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# Simulating the “city of joy”: state choreography and the re-appropriation of public spaces in Kolkata

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## ABSTRACT

Videos of what seems like enforced and orchestrated solidarity, performed by celebrities from the film industry in Kolkata, each scene blending into another, each upper-class urban home-space resembling the other, each envisioning a brighter future, rendering the same song in multiple voices, with metaphors of cities smiling again, circulated through social media are problematic in the erasures of particularities, “of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work”. While the nature of public spaces and performances of the public gathering is evolving amidst a pandemic, this paper, probing primarily into the state-sponsored strategic public performances in COVID-affected Kolkata, argues that the simulation and performance of state-envisioned “joy” by a postcolonial neoliberal city to mimic the imagined global city, to embody “the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulation without end” has frightfully familiar echoes of coloniality and hegemonic control.

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The widespread global pandemic has made it necessary for world leaders to take a stance on social distancing, choreographing new rules for public spaces and their uses. Meanwhile, the virtual space in the world of social media explodes with newer memes, jokes and viral videos around the themes of the pandemic and social distancing, navigating questions of connection and intimacy through carefully designed performances. Following Italy and Spain’s response to the despairing situation of the widespread pandemic, as citizens performed songs in their balconies, somewhat blurring the already porous border between private and public space, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, instructed the citizens to come out to their balconies at 5pm on 22 March 2020, a day he had previously declared as “*Janata* curfew” or “people’s curfew”, to “ring bells or beat on vessels” (Scroll, 2020) as a message of appreciation to the essential workers. Within a few weeks, Modi created a newer script for this performance of appreciation – at 9pm on April 5, citizens were instructed to switch off all their lights and light *diyas* (small lamps) instead, “to defeat the despair of coronavirus” and to exhibit one’s “discipline and service to the nation” (Pandey, 2020). While the performance itself is

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projected as a symbol of solidarity and unity, the choreography covertly appropriates rituals associated with Hindu piety – the ringing of bells and lighting of *diyas*, metaphors of *pooja*, mostly associated with worship in a Hindu context.

On the other hand, the performance esthetics adopted by the state of West Bengal varies significantly from the Central mandates of the Hindu-leaning rituals. On May 20, as the country was dealing with COVID-related lockdown challenges, a few artists from the Kolkata<sup>1</sup> film industry, under the banner of “Tollywood<sup>2</sup> Artists Collective”, came together in a display of solidarity through a music video released on the Internet (Raj Chakraborty Entertainment, 2020). The video begins with aerial shots of the major identifying markers of public spaces in Kolkata – the Maidan, Howrah station across the Hooghly river, the Chowringhee skyline, the Second Hooghly Bridge and the Victoria Memorial, interjected with shots of daily city life, pedestrians and hawkers, and people from the streets. The video then transitions into short clips, strung together through successive edits, of Tollywood actors lip-syncing to a Bengali song promoting hope, solidarity, courage and an imagined future of resumed activities. The repetitive refrain “*Ei Bangla aamar hashbe abar*” (This Bengal of mine will smile again) plays over shots of crowds in a football stadium, the actors in their own open balconies, usually of urban high-rise buildings, curtains flapping in the wind, with an ambience of hope and optimism choreographed through a certain lens of neoliberal futurism. Interjected in between these short snippets are one-second stills of policemen in uniform holding a sign with some precautionary advice in the language of the Internet – “#WEAR MASK” or “#WASH YOUR HANDS”. The second part of the video showcases female actors lip-syncing to a female voiceover vocalist recapitulating the safety measures one can take to avoid the virus.

While West Bengal enacts a more secular counterpart to the center’s choreography of Hindutva politics erasing religious differences and diversity, the neoliberal urban economy portrayed and promoted through these glossy videos with images of hope, courage and optimism, enacts a different kind of erasure of class and a glorification of neoliberal urbanity, as “social order has long been legible in urban form” (Sorkin, 1992, p. xiii). As Sorkin reminds us, “In the new, recombinant city, however, the legibility of these orders has been dramatically manipulated, often completely obscured. Here, anything seems to go with anything – hierarchies are both reinforced and concealed, at once fixed and despatialized” (Sorkin, 1992, p. xiii). The images in the video are clearly drawn from Kolkata, while the song refers to “Bangla” or the state of West Bengal, a predominantly agrarian state. At the very end of the music video, we see Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee appear and deliver a few stoic statements on how the people need to have the courage to defeat the pandemic. She then demonstrates how to wear a mask, concluding her message with directions to stay healthy and safe. This paper, probing primarily into the state-sponsored strategic public performances in COVID-affected Kolkata, argues that the simulation and performance of state-envisioned “joy” by a postcolonial neoliberal city to mimic the imagined “global city”, to embody “the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulation without end” (Sorkin, 1992, p. xv) has frightfully familiar echoes of coloniality and hegemonic control.

