

Conference

City as the Southern Question

13-14 November 2024, The Sonnet, Kolkata

Calcutta Research Group and Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna

The pre-eminence of cities as sites of human history is inextricable and so are the instances when cities metamorphosed themselves as characters acting on the formalisation of orders and institutions that shape our world and the cities in it presently. The rise of Urban Studies as an academic field speaks of the importance of cities. However, the emergence of modern cities, the ones that we see and live at now, has much to do with the rise in a multitude of factors. Over the years, