function of these architectural interventions challenges the dominant framing of New Town as ‘dystopic’ (Dey et al. 2016), which, as I mentioned earlier, fails to capture the intent of state-led planning and how it mobilizes a range of affective, discursive and material flows with concrete architectural and designed punctuations in the landscape of New Town. The ‘worlding’ of New Town is a process, which is sustained and operationalized by such precise punctuations in the landscape of New Town.

The ‘separation’ (Debord 1977) between the city and its economic undergirding — what Dey, Samadhar and Sen (2016) call the logistical grid — and its re-framed representation of itself through Biswa Bangla Gate and the miniature replicas is the space where state-led planning mobilizes a range of processes, worlding the city in its own particular and vernacular framing of the global, mobilizing the art of being global; a worlding that dissolves the distance between the home and the world, the urban and the global, the far and the near through precise punctuations in the landscape.

Conclusion

Following the process of primitive accumulation that marked the inaugural moves of New Town (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011), the above-described architectures today mobilize a range of affective, material and discursive linkages to ground the city of New Town within a register that marks the entry of West Bengal’s urbanism into the twenty-first century.

Though New Town’s history has remained contested, because of the land acquisition drive in its initial years, these configurations allow the ruling party and the state to grant legitimacy to the urban development process that is still underway in New Town. Granting legitimacy to New Town remains an important concern because of AITC’s central role in the anti-land acquisition movement in Bengal that led to the ousting of the erstwhile Left Front government. At a time when throughout India cities are being renamed to mark revivalism of ‘lost histories’, New Town bears its generic English name while enacting a particular form of Bengali identity; an identity that has assembled a city to look at while presenting the world to the city. By enacting such an assemblage, New Town locates itself firmly within a global history of urbanism where the city and the world are intimately linked and the world is only a step away.

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