Videos of what seems like enforced and orchestrated solidarity, performed by celebrities from the film industry in Kolkata, each scene blending into another, each upper-class urban home-space resembling the other, each envisioning a brighter future,

rendering the same song in multiple voices, with metaphors of the city smiling again, circulated through social media are problematic in the erasures of particularities, “of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work” (Sorkin, 1992, p. xv). On the one hand, Kolkata police performs popular Bengali songs in urban, upper and middle-class residential complexes, adapting them to spread awareness messages (“Kolkata Police Gives Twist to Song”, 2020), police brutality in minority residential areas remains an ongoing problem, on the other, reiterating a choreography of state-sponsored exclusion and segregation.

The glossing over and even romanticizing of poverty, with videos of urban middle-class TV and movie actors and underprivileged rickshaw pullers, roadside *chai* sellers, vendors, hawkers and street children, occupying the same virtual public space in the guise of unity that creates the illusion of a leveler, is paralleled in actual public spaces in the design of urban esthetics in contemporary Kolkata. I use the metaphor of performance since the state choreography of public spaces includes framing of our visual fields in order to send out a uniform messaging of a developing global city. While one of the primary functions of a performance is to *show*, the framing of the revelations also necessitates conscious concealments. The *show* diverts our attention away from the gritty details, the uncomfortable particularities that might dent the narrative of a perfectly packaged and saleable vision. Space, here, is both “departicularized” and “ageographical” (Sorkin, 1992), separated and unified at the same time. This simultaneous combination and separation of public spaces while choreographing a semblance of unification may be considered as “a strategic deployment of ‘conjunctural geographies’ – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate” (Graham, 2020, p. 454). This ageographia of the Internet, a virtual public space, directs our focus and attention towards the performance of solidarity, while making invisible the different layers of exclusion and inequity – such as class, socio-economic disparities in wealth and privileges, during a worldwide pandemic.

The video illustrates a cityscape of conjunctures – an imagined future, a dream of a return to “old ways” – a performance of nostalgia that the state itself capitalizes on and choreographs through its promises of a “global city”. The shots of people congregating on the streets for *adda* over *cha*<sup>3</sup> are included as part of that nostalgic return to gatherings in public spaces, physical and spatial intimacy, without fear of contamination. Such a portrayal is quite ironic considering the city’s contemporary urban planning initiatives that have designed structures to build an “analogous city” (Boddy, 1992, p. 123) – that of overpasses, towering buildings, malls and city gates, the IT boom and the transforming skyline in the city’s northeastern limits at Rajarhat, a realization of the state’s vision of a global city. Such neoliberal state-choreographed initiatives contribute to further class and cultural segregation within the city, following the model of its colonial predecessors. According to Lucy P. Jordan (2017),

Global city status necessarily involves a series of economic and social restructuring processes: hyper-specialization in producer services and the creation of super-profits; neoliberalized and globalized statecraft; gentrification of inner-city enclaves; a move from an industrial to a flexible postindustrial service sector; and, as a result, a social geography marked by polarization (the growth of the high and low ends of the income and occupational spectrum at the expense of the middle). (p. 1456)

The ageographia that the music video creates in a virtual sense is what Mamata Banerjee's choreography of *paribartan* (change) by envisioning Kolkata as London creates in a spatial sense. On 3 August 2011, *The Hindu*, one of the leading newspapers in India, published an online news article, "Mamata Wants to Turn Kolkata into London" (Bose, 2011). Mamata Banerjee, the then newly elected Chief Minister of West Bengal, and leader of the Trinamool Congress Party, with the help of the British High Commission, the Tourism department and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, launched an ambitious project to realize her dream of "paribartan" or "transformation," "with the Hooghly river 'as the theme on the lines of the Thames'" (Bose, 2011). Within the next few years, the Hooghly river banks were cleaned, sanitized, paved, with trident lampposts along the *ghats*, and in all other parts of the state; official buildings, gate posts and railings were re-painted with the Trinamool Congress Party colors blue and white, eliminating any speck of red or symbolic representation of the erstwhile ruling Marxist government. This declaration and the subsequent initiative of superimposing on to the city an imagined London, and in the Sorkinian sense, redesigning the city as a Theme Park (Sorkin, 1992), is much more complex, not to mention ironic, in light of the city's colonial history.

The arrival of the English East India Company, in historical records, has been accredited to the late seventeenth century, when the Company gradually came to occupy large parts of the land that now make up the city of Kolkata (Dutta & Desai, 2008). The occupied land covering three villages – Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur (Banerjee et al., 2009) – eventually came to be called Kolkata, the anglicized version of which is Calcutta. The town planning and structuring of the city by the British town planners were largely based on their administrative priorities and convenience, with little to no regard paid to the interests of local residents. In 1757, the British shifted Fort William (which was named after the then reigning British monarch William III and housed the British soldiers) from Kolkata (where it was established in 1698) to further south in Gobindapur village (Banerjee, 2016, pp. 20–22). This reconstruction of Fort William in Gobindapur, from 1758 to 1773, in the western part of Gobindapur resulted in the large-scale displacement of villagers. The rich villagers were given cash compensation to move further upward in the Sutanuti area, where new settlements were formed along the Chitpur Road and later came to be known as the Black Town. The poorer villagers were moved eastward, where the East India Company was building roads and clearing jungles, and therefore needed labor for their administrative and entrepreneurial ventures. The poor villagers were resettled in slums that were named after English owners of the plots of land that were rented out – Duncan's Bustee, Colvin's Bustee, etc. The Company was designing and choreographing a demographic pattern based on class, privilege, race, economic and cultural power relations, segregating the Black Town from the White, the rich from the poor, and the English from the native (Banerjee, 2016, p. 23).

Unsurprisingly, these slums in the Gobindapur area had to be cleared through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to make roads, therefore displacing the local, laboring residents yet again. The colonial project as a whole was to design what can be considered a Sorkinian ageographia – colonies that resemble and mimic the British Empire, fulfilling "the [colonial] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122, emphasis in the original). In this colonial project, the building of roads and highways strategically to control, choreograph,

regulate, compartmentalize and limit interactions among the people have played an important role. However, this imperial choreography of public spaces that included clearance of jungles, villages and slums, encroaching on lands, displacing and resettling populations, and “creating strictly bordered arterial thoroughfares” (Banerjee, 2016, p. 28) was constantly being subverted, interrupted and sabotaged by locals who built narrow lanes and by-lanes called *golis* in Bengali. Homi Bhabha recognizes such iterative postcoloniality as “a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9).

He further articulates the borderline cultures as those in alignment with what he terms “contra-modernity”.

Such cultures of a postcolonial *contra-modernity* may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in connection with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9, emphasis in the original)

Even though the colonial histories are traced through the city’s road-systems and arrangement of demographics, the traces of contra-modern resistance are found in the public performance spaces outside of the hegemonic surveillance – in serpentine *golis*, in slums and makeshift dwellings that trouble the neatly organized state choreography of control, dominance and exploitation.

A more contemporary example of state design of urban space in Kolkata is a 135-foot structure built in the imitation of the London Big Ben in 2015, which was erected in the middle of a busy traffic intersection, as part of the Chief Minister’s vision to “turn Kolkata into London” (Kolkata Bureau, 2015). The changes proposed by the ruling government of West Bengal have been more or less cosmetic and touristic – by emulating the banks of Thames, and installing a replica of the Big Ben, Mamata Banerjee’s government has been orchestrating the simulacrum of what defines the city’s past colonizer.

Continuing in a similar trend of “profit-making, privatized model of urbanization” (Banerjee, 2016, p. 158) or “strategic beautification”, in 2017, the Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation set up the Biswa Bangla Gate, or the Kolkata Gate, at New Town on Biswa Bangla Sarani. As one drives along the newly constructed Eco Park in Rajarhat, one can even spot an Eiffel Tower, a Taj Mahal and pyramids, all within the same complex, once again enacting a kind of “colonial mimicry” (Bhabha, 1984), while also exhibiting its slippages. As Sumanta Banerjee (2016) states,

