

Traversing the *paras* of Kolkata: A sociological reflection on urban lived experiences

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Abstract

The paper is a critical analysis of the sociological and anthropological literature on neighbourhood studies in India. Here, the objective is to examine the lived experiences of communities in various neighbourhoods which are often organized based on identities such as ethnicity, caste, religion and so on. While interrogating the literature, we also emphasize on the concepts of 'neighbourhood', 'locality' to make a difference between the two. The paper reveals the particularities about Kolkata's *paras* (meaning neighbourhood in Bengali) as it lies at the intersection of administrative, affective, emotive and sensory experiences. Upon interrogating the literature, we present an analysis of three *paras* belonging to three different cultures and communities to enquire, what does it mean to live in a neighbourhood of a similar faith or religion? In exploring the neighbourhood dimensions, we pay attention to the tensions and hostilities which are critical parts of living together. These divisions and differences are crucial in analysing the social and cultural milieu of *paras* which is also informed by boundary-making, symbolic violence of discrimination and isolation. Subsequently, we argue that these aspects complete the understanding of Kolkata *paras*, which is indeed a critical component to studying cities of South Asia.

Keywords: urban space, neighbourhood, residential segregation, lived experiences, hostility, community, identity

1. Introduction

Cities all over the world are today transforming and facing challenges in mediating new urbanism. In this process, they are organizing and segregating their residential neighbourhoods according to various parameters – race, class, caste, ethnicity, occupation, religion, and so on. While several Indian cities and their neighbourhoods attempt to retrofit to the demands of the fast-paced contemporary life, in this paper we particularly highlight the situation in Kolkata. Calcutta or Kolkata (as the de-anglicized name of the city became official in 2001) is a metropolitan city in the West Bengal state of eastern India and is often considered to be a cultural hub. It is noteworthy that in Indian cities, *para*, *mohalla*, and *pols* can be considered as variants of the neighbourhood.

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While this reference to *mohalla* is regarding the neighbourhood in north India, it is referred as *pols* in the case of Ahmedabad and as *para* in the case of Bengal. However, *para*, the word for neighbourhood in the Bengali language, is more than just a residential area in an urban society; it constitutes social identities based on emotions, kinship, conflicts, gender norms, honour, pride, and so on. In urban settings, which are traditionally associated with anonymity, hostility and strangeness, where competition and individualism govern everyday life, the *para* and social bondings woven around it are unique. It is the social interactions in the *para* – hovering around one's balcony, street corner, grocery store, clubs, parks, religious institutions, and many such places – that provide a platform for discussions ranging from politics, movies, gossip, and ridicule of various types. In the face of globalization, what has happened to the neighbours and neighbourliness in the *paras* remains a point of enquiry. This makes *para* an interesting space for sociologically dissecting various forms of ordinary everyday life.

The city of Kolkata is marked by the presence of a heterogeneous population residing here. The population comprises of communities with diverse origins—the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch, Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, Chinese, and Parsis; and communities from various parts of the Indian subcontinent—Sindhis, Biharis, Marwaris, Tamils, Kannadas, Asamiyas, Tibetians, Nepalese, Oriyas, Maharashtrians, Bohra Muslims, Sikhs, and Bengalis (Banerjee, et al 2009:3). Here Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians represent the religious diversity of this city (Banerjee, et al 2009:18). There is a difference between identities as lived experiences and identities as objects of analysis. There is also a difference between the construction of identities as public or political discourses and identities as academic engagement (Sen 2023).

On the one hand, our empirical observations in Kolkata suggest that neighbourhoods are places where informal kinship relations across generations are maintained and monitored; these create bonds of trust, support, and even care. The use of informal kinship relations such as *jethu*, *kaku*, *kakima*, *dada* and *didi* are quite commonly used to refer to uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters beyond one's blood ties and family, often located in the neighbourhood. As people live, share, interact, and interrogate spaces on the basis of various identities, this creates a space of belongingness, memory, and homogeneity. This in turn produces a certain kind of hierarchy that shapes both the people who live in it and outside it. Often, such neighbourhoods become a world of their own, celebrating and living a life which might seem 'alien' to the population outside. We consider that what seems 'alien' is deemed fit for sociological understanding here, as neighbourhood reveals interesting questions on social life based on various cultures and communities living in the city. Thus, the spatial and the social are deeply interwoven. On the other hand, it suggests that from north to south and from east to west, the population, architecture, and cultural ethos changes across Kolkata, and yet there remains a certain flow between these. Several scholars studying the relationships between people in cities, institutions, and social processes, often consider the neighbourhood as the default location to study the urban, depriving it of its own social meanings and motivations (Abraham 2018; Ibrahim 2017; Donner and De Neve 2006). The neglect in considering the neighbourhood as a sociological object worthy of long-term study paved our interest in studying neighbourhoods and its changing relations.

