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-equips one to deal with, or account for, societal or experiential differences. It leads us inevitably to reduce the manifold divergences and diversities manifest in the colonial experience to the over-simplification of a domination–subjugation relationship played out by the two actors (the colonizers and the colonized).

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Above: A window in Kolkata. Photo by Lecercle

'POSTCOLONIALISM' CAME INTO USE and has traveled a long way 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 a body 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 isolated 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 than not attributed just to 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 former experienced 'ignominy' and the latter experienced 'glory'.

Thus, we identify postcolonial identities as fractured identities entailing moments of 'domination' by the colonized and 'subjugation' of the colonizer and not as monolithic identities of colonizers as rulers and the colonized as the 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 understanding 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 resistors. 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 intermittent 'domination' of the colonized over the colonizer 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 (re)organization and social (re)organization. Though spatial (re)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 rulers 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 Delhis –the latter being the imperial capital separated from the former by large parks and *maidans*. This was done 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 colonizer had a desire for virgin native territory; however, the indispensable role played by the native 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 railings 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 these natives as servants within those very protective 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 impervious border between the spaces of the server and the served (Chattopadhyay, 2000). The very perception of natives as threats made it imperative 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 perforce 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 Old Delhi a 'slum' and attempting to obliterate it (Hosagrahar, 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-à-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-implementation 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 mission' of the colonizers, when it was actually their actions that brought about chaos and disharmony.

The articulation of social (re)organization would help us better understand the fracture. Colonial policies brought about far-flung social changes, prime among them the creation of the Indian intelligentsia. This intelligentsia was 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 imperial rule 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 constant pressure from antagonistic native interests in commerce and administration.
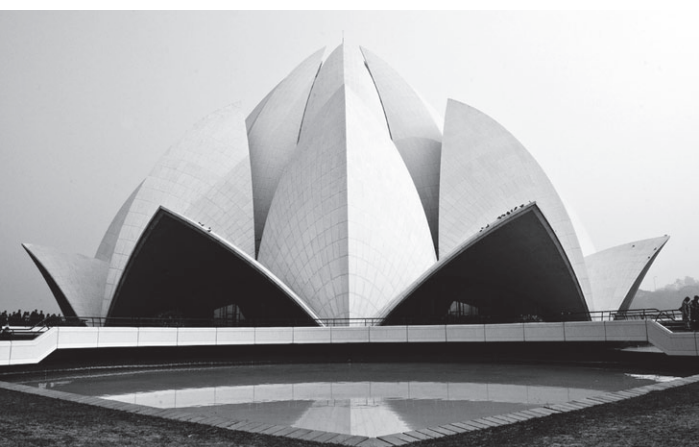
Colonization was not just a uni-dimensional act in which the colonizer dominated the colonized. No, colonialism was characterized by the frequent crossing of boundaries in the 'given' roles of the colonizer and the colonized where even the former experienced 'ignominy' and the latter experienced 'glory'.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation was an important body through which most developmental works were directed. The Calcutta Municipal Act of 1875 gave a majority in the Corporation to natives to whom the appointed European Chairman had to pay heed. This proved to be apocalyptic for European business interests as the Corporation brought within its purview the welfare of the city's native population. To this end, several licenses were revoked or refused to Euro-peans and many construction projects s were held up due to the inconvenience that they would cause to natives. An example of this was the license for a jute *godown* (warehouse) that was withheld from James Finley, a powerful businessman, because the project would have troubled the native residents of the area. The European community appealed to the British government to alter the constitution of the Corporation, and the native elected population was subsequently reduced by the Municipal Amendment Act of 1899.

The Corporation's constitution was made democratic again by the then Minister of Local Self-Government, Surendranath Banerjea, in 1923. As a result, the 1924 municipal elections witnessed the first native elected Mayor of Calcutta. The Corporation thus regained its earlier flavour and directed many welfare activities towards natives. A number of free primary schools and medical relief services came to be established. Electricity rates for local consumers were reduced after pressure from the Corporation, while strikes and closures became common. Moreover, the Corporation took to paying tribute to 'martyred terrorists' through municipal resolutions. All this intimidated the colonizers who sought to remedy this anomaly by capitalizing on the plurality of the native society and introducing separate electorates.

The criminal underworld
In Delhi too, sections of the intelligentsia sought to protect the interests of the native population in the face of a conscious policy of neglect and destruction of Old Delhi in favor of the imperial Delhi of Lutyen. The establishment of the Delhi Improvement Trust to look into the 'welfare' of Old Delhi reflected this well. Additionally, colonizers had to contend with a new commercial elite who, with their growing clout, were also compelling the colonizers to give way.

Another social entity that often 'victimized' the colonizers was the underworld that was another outcome of the social upheaval caused by colonial policies. The reports of the Justices of Peace and the Penal Code identified and codified crimes which included a plethora of non-harmful native practices and behaviours. One such native practice was the enactment of satirical street plays where the lower classes targeted native commercial elites.