New Town harks back to the early days of colonial policy of spatial division of Calcutta according to the needs of the then dominant power. Like the White Town of the past, New Town of today reproduces the same pattern of institutionalizing (through spatial policies) the territorial monopoly of the dominant interests, denial of rights to the subordinate groups in the making of such policies, and the systematic deprivation of these underprivileged groups. It is a neo-colonial reproduction of the past model of urbanization by an indigenous ruling elite. (pp. 160–161)

Not only are the underprivileged groups of people used for labor to build such infrastructural splendor that the metropolis boasts of, some of these subaltern groups become part

of the revenue-generating machine of the neoliberal economy while remaining unnamed, invisible and erased from the narratives. As Sun and Chen (2017) have concluded in their research, adhering to this homogeneous hegemonic vision of “global cities” has increased income inequality, occupational polarization and a “floating population” of migrant laborers with precarious work conditions (p. 1480). The 2019 pandemic made visible several such inequalities and oppression, as interstate migrant laborers, who constitute more than 93% of the labor force in India (Maity, 2021), were left stranded in their host cities, without food, money, resources, during the lockdown announced by Modi. These laborers took to streets and national highways, walking thousands of miles to return to their hometowns. Images of mass exodus, of exhausted, beaten, weakened and dead bodies of these migrant laborers, otherwise rendered invisible and dispensable due to class and caste segregation and capitalistic erasures of laboring bodies, became frequent images on media outlets, evoking middle-class sympathy. But on the other hand, these laborers were reduced to bodies that carried diseases, ostracized both in their host cities and home villages, while not being able to afford physical and social distancing that “gradually became a privilege solely enjoyed by less than 40% of the Indian population, half of 60% of the population living below the poverty line” (Maity, 2021, pp. 72–73). “The workers were subjected to harsh treatment from not only [police] officers on duty but also their neighbors who feared that the laborer returning from urban India would be a carrier of the virus” (Singhania & Banerjee, 2020, p. 85).

Having collected first-hand narratives of interstate migrant laborers from Selmabad, a small village in the East Midnapore district of West Bengal, Sukanya Maity (2021) discusses the implications of selective “care” that the government provided in the context of COVID-19 in India. She writes,

The politicization of the public space, earlier by the caste supremacists and now by the Indian state has made these already marginalized sections of the population more prone to discrimination and oppression and simultaneously reflects the position of the state and questions the equality of citizenship. (Maity, 2021, p. 73).

Creating images of a global city with a benevolent government through media, YouTube videos, widely circulated WhatsApp messages creates a simulation of an imagined urban space that uniformly irons out the creases of inequalities in class, caste, religion, income and privileges, especially in the midst of a global crisis such as the pandemic. Sorkin explains that “the privatized city of bits is a lie, simulating its connections, obliterating the power of its citizens either to act alone or to act together” (Sorkin, 1992, p. xv).

Similarly, through the production of feel-good videos and live police-performances of popular Bengali songs with instructions to stay at home and wash hands during the pandemic in middle-class urban neighborhoods diverts the attention, energy and critique away from the more crucial and pressing issues in hand – the continually rising Coronavirus cases in Kolkata, the lack of sufficient medical facilities, the dearth of doctors and other medical resources, and the unimaginable plight of daily-wage migrant laborers. One might argue that such videos serve to uplift the spirit of the people, and therefore, are essential during a crisis. But we also need to evaluate who the recipients of such state care and benevolence are – once again, it is impossible to separate privilege from class. Releasing a Tollywood-produced video on the Internet, having police departments



perform in urban neighborhoods cater only to middle-class and affluent citizens – those who can *afford* an Internet connection, those who can *afford* to stay in urban neighborhoods, and primarily those who *identify* with such framings of performances. That itself excludes the minorities. The state not only choreographs the public performances, but also frames the vision fields, beyond which remain hidden, unheard, invisible and neglected masses of poor and underprivileged citizens. They only appear as one-second sanitized stills or clips, in black and white, silent and voiceless, and witness to the display of a neoliberal Kolkata – designed with an impulse of nostalgic return that can also fuel its futuristic urban expansionist aspirations.

The changing scenes of the present globalizing condition demand it to exhibit signs of progress in creating *ageographic* public spaces, through a mimicry of London as well as subscribing to imaginaries of a progressive, technologized, neoliberal state. In the articulation of this “colonial mimicry” (Bhabha, 1984), its slippage is produced through the overarching trends of capitalizing the colonial history in the desire for a neoliberal profit-oriented capitalistic future. And simultaneously, within the system of state-produced performance of joy, abundance and contentment, slippages are produced through overt and covert subversion of state designs and desires of neatly organized streets and thoroughfares. In his 2010–2011 fieldwork journal, Sumanta Banerjee (2016) describes the ways in which the under-city bypasses and subverts the state designs of neoliberal urbanization utilizing some of the infrastructural facilities of the state itself.