In multicultural South Asian cities like Kolkata, which has a rich colonial history, living in spatial units is not an innocent, random, or arbitrary phenomenon. It is a carefully planned decision based on kinship, caste, religion, occupation, migration, and so on. Who lives where?, who is one's neighbour?, who rents flats to whom?, and so on are crucial questions explaining the peculiar forms of inclusion and exclusion in these cities. The relationship between living together in close proximity often leads to both affection and tension among each other. Questions of power, dominance, authority, class, caste, religion, and gender all seem to fit in the study of neighbourhoods. Gossip and ridicule are also common practices in any neighbourhood. Often, neighbours, neighbourliness, and social status become a contested question.

Writing in the context of Bengal, Sengupta (2018: 1) reveals that the nature of Indian neighbourhoods or, for that matter, South Asian neighbourhoods, operates 'as a liminal space, neither a purely affective unit nor an administrative category, and neither a purely public or private domain'. Here neighbourhoods are vibrant spaces that lead to sensory experiences, such as sights, smells, sounds, gossip, and ridicule, that all contribute to the everyday life of a neighbourhood. Thus, the neighbourhood in South Asia is a powerhouse of many interesting questions and observations, which can render topsy-turvy many theories and practices of living in the cities of the Global North.

The character of the South Asian neighbourhood implies a sharp departure from the city-building practices of North American or European cities. Hansen (2013) argues that many of the mechanisms that facilitate metropolitan life in Europe and North America include massive labour-intensive industrialization, the severing of ties between metro cities and the countryside, and large-scale holdings of property and land. While in South Asian cities, the key features which lead to shaping the identity include the rich history of the mobility of people and political and cultural milieus (Hansen 2013). Chatterjee (2004, as cited in Hansen 2013) articulates that much of the process of city-making in the South Asian context happens over the aspiration of the cities to be bourgeois, where the elite and the middle class enjoy all the benefits of the city, while the subaltern are pushed into becoming the worst victims of the process. Therefore, through respective observations conducted across various *paras* in Kolkata the paper traces the idea of neighbourhood through continuity and change.

The paper begins with a glancing through the the sociological literature to analyse the peculiar nature and meanings of Indian neighbourhoods, following which we include some inputs from few selected neighbourhoods in the city which shows the cultural differences and the nature of living in a neighbourhood. To further critically look into the nature of living, we provide a discussion on the tensions and conflicts in *paras* between various communities and cultures, and finally, end with some concluding remarks.

2. Glancing through the Literature

Defining the neighbourhood is a complex endeavour, and often, multiple narratives across the population spectrum need to be considered. In some *paras*, boundaries are closely monitored, strangers are looked with suspicion, women and children are looked through the prism of discipline and honour, and with certain expectations that are closely linked to the status of the neighbourhood (see Abraham 2018). When one is trying to trace the physical boundary of a particular neighbourhood, the question that arises is: how much are the official government administrative records suitable over the geographical boundaries of a neighbourhood? Are space–place markers only possible through physical and tangible measurements? Or does one follow the idea of belonging and the social relations that the residents of the neighbourhood identify with, which include informal and everyday knowledge of the residents of the areas and their relations with others in nearby areas? (see Dasgupta 2021). The term neighbourhood should be defined vis-à-vis other similar associated concepts, but at any point, boundaries between ‘neighbourhood’, ‘locality’, and ‘communities’ may seem blurred and not easily and/or clearly categorized.