Reining in a section of the colonized was one way of mitigating the intimidation that the colonizers faced. However, records reveal that the more intense the punishment, the more accomplished the criminals became at organizing and implementing their crimes. With every adoption of a stronger stance by the colonizers, criminals were further emboldened.

Noteworthy is the number of instances where the colonizer had to give in. Not only were they themselves intimidated by criminals, they also caved in to vociferous demands and lobbying by the native commercial elite who wanted sections of the native population restricted. Furthermore, public punishments did not horrify the native population, but rather attracted them to spectacles of 'villainous heroes meeting their ends' (Banerjee, 2003). Such colonial practices compelled criticism from home, too, forcing colonizers to backtrack and shift the arena of punishment to the privacy of jails.

These incidents demonstrate the rupture in the perceived monolithic identities of the colonizer and the colonized as subjugator and subjugated respectively. The experiences of colonizer and colonized were complex: the colonized, too, 'dominated', pressurized and forced the colonizers into changing their stance, opting for alternatives and stepping down.

The building of servant's quarters, though an architectural afterthought, breached the perceived impervious border between the spaces of the server and the served.

Left: The Lotus temple, the famous Bahá'í House of Worship in Delhi. Photo by Ranjith Shenoy.

Proximity to power centres
The colonial experience bore many shades. It did not just represent victimization of the colonized, although that constituted a substantial portion of it. It was not a unilateral act of rampant domination by the colonizers or unrelieved suffering (or resistance) for the colonized. The archives at our disposal view the colonized either as active or passive subjects. This perception must be relegated with the understanding that roles were reversed between the colonizer and the colonized at several points in time when the lives and ambitions of the colonizers were restricted, frustrated and constrained. The colonized also found a number of avenues to experience moments of domination and control.

This fracture was further affected by the proximity of the colonized and the colonizer to 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 nearer the centre of power, moments of victory for the colonized were fewer given the resources and strength that colonizers at the power centre could field against the 'domination' of the colonized. Likewise, a greater distance from 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 junctures during the colonial experience. Prior to 1912, when the imperial capital was Calcutta, the opportunities of the colonized to 'dominate' were infrequent and rather limited, asevidenced by the municipal amendments mentioned above. On the other hand, being distant from this centre Delhi could gather the wherewithal to become a parallel centre of power for the revolutionaries of the 1857 revolt. This was one incident marked by a long period of 'domination' by the colonized as it proved difficult for colonizers to get through to these revolutionaries.

After the imperial capital shifted to Delhi, the 'victimization' of the colonizer became more pronounced in Calcutta. The outcomes of ongoing competition between European and Indian interests in Calcutta are indicative of this. The colonized could make the colonizer yield much more way in the form of commerce, welfare activities directed through the administration towards the native population, concessions extracted from European interests by various segments of the colonized, and so on. The elected representatives in Calcutta, too, had a freer hand as compared to those in Delhi, who had to abandon a number of priorities such as the development of Old Delhi.

At the time of India's independence, the postcolonial identities in the two cities Delhi and Calcutta differed from each other in terms of their degree of fracture. In Delhi identities were less fractured as compared to those in Calcutta.

Old colonizers and new global forces
Postcolonial identities were thus fluid. What logically follows is that we must view even the colonizers as postcolonial people as the colonial experience extends also to the colonizer who has drawn much from the colonial venture. The postcolonial identities of these postcolonial people gave postcolonial cities a substantial portion of their present form. But are identities like outfits to be worn or discarded as required? It would be pertinent to answer this by accepting that there may be multiple layers of identities, evolving with time, overlapping each other and not necessarily at odds. After independence, Delhi was retained as the Indian capital. Hence, there was not much change from its earlier position as a power centre comprising the colonizer and the colonized, except that both sides had evolved in keeping with international changes. So in Delhi, inherited, less-fractured postcolonial identities largely remained. Erstwhile colonizers made way for global forces focused more on the economic, cultural, ideological and social fronts rather than the territorial. Colonizer groups were further diluted by new powers from various quarters of the globe, whereas the colonized became citizens of independent nation-states. Delhi has witnessed very infrequent 'victimization' from these global forces although incidences do exist.

One example is the planning and development initiative when the provisional Delhi Development Authority was established (along with the Town Planning Organization under the Chairman of the Delhi Improvement Trust). Entities like the Ford Foundation Consultant Team made their presence felt as early as 1955 and assisted in preparing a master plan for the development of the city. Despite the presence of global forces, the new plan, in accordance with an earlier indigenous plan, prioritized city development rather than 'slum clearance'.

Another instance is the feminist movement that arrived (largely but not exclusively) as white middle class feminism and made its way into the capital where it came to be negotiated in the context of a home grown feminist movement.

Towards a global city
Contrastingly, there are innumerable examples of the relatively free influence of global forces in Delhi. (By 'global forces' we mean much more than just economic forces – rather, this includes a whole gamut of ideas, practices, conventions, and so on.) For instance, attempts at 'beautifying' and 'modernizing' the city have entailed a wholesale import of global ideas which have met negligible 'direction' or 'control'. The increase in the number of malls, iconic buildings and export villages along with a simultaneous relegation of the poor to the peripheries of the city through frequent land development or rehabilitation schemes (Priya, 1993; Ramachandran, 2003) are evidence of this. These exotic places have little utility when it comes to issues of development. However, they are seen as essential and important strides on the path to becoming a robust global city.

Building such exotic locations are also steps towards establishing a cultural space to facilitate interaction with global forces. These places 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. Not only these spaces, but also these ideas hold great appeal and thus, 'state-of-the-art' technology, communication and innovation are implemented almost uncontested. A recent example is the establishment of the BRT (Bus Rapid Transport) system in certain sections of the city. The arrangemment emerged as highly unwieldy given the density of vehicular traffic in the city. However, the enthusiasm marking its implementation was noteworthy. Delhi has thus gradually 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.

Kolkata on its own terms
However, Calcutta (now Kolkata) has continued to retain its distance from the power centre and therefore its inherited highly-fractured postcolonial identities have provided ample opportunities for 'dominating' and 'controlling' global forces. Thus, global forces were presented with a number of bottlenecks starting in 1953 when the city witnessed violent protests against a tram fare hike for second class passengers. The movement against the privately owned British tram company assumed such magnitude (including mob violence, assault on the state machinery and public property), that the state government had to suspend the price rise and refer the matter to a tribunal. Numerous companies faced closure due to their inability to cope with this 'domination' and as a protest against it. Only much later did they return to the city. Cultural global forces also took some time to create a niche for themselves in the city. Most global fast food chains were absent for quite long and found their way into Kolkata much later than into other large Indian cities (where these influences soon went 'glocal', as in the localization of the Global Chicken McGrill by McDonalds who introduced such items as the McAloo Tikki Burger (Potato Kebab Burger).

Robin Evans reminds us that spatial organization initiates the processes of social inclusion or exclusion. The early absence and the highly protracted subsequent development in Kolkata of spaces of interaction with global forces signals the balance that the city desires in its interaction with global forces. It would be difficult, premature or rather wrong to say that Kolkata does not wish to figure as a global city on the inter-national map. But catch is that it wants to do so on its own terms by maintaining an edge over the global forces. This constraint is not often acceptable to these global forces and is viewed by them as arbitrary obstruction.

Delhi vs. Kolkata
Given this, how do Delhi and Kolkata stand as postcolonial global cities? 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. Delhi 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. The city has greatly internalized its inherited postcolonial identities and there seems no great possibility of strangling global forces in the city. Delhi being the capital, maintaining its 'global' stance is viewed as essential. Its future strides in this direction also seem unhindered at present.

Kolkata, on the other hand, witnessed a steady withdrawal of global forces, especially on the economic and developmental front. The perceived capriciousness of global economic forces in particular was dealt with heavy-handedly, despite the ideological affiliations of those in power. Differences in ideology did not matter as long as they were perceived as implementing the same agenda of supporting the supposed randomness of global forces. The fatigue, claustrophobia and 'victimization' caused by restrictions imposed by the city on these global forces was obvious and made them wary to the point of withdrawal.

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This situation has been changing and efforts to attract global forces to the city have recently resumed with fruitful results. It remains to be seen whether this development will continue in view of larger realities.

Conclusion

We have argued that postcolonial identities are fractured identities defined in terms of two aspects: the recognition that the colonial experience consisted of moments of 'domination' by the colonized and 'victimization' of the colonizer and that the frequency of this role reversal depended on the proximity to the centre of power. We have demonstrated this by establishing how the two postcolonial cities Delhi and Kolkata have, by virtues of their inherited postcolonial identities, acquired different forms today.

Delhi inherited less-fractured postcolonial identities as colonizers succumbed less to the colonized by virtue of the city being the imperial power centre, as opposed to Kolkata where colonizers faced 'domination' on several occasions. Hence, Delhi presented itself as more congenial to global forces than Kolkata and has donned the mantle of global city earlier and much faster than Kolkata.

It is through this kind of analysis of postcolonial identities that we aspire to draw attention to the possibility of recognizing the first and second worlds as postcolonial along with the third world. This also entails recognizing that a first world city can be deemed as a postcolonial city possessing postcolonial identities, given that it too has drawn a great deal from the colonial experience.

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Erstwhile colonizers made way for global forces focused more on the economic, cultural, ideological and social fronts rather than the territorial.

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