At midnight, as I walk down the paths of neon-lit glittering Park Street – Theatre Road, where the bars and restaurants are still alive, I follow my nose through the old familiar territory and soon sniff my way into one of the back lanes. The grocery stores and tea shops that operate during the day have already put up their shutters. Dim street lights spread a lemon haze. I enter the cardboard city – another urban complex made up of paper and plastic, scraps and rags. It is now time for another Kolkata to come alive. (p. 69)

These interstitial public spaces of temporary dwellings outside of the IT centers and shopping malls, and virtual public spaces rupturing the neatly framed state choreographies become contested spaces. The domestic helps, rickshaw pullers, vegetable vendors, hawkers and presswallahs who stay in these temporary arrangements on footpaths, “on the margins of metropolitan desire” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 31), serving the upper- and middle-class residents of the high-rises and towers in New Town and Rajarhat, bridge the class gaps, in a certain way bringing the slum dwellers, city-dwelling urban classes and the middle classes together at least spatially, if not culturally, undoing the state’s neat designs.

On April 25, 2020, about a week after the music video responding to the Coronavirus situation in West Bengal was released with celebrities from Kolkata lip-syncing to a song of hope, another video is released on YouTube with the same song and a similar idea, but with a group of women lip-syncing and performing on their terraces instead. They call themselves “Fusion Girls” (2020) but they are not celebrity stars. Nor are they in neighborhoods extending the frontiers of the city, subscribing to a uniform hegemonic vision of an urban space. They perform from their houses that rupture the uniformity of match-box high-rises in Rajarhat, that create a contrapuntal narrative of urbanity. The very disjuncture produced in the dissonance of male voices being lip-synced by a group of girls

ruptures and unsettles the state choreography of a harmonious city, exposing the mechanisms of performance. This also serves as a perfect metaphor for the city itself – contrasting, conflicting, chafing and corroding conjunctures of choreography serving the state’s capitalistic neoliberal vision.

Contrasted with Modi’s overt instructions of emulating Hindu-leaning rituals to beat vessels or ring bells, and Banerjee’s covert strategies of designing “joy” and “unity” propagating neoliberal imaginings of the city, the spontaneity displayed by these girls serves almost as a political statement against the neatness of orchestrated state designs, reiterating “the importance of fun as a form of non-productive pleasure” (Lieder, 2018, p. 250). Phadke et al. (2011), examining women’s access to public spaces in urban India, emphasize the role of pleasure in protesting against oppressive systems of control,

Pleasure is an unknown quantity, which undermines the very possibility of order and control [...] Pleasure or fun is seen as threatening because it fundamentally questions the idea that women’s presence in public space is only acceptable when they have a purpose. (p. 150)

The utter purposelessness and quiriness of the video by the “Fusion Girls” disrupt the ideas of control and choreographed joy. Instead, their choice of mundane everyday spaces that do not align with the neoliberal designs of high-rises, and idiosyncratic adaptation of a state-controlled video depart from choreographed “joy” moving towards a more dissenting purposeless “pleasure” and “fun”, appropriating, subverting and disobeying neoliberal governmentality, while occupying and offering alternative virtual public spaces.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes

1. Kolkata earned the epithet after the 1985 novel based on Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), *City of Joy*, by the French author Dominique Lapierre.
2. A local derivative of Hollywood, the Kolkata film industry is commonly referred to as Tollywood, since the film studios are localized in the neighborhood of Tollygunge. Quite ironically, the neighborhood itself was named after an Officer of the British East India Company, Sir William Tolly. Later, the neighborhood was heavily populated by an influx of refugees coming in from East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) after the Partition in 1945 (Chaudhuri, 1995).
3. An *adda over cha*, roughly translated as tea over conversations, is an integral part of the city and the Bengali culture. From literature to popular culture portrayals of Bengalis, having intellectual, political, philosophical and spiritual discussions without much agenda in roadside tea stalls, or in front of house facades, have been inextricably linked with community relations and congregations, something that the “global city” with its neoliberal capitalistic pursuits tries to prevent.

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