To comprehend the differences between neighbourhood and locality, it is useful to refer to Appadurai’s (1996: 178) distinction between neighbourhood and locality. He comprehends ‘locality as relational or contextual rather than as scalar or spatial’. He argues that locality comprises of a ‘complex phenomenological quality’, which manifests itself in certain conditions of agency, sociality and reproducibility. On the one hand, the neighbourhood in his language is explained as ‘existing social forms in which locality as a dimension or value is variably realized’. Clearer examples of Appadurai’s (1996) definition of neighbourhood as ‘social form’ can be churches, temples, clubs, and different associations of the civic bodies. On the other hand, locality as ‘property of social life’ can signify varied emotions, gossip, rumour, practices of faith, belief, religious sentiments and the like. Expanding the discussion on the difference between a neighbourhood and a locality, Appadurai (1996: 186) problematizes the relationship between the two to argue that ‘neighbourhoods both constitute and require contexts’. He further states that a neighbourhood works in relation to another neighbourhood and is sometimes dependent on the actions and influences of other neighbourhoods. At times, they are independent and create their own ways of formation and reorganization, for example, the social structure of a gentrified gated community (Ghertner 2011) in relation to the slum outside. Neighbourhoods exert their power on the formation of localities, which influence the external social formations that may be cities or towns, states, nation states, and the like. He (1996) argues that the very act of people migrating and moving around the neighbourhood and exchanging or having conversations with each other is also accompanied by these people contributing to simultaneous conversations with the wider society, and this is facilitated by various neighbourhood factors as well. In doing so, the neighbourhood also synchronically maintains a bond of kinship and family relations, which characterize the framework of the ethnoscape for Appadurai (1996). While the neighbourhood may be an amalgamation of contexts which are historically, socially, and politically constituted, the locality, for Appadurai (1996), is often taken for granted in terms of its production either in locally bounded settings or trans-local settings.

In answering Appadurai's (1996: 179) question of the relationship between the 'locality as an aspect of social life' and its connection to the 'neighbourhood's substantial social forms', one observes that the locality has to be continuously produced based on various reinterpretations of different actors.

Thus, for Appadurai (1995: 210), locality is 'ephemeral' unless it is ritually produced; it needs to be constructed and built on everyday encounters to 'maintain its materiality'. According to Appadurai (1995: 213), locality is personified in the very 'multiplex interpretive site' of the neighbourhood and through different performances, acts, services, actions, or events, the locality expresses itself in the contours of the neighbourhood. Such ways of constructing locality have been broadly categorized by him through the discussion on 'space' and 'time'. For example, various forms of social control, such as gossip and ridicule along with everyday lived experiences operating in the neighbourhood, may be used by different actors to reinterpret the locality as these actions are group-based, personal, functional, conflictual, or individualist (Dasgupta 2021).

The need to take the neighbourhood seriously as an anthropological object of study demands that the neighbourhood should not be seen just as a postscript of the urban and, at the same time, not the extension of rural categories. This aspect has been captured in the scholarship of labour historian Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (1997), who breaks out from the 'problem-centered approach' understanding of the neighbourhood. Chandavarkar looks into the way workers who came from rural backgrounds developed new relations that were 'also informed by work and by politics, and indeed by the daily struggles of workplace and neighbourhood' (Chandavarkar 1997: 187). The work by Chandavarkar highlights the importance of studying the neighbourhood not only on the basis of the old categories that the workers brought with themselves – for example, caste and kinship through their rural ties – but also the experiences of staying in the neighbourhood that introduced them to the new networks of power and domination.

In the same thread as Chandavarkar (1997), Abraham (2018) and Sengupta (2018) argue that although the interest among sociologists has graduated from the rural to the urban and there is a tendency to study urban communities in greater detail, the shift did not bring new categories of studying urban neighbourhoods. Many studies have followed the trajectory of Chandavarkar in offering interesting studies on the neighbourhood. Some of them include Khan (2007) on the Muslim mohalla, Donner and De Neve's (2006) edited book on different neighbourhoods in India, Abraham (2010, 2018) on neighbourhoods in Kerala and Rajasthan, Jamil's (2017) work on accumulation by segregation in Muslim localities in Delhi, and Chatterjee's (2017) on the *Musholmann para* in Kolkata. Residential settlements based on caste, ethnicity, and religion are well captured in both colonial and recent works on West Bengal (Dasgupta 2021; Sen 2015, 2023).

