

**A Report
On
The Activities under Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) Fellowship**

**Calcutta Research Group
In Collaboration with CIFAR
August 2024 to April 2025**

Ranabir Samaddar, Professor Emeritus at Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group and CIFAR Fellow in the Humanity's Urban Future programme (from 2023 till present) with the support of research and programme assistant Poushali Basak and others successfully completed a number of research activities and programmes. Under the leadership of the CIFAR Fellow, CRG has organised a public lecture series, 'City Lights'; an international authors' workshop in November 2024 titled 'City as a Southern Question'. The international authors' workshop was designed to deliberate on the theme of 'City as Southern Question', and is further being planned as an edited book volume; the manuscript is currently in the process of compilation. An online course on 'Making and Unmaking of Cities' was organised and successfully completed. Professor Samaddar has piloted, supervised and conceptualised the public lectures series, online course, ideating the course curriculum, design and locating resource persons with the support of Samata Biswas, member of CRG. Poushali Basak with the help of research staff at CRG has helped in implementing the programmes and conducted one individual research study, 'Dream Deferred: Girl Child Education in post-Covid Kolkata'. Another research study, titled 'Ecology, Extraction, City: The Making and Unmaking of Kolkata and Its Hinterland' has been jointly conducted by Shatabdi Das, Samaresh Guchhait and Ranabir Samaddar.

“City Lights” Public Lecture Series (September 2024 to May 2025)

The public lecture series 'City Lights' started in September 2024 and is continuing in collaboration with different cultural and educational institutions in Kolkata, and other cities, to explore various aspects of the city - as sites and citadels of modernity, in imagination and as destination, as geographical place and affective space, as sites of refuge and crime, and above all as sites of contentious claim makings, revolts, new collectivities, trust, and mutual protection. The aim has been to deliberate on city making and unmaking beyond the disciplines of urban studies, social sciences, geography. The lecture series situated in the contemporary political economy, revisited history primarily concentrating on the city making processes of Kolkata, discussing the post-colonial and post-industrial contentions, focussing on infrastructures of streets and modalities, water and waste management, informal and platform labour, cinema, gendered histories of work, education and urbanisation. Following is the chronology of lectures.

- a) The first lecture, titled 'Urban Turn, Biopolitics, and the City' by Professor Ranabir Samaddar, was held on 23 September 2024 at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata.
- b) The second lecture, titled 'The Street and the Making of Cities' by Dr. Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay was held on 20 December 2024 at Rabindra Bharati University.

- c) The third lecture titled ‘City as Cinema: The Choric in Mrinal Sen’ by Dr. Samata Biswas was held on 10 January 2025, at Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata.
- d) The fourth lecture, titled ‘Tales from Kolkata: New Labour in a Post-industrial City’ by Professor Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury was held on 31 January 2025, at St. Xaviers College, Kolkata.
- e) The fifth lecture, titled ‘Sex Workers, Migrants, Citizens: The Making of Kollolini Kolkata’ by Professor Paula Banerjee was held on 18 March 2025, at Bethune College, Kolkata.
- f) The sixth lecture, titled ‘Water and Waste Management in Darjeeling’ by Roshan Rai was held on 27 March 2025, at Gymkhana Club, Darjeeling. This lecture was followed by a roundtable discussion on ‘Rivers, Hazards, Urban Ecology and Activism’ with participants from DLR Prerna and researchers from the Calcutta Research Group.
- g) The seventh lecture, ‘Dream Deferred: Girl Child Education in Post-Covid Kolkata’ by Poushali Basak was held on 29 April 2025, at Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK).
- h) The eight lecture, titled ‘Calcutta as an imperial city in the early twentieth century’ has been presented by Dr. Kaustubh Mani Sengupta on 31 May 2025 at Bangla Akademi, Kolkata.

“City as a Southern Question”: Authors’ Workshop (13-14 November 2024)

The Conference “City as a Southern Question”, organised by the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) on 13-14 November 2024 in Kolkata, in collaboration with Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR), Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, University of Naples Federico II, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and several other universities and institutes, was designed as a writer’s workshop. It had presentations of research articles by the contributing authors of an upcoming edited book volume titled ‘City as the Southern Question’ (Routledge, forthcoming). The contributing authors as well as editors presented their research and participated in the discussions both online and in physical sessions in Kolkata. There were also presentations by participants selected from a pool of 100 odd applications received through a call for proposal announced in early 2024.

The Conference was conceptualised to re-situate and revisit cities in the South in a rapidly globalising, urbanising world and to re-investigate the North-South relations. Large Southern urban concentrations as islands of industry, services and development are working at the same time as giant branches of Northern corporate capital, determining the grotesque, unbalanced structure of Southern economies. Their role as logistical hubs, which is why they are often port cities, is therefore no accident. The Conference attempted to unfold the myriad facets of Southern urbanisation, from port cities, steel cities, trading towns, railway towns to smart cities, tourism hubs, capital and logistical cities. The Conference aimed at discourse on cities and the questions that need to be asked and thought of by taking into consideration Gramsci’s ‘The Southern Question’, extended through sub-themes such as Transitioning City and Expanding Urban Worlds; Work, Entrepreneurship, Urban Economy; Conflicts and Protests in Urban Spaces; Urban Planning and Urban Future(s); Urban Health; City, Refugees, Migrants and the

Stateless; Urban Violence and Justice; City, Climate Change and Sustainability; Representations of the City in Literature, Films, Plays and Popular Culture; Making and Unmaking of Cities, and more.