In the context of West Bengal, *paras* derived their names from the physical attributes of the place, for example, *pukur* (pond), *bagan* (garden), or bazaar (market). Interestingly, *paras* were also named after occupational and caste lines, for example, Kansaripara (neighbourhood of brazier and coppersmith), Kumartoli (neighbourhood of potters), Jeleypara (neighbourhood of fishermen), Sen *para* (community belonging to the *Baidya* caste), and so on (Sengupta 2018).

Even streets are named after particular castes, such as Ganguly, Biswas, Santra, Sikdar, and so on. Much less in size than the *paras*, were the *tolas* of professional groups such as *ahirs* (cowherds or milkmen), *byaparis* (merchants), *kalus* (oil pressers), *kambulias* (blanket-sellers), *patuas* (pat-painters), *shankharis* (conch-workers) (Nair 1990) and the erstwhile White Town and the Black Town which created two separated sections of the city with contrasting infrastructure (Sengupta 2018; Chattopadhyay 2005; King 1980).

In the context of Muslim neighbourhoods, the narratives of ‘ghettoization’ and development that separate enclaves for the Muslim population have become a key category for understanding the everyday life experiences of Muslims. Particularly the contributions of Chatterjee (2017) on Kolkata and Jamil (2017) on Delhi are mentionworthy in this regard. They describe how the combination of poverty and ‘Muslimness’ contributes together in the formation of ‘safe’ ghetto-like spaces for the Muslims where they can feel safe. Nevertheless, such spaces also confine and exclude Muslims from the more significant benefits of the city (see Robinson 2005).

The discussion on community, citizenship, and the ways in which neighbourhood spaces create a specific ambience of Muslimness that prohibits ‘respectable’ Hindu men and women from entering this space at a certain time of the day, thus contributes towards making the Muslim the ‘other’ in relation to the Hindus in cities such as Kolkata. Chatterjee’s (2017: 13) ethnographic work brings out an interplay of religion, caste, language, and religion, which leads to ‘a peculiar experience of urbanity and community for the neighbourhood’s Muslims group’. Similarly, in the context of Delhi, Jamil (2017) deduces her analysis from David Harvey’s strategy of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ but reframes it as ‘accumulation by segregation’ and argues that the Indian cities continue to be the site of capital extraction, which is based on privatization of public assets and financialization. Jamil (2017), in the context of Delhi, argues that capital accumulation and the segregation of the city spaces work in tandem with each other as the accumulation of capital, the materiality of culture and the stereotypical portrayal of media indicate new patterns of residential segregation. In her discussion on Muslim neighbourhoods in Delhi, Jamil argues that exclusion by residential segregation and the uneven distribution of capital accumulation not only marginalizes the Muslims but, at the same time, objectifies their culture and portrays them as an unchanging slice of Indian society, which is stuck in time and space. Jamil (2017) contends that Muslim neighbourhoods then become a cradle of structural inequality, a marker of urban development enmeshed in politics, and contribute towards creating the ‘museumization’ of a neighbourhood and its people, thus keeping its residents and people away from civil and political society (see also Dasgupta 2021). Having said that, we will now discuss about few selected neighbourhoods across the city.

2.1.The White and Black Town of Calcutta

In many South Asian cities, the social and spatial structuring was such that, as King (1980) points out, forms of residential segregation was characterized by both indigenous criteria of stratification (such as caste, religion, language) and additional criteria of bureaucracy. Even ethnic and racial dimensions contributed quite significantly to residential differentiation and at times provided the basis for communal conflict.

Segregation and separation were the key mechanism of the colonial powers in administrating urban spaces, including Calcutta. One possible evidence of such colonial urban planning was the creation of Black Town and White Town, with Grey Town referring to the zone in between. Black Town covered the neighbourhood of Sutanuti and its surrounding areas, occupying a major portion of the available land of the growing city. They were the wealthy natives who lived in the mansions of North Kolkata. But regardless of their social status and occupational privilege, they were part of the Black Town (Chakraborty 2022). Apart from the wealthy natives such as zamindars and aristocrats, the Black Town was home to a diverse population, be it wealthy East India Company agents and also a large section of poor labourers engaged in various menial jobs. The housing arrangements and overall planning of this part of the city were indigent as the built environment was similar to the villages, from where a large population migrated in search of better jobs and opportunities. Residents of the Black Town were socially and spatially segregated, and they did not share any kind of commonalities. As opposed to this, the White town, which primarily belonged to the village of Gobindapur, was dominated by white-skinned Europeans who lived far away in areas close to Park Street, Esplanade, which was considerably far away from Sutanuti (Black Town). White Town had better urban planning with wide roads and better housing facilities, providing the Europeans access to all the benefits of the city. Writings on the urban history of Calcutta, Chattopadhyay (2000) has also emphasized on the blurring of boundaries and fluidity that existed between these categories. In the years following Independence, though the prejudices of Black Town and White Town visibly collapsed, patterns of biasness and preference of certain locations over others continued.

2.2.The Various *Paras* of Kolkata

As we move across the city of Kolkata, it continues to show its diversity in terms of culture, communities, and its neighbourhoods. For example, Dakshin Paikpara was a neighbourhood for native watchmen who worked as policemen, often employed privately by rich Indians to protect their persons and property. The neighbourhood of Belgachia hosted famous private houses of nineteenth-century *babus*, such as Prince Dwarkanath Thakur. While Ultadanga (*ulta*, or opposite the bank), one of the busiest neighbourhoods in eastern Kolkata, derives its name from the name *ulta-dingi* (upturned boat), which may denote an accident, whereas the close by neighbourhood of Kankurgachi extracts its name from *kankurs*, a species of melon, which perhaps grew well in that region (Nair 1990). Meanwhile, Bagmari derives its name from a *bagh* (tiger), which had been killed there. Interestingly, the area of Sukeas Street owes its name to an Armenian merchant, Peter Sukeas, whose name is associated to the generous charity work of providing water to common people from his tank (Nair 1990).

Barabazar was initially named after Shiva, commonly known as '*Buro*'. The merchant community, better known as Sheths, changed the name to 'Bara Bazar', the big market. Today, the success of Barabazar is owed to the Marwaris, the business community that has significantly contributed to the commercial sector of Kolkata. Another neighbourhood famous for its bazaar is Bowbazar, which can literally be translated as bride's bazaar (Nair 1990). One of the interesting narratives is that this bazaar was gifted by Bishwanath Matilal to his daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, Kalutola was the home of the East India Company's *kaluas* (kalus) or oil-pressers,

who are believed to have supplied mustard and other oils to the Burrabazar merchants. Kalutola was home to wealthy families – Keshab Chandra Sen, Tarachand Datta, and Harihar Datta. Most of the neighbourhoods were named after merchants, lakes, ponds, blanket sellers, and even gods and goddesses, such as Manasatala, Panchanantala, and Shibtala (Nair 1990). After providing a brief sketch of the etymology of some paras of Kolkata, we now turn the reader's attention to three interesting *paras*, which have played a significant role in shaping our growing up years in Kolkata as well as our academic pursuits. As young sociologists, we comprehend and analyze these selected neighbourhoods, through their relation to culture, communities, and everyday life. Thereby, indicating the diversity in the city and connections between neighbourhoods.

2.2.1. Bowbarracks of Kolkata:

The literature on Anglo-Indians of Calcutta has been well documented, mostly focusing on the concerns of identity, migration, home and nostalgia (Blunt and Bonnerjee 2013, Bonnerjee 2010; Bhattacharya 2009). Our interest on Anglo Indian particularly living in the Bowbarracks as an intriguing neighbourhood developed through popular culture, after watching Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and Anjan Dutta's *Bow Barracks Forever* (2004), and reading newspaper articles and short stories about the community and their neighbourhood. Located between Hare Street and Bowbazar Police Station, Bowbarracks tells the tale of neighbourhoods based on race, religion, and belonging. The distinctive red brick buildings with small flats had a certain charm that filled our imagination of colonial Calcutta and made us realize that many *different* Kolkata's exist inside the one city of Kolkata. Numerous trips to Bowbarracks can still not make the place seem boring and monotonous, there is so much to be absorbed and observed about this neighbourhood. The images of a few Catholics praying at the grotto of Mother Mary with rosaries in their hands while some children playing and running across the street are mundane, yet distinct sights of this neighbourhood.