“Making and Unmaking of Cities”: Online Course (15 February 2025 to 29 March 2025)

A certificate Online Course on City was conducted from 15 February 2025 to 29 March 2025 under the CIFAR grant. It aimed at deliberations on making and unmaking of cities in South Asia and the world, issues of urban autonomy and sovereignty, struggles for rights and urban justice, as well as dominant stories that cities tell of themselves. The sub-themes of the Conferences have been a) City and Infrastructure, b) Labour and Economy, c) Climate Change and Urban Ecological Crisis, d) Urban Divides, e) Conflicts and Urban Protests for Justice, f) Images and Imaginations of the City in Transition.

The call for online applications was out by November 2024 and eighty applications were received from India and abroad.. Thirty-seven participants were selected from the pool of applications for registration in the course, mostly research scholars from varied disciplines within the country and also abroad. Some were professionals – artists, journalists, development sector workers. The resource persons were from renowned Universities from abroad and within India as well. They offered lectures on various aspects of urbanisation and city making, especially deliberating on current contentions and discourses on City from the theoretical perspective of ‘urban virtues’; accumulation, rent and infrastructure; the burgeoning platform economy and informal labour; climate change and urban ecological shifts; protests, spatial justice and reclaiming urban public; organisation and unionisation of informal labour; cities in fiction and city fictions. The online course explored the process of urbanisation ideologically, sociologically, economically, and politically. It explored how cities have been built and rebuilt in the wake of violence, epidemics, climate disasters, modernisation and planning. It deliberated on “futuristic” and smart cities, cities of refuge and creativity, cities that are home to crime and labour mobilisation. The cities in focus were Southern cities across the globe but also occasionally referring to some Northern cities as per contexts. CRG is in the process of curating the online lectures and the videos will be uploaded on the website soon.

Research Study I: ‘Dream Deferred: Girl Child Education in post-Covid Kolkata’ by Poushali Basak

The research study aimed at understanding the reason for drop-outs of girl children in government schools and the current situation of public schooling in Kolkata. Research studies on ‘girl child’ education indicate the high level of drop-outs, even after introduction of several government welfare schemes in West Bengal in the last 10 years. National Family Health Survey - NFHS-5 (2019-21) indicates how child or early marriage percentage remains the same in West Bengal, which is 41.6%, similar to NFHS-4 in 2015-16 as indicated by a study conducted by Sabir Ahamed in 2021. However, most of these studies are conducted in the districts and there is hardly any research on the educational situation in the cities. Public education, especially public schooling in the context of Indian cities become more complex

and contentious as it is about the dreams and aspirations of the urban labouring classes. At this juncture, the study tried to map out the needs, aspirations vis-à-vis the situation of public schooling of the ‘girl child’ in post-Covid Kolkata. The questions asked were – What is the pattern of enrolments and drop-outs in state government schools in the city in last 10 years? What are the educational aspirations and needs of young women in the city? What are the challenges faced by young people from marginalised communities in continuing school education and why?

Through some qualitative interviews with teachers in government schools, representatives of women’s organisations, community schools or *Pathshalas* working with adolescent children and a quantitative analysis of the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) data, from 2011-12 to 2020-21, this research discusses how government school system is not able to meet the needs and aspirations of young adults from poor and marginalised communities. The present public education system though functioning through various welfare measures is not able to retain children in schools due to scarcity of teachers and teaching-learning facilities and infrastructures. Socio-economic shifts in the post-Covid Kolkata also creates economic hurdles, where young adults dropped out of schools in search of jobs. Especially for girls, several interlocked factors of patriarchal violence in family, male gaze and surveillance in neighbourhood and attractions of the neo-liberal digital market play at intersections. Schools though initialising online classes, making mobile phones accessible through welfare schemes, lack of guidance about how to navigate the digital world, immediate attraction of fame, social capital, romantic pursuits and money making become more important through mobile phones than using it for educational purposes. In such a situation instead of instituting inspection, monitoring of schools, evaluation of curriculum and investing in public education, the State is somewhere reclining and creating space for private players in primary, elementary, secondary and higher secondary school education.

Research Study II: ‘Ecology, Extraction, City: The Making and Unmaking of Kolkata and Its Hinterland’ by Shatabdi Das, Samaresh Guchhait and Ranabir Samaddar

This research primarily binds together the factors that have gone into the making and unmaking of Kolkata, how activities and economic processes acted as controls for the evolution of the port city and its growth at the cost of ecological damages to the wetland ecosystem constituting the deltaic land, that has been shaping the city’s attributes; and finally the river basins including the coalfields connected by railways and roadways acting as nodes of development of the secondary urban agglomerations. The paper analyses the impacts of expanding industrial complexes, real estate, infrastructure and concrete constructions into the East Calcutta Wetlands at the cost of pollution and loss of ecosystem services. The future of the wetlands, livelihood and issues of ecological protection draw attention to the emerging legal debates of environmental conservation and economic development in Kolkata together with policies aimed at environmental protection yet those that further trigger destruction of land. The research focuses on the planning area serving as the hinterland of Kolkata port, also a bustling industrial-urban corridor in the western part of Bengal that houses iron and steel industries, coalfields, and big cities along with medium-sized towns based on industrial production and

extractive economy. The struggles of development to cope with environmental damages is one key aspect that the closing segment of the study looks into, along with the unceasing yet imbalanced (at times) efforts of environmental protection in the coal mining, industrial-urban corridor thriving in a river basin, raising the question of an unceasing process of making and unmaking of cities and their relentless implications that continue to transform the landscape.