In our numerous strolls to the neighbourhood, we realized that the small flats with even smaller balconies were made by the British during the First World War for soldiers; but they refused to live in such small, unattractive pigeon-hole flats. It was then that Anglo-Indian families moved to the Barracks, paying rent to the Calcutta Improvement Trust. Today, Bowbarracks has a mixed population, which includes Chinese, Muslims, and very few Anglo-Indian families. Be it Christmas or New Year, Bowbarracks offer something special that we have never encountered in any other neighbourhoods. From Christmas goodies available at the kiosks before Christmas to the traditional homemade wine sold in the bylanes, the place makes one remember how Kolkata continues to be home to various cultures and communities. What stroked our attention during our numerous visits to Bowbarracks was the sense of solidarity, bonhomie, and the deep feeling of belonging to the city of Kolkata that exists here. This small neighbourhood looks like an oasis in the desert, strongly signifying that Kolkata belongs to everyone.

Although with time, many Anglo Indians have migrated to overseas countries, but this emblematic *para* remained a source of connection to the city, nostalgia and old bygone days.

Thus, one can argue that *paras* continues to represent a strong sense of memories belonging and affection, warmth and solidarity in a city which is rapidly changing, transforming to a hostile place.

2.2.2. China Town of Tangra:

Much has been written both on the academic and popular front on the Anglo Indians of Bowbarracks and the Chinese of Calcutta. The Chinese settlement of Calcutta can be found both in Central Calcutta, particularly in areas like Tirretta Bazar and also on the eastern fringe of the city, close to Tangra. The Chinese community was relatively late in reaching the shores of Calcutta, perhaps around 1780s. According to scholars, Atchew or Tong Aschew was the first Chinese to reach and settle in Calcutta. He belonged to the Hakka Chinese community, and it was much later that Cantonese, Hupey, and the Shanghai Chinese came to the city. The small Chinese population in Kolkata, nevertheless boasts its traditional temples and distinct architectural styles (Mukherjee and Gooptu 2009). The celebrations and festivals on the Chinese New Year suggests how multicultural and diverse the city is. Here the spatial and the social shares a close relationship. Leather, its tanning, manufacturing, and trading, was one of the most common occupations of the Chinese community in Kolkata for a very long time. Apart from this, the presence of the community is quite visible in beauty salons and restaurants or food industry. Most city dwellers relationship with Chinatown is majorly through its Chinese food, which made us realize that sensory and culinary experiences bring people and places together.

Our introduction to the neighbourhood was primarily through the Chinese food which became synonomous with the neighbourhood, giving them a distinct commercial purpose. How does food bring an 'outsider' to a neighbourhood which is decaying in various aspects of the built environment? How does food become an interesting entry point to study a community, culture, continuity and change? In this context, food is connected to identity as well as an agency for this Chinese community to exercise their rights. Thus, food allows them to assimilate with the local Bengali culture, making the Chinese community an integrated part of Kolkata *para* culture. With time the Chinese community in Kolkata has advanced to other arenas of occupation, however, food remains a primary anchor for the community and their identity in the city.

2.2.3. The Bengali Christian *Para* of Krishnapur:

Bengal's tryst with Christianity took place at the end of sixteenth century, particularly in 1597 when the emperor Akbar issued a *farman* allowing the missionaries to work (Chattopadhyay 2013). The first colonial power that arrived in Bengal was the Portuguese. Campos (1919) in his book History of the Portuguese in Bengal provides an in-depth account of the routes and roads through which the Portuguese arrived in Bengal. According to Campos (1919), it is usually believed that in 1599, the Portuguese king gave the Bengal mission to the Augustinian friars, through which priests, catechists, and various kinds of personnel arrived to work in Bengal. The Portuguese were master traders who brought cross and commerce together. So, sufficient attention was paid towards establishing commercial relations through strategic plans.

For better administration and commercial purposes, the ‘city of Bengala’ was divided into two ports—Porto Grande (great port) which included the port of Chittagong (in modern day Bangladesh); while on the other hand, Porto Pequeno (small port) included areas associated with Saptagram (Satgaon) on the bank of the Hooghly (in modern day West Bengal) (Campos 1919: 21). One of the important settlements established by Portuguese in Hooghly was in Bandel. The Bandel church known as the Basilica of the Holy Rosary is one the oldest Catholic convent and church in Bengal which was founded in 1599. Substantially more than the Portuguese and Armenians in their dominance and hegemony, it was the British rule in Bengal led by Job Charnock in August 1690 that is credited with having founded the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata) for the establishment of the East India Company. The amalgamation of three villages -- Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur in forming the city of Kolkata provided the East India Company with enough land, houses, and quarters to engage in the administrative and the commercial pursuit for the expansion of the British Raj.

Conversion to Christianity in this neighbourhood happened during the Portuguese rule, but later with the advent of British rule, Protestantism dominated. The Christian *para* of Krishnapur spans ward number 26 and 27 and falls under the jurisdiction of the Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation and Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA). In connection to the geographic location, the Christian *para* lies close to the VIP road that connects the *para* with the Dum Dum airport. The wider area of Krishnapur, including the Christian *para*, is a part of Greater Kolkata and is surrounded by well-known places, including Salt Lake and New Town. This offers the *para* all kinds of occupational opportunities to the residents of the *para*. Contrary to the Anglo Indians of Bowbarracks, this is a small Bengali Christian neighbourhood in the busy area of Krishnapur. Bengali Christians are mostly overlooked in both academic engagements and common parlance due to their close resemblance to the Bengali Hindu population, but we feel that the following words of Patrick Ghosh capture the peculiarity of the community extremely well. He says:

We can speak English as first language but are equally comfortable in Bangla, worship a single god originating in the Middle East within the confines of usually majestic colonial architecture, seem to get very envied preferential admission to those much-aspired-for English-medium educational institutions, and eat food that straddles many cultures. I love the astonished look on Bengali friends’ face when I tell them that sacred Bengali Sunday lunch of *mangsho-bhaat* could often well be rice, dal, accompanied by fried masala pork sausages handmade in the Entally or Park Circus markets with boiled potatoes. The astonishment usually leads to stupefaction when told that we also eat *shukto* and *jhingey posto*. Or *halka maacher jhol*. And then we have surnames that span the Brahmanical to the Dalit, but usually marry persons without regard to caste, creed or community. Damn! Who on earth are we? (Ghosh quoted in Dasgupta 2021).

The *para* is dominated by the native Mondal family, which is affiliated to the various churches, with a majority belonging to various Protestant denominations. However, the Christian population in the *para* is diverse, belonging to three denominations—Protestants, Catholics, and Pentecostals. They are all affiliated to different churches. The Protestants are affiliated to the E. Protestant church, Church of North India; the Catholics usually seek membership of the H.

Family Catholic church, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Calcutta; and the Pentecostals belong to the Assembly of God church. Apart from the three recognized churches, there are two house churches as well: the Seventh Day Adventist church and the *Pabitra Atmar Mondali* (Congregation of the Holy Spirit). The *para* also hosts two prayer meetings, one Pentecostal and the other Catholic, which are mainly attended by the Hindus, particularly women. The heterogeneity of Christians living in the *para* are also divided on the basis of their social groups – *bangal* (came from eastern side of undivided Bengal) and *ghotis* (from western side of undivided Bengal) and economic groups based on occupation, which is closely linked to the caste and class. The presence of three active churches in a distance of less than one kilometre and a strong Christian culture makes this neighbourhood stand out as compared to other local neighbourhoods, which are primarily dominated by Hindus. Such a neighbourhood is an interesting place to understand how kinship, ethnicity, and religion shape the spatial understanding of everyday life.

The neighbourhood is constituted by a strong presence of kinship, gendered mobility, and occupational hierarchies leading to distinctions of social class, surveillance (one grounded on localised moral concerns or conventions), and various forms of social control mediated through the registers of gossip, ridicule, and taste-based distinctions which are crucial in advancing the formation of locality in Appadurai's sense.

2.3. Tensions and Conflicts in *Paras*

Having mentioned about the various *paras* in Kolkata, it is important to argue that the social and cultural life of the *paras* are also fraught with hostilities, differences and competitions which adds more layers to the living and belongingness of the *paras*. We consider that it is significant to mention here that apart from the historical, social and cultural constructions of the *paras*, the *paras* are also formed and maintained due to various strict boundaries of spatial segregation. This in turn leads to situations of tensions and conflicts in *paras*. All these three neighbourhoods, discussed above are dominated by minority populations, which are increasingly witnessing the power, politics and pervasiveness of real estate development authorities which plans to 'homogenise' the city with its standard form of development without regard to different culture, communities and specific way of living in the neighbourhoods.

Hansen (2013:36) notes that 'urban coexistence and neighbourliness' has stopped before it even began due to politicization of everyday life in cities. We observed that incidences of violence and hostility have increased steadily across the state and it often had an impact on the neighbourhood relations as well. As pointed out by Srivastava (2003:157), the role of administration and political institutions to alleviate social tensions in this context becomes important. Though processes of urbanization and modernization have impacted different cities in India differently, Kolkata was considered to be a 'modern' city which had always been a place and site for several communities amicably coexisting.

Another set of literature would engage with the idea of neighbourhoods in terms of drawing reference to landscapes of fear. The concept of 'fortified enclaves' (Caldeira 1996) gives us the cue to understand the urban fear that circulates around the significance of gated communities.

While scholars have noted that colonial Indian cities have engaged in residential segregation for several years in terms of race, ethnic and religious divisions (King 1980; Naik-Singru 2007), we observed the prevalent attitude of ‘drawing the boundaries’ and ‘symbolic boundary making’ in *paras* in Kolkata through multiple ways in everyday life in the contemporary times. This was especially observable when people were moving from one neighbourhood to another. Various interests and politics are played out in deciding who lives where, who gets to buy and sell property in a particular neighbourhood.

For instance, on the one hand, it is observed that as the spatial imagination of the city is undergoing certain changes in contemporary times, people prefer to assert their residential address by naming the popular residential projects in the city. This in turn creates a sense of superiority amongst their kins and peers. On the other hand, practices of individuals and communities often spatially segregate each other by not buying a house in a ghetto of another community. In Sen’s work (2023), she observed that several upper and middle-class Hindu respondents made it clear that they felt unsafe in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood and therefore, wanted to invest in gated communities which house members from their community and faith. Respondents highlighted that though several new residential projects with different amenities are soon coming up in Topsia and Tangra areas, which were predominantly occupied by Muslims and Chinese communities, they were reluctant to invest in those areas because of the gaze of ‘other’ and also the foul smell of tanneries which once occupied every bylanes in this area.

Conversely, in Dasgupta’s (2021) work on a Christian neighbourhood in Kolkata, faith, and ethnicity played a crucial role in the question of belonging. The Christians’ reimagination of neighbourhood on theological lines argues that due to the massive growth of real estate industries and the in-migration of many Hindus, Christians develop different strategies to reconnect with the neighbourhood which are not only spatial or geographical but also theological, heavily invested in prayers, sermons, biblical narratives. In the same neighbourhood, questions of faith leadership, and the right to preach led to the transfer of a non-Bengali pastor on the issues of his half caste identities and non-native suspiciousness which was mostly spread due to the *para’s* practice of gossip and ridicule. Therefore, it is suggested that residential segregation continues to operate in Indian neighbourhoods, albeit under the veil of caste, class and ethnic positions.

3. Concluding Remarks

Neighbourhoods, with their multifaceted dimensions of everyday life, beg for more in-depth studies that will reveal the formation, genesis, and evolution of how neighbourhoods are sites for both affection, care, as well as hostilities. Due to the brevity of space, we have presented a brief overview of the literature on Indian neighbourhoods along with insights from three neighbourhoods in Kolkata of interest. We have highlighted that it is through continuity and change that neighbourhoods persist in contemporary times. However, more heritage walks, urban conservation initiative developments, and awareness of minority cultures and communities are needed to eke out more ‘invisible’ neighbourhoods that have played an important role in shaping the cultural, political, and economic milieu of the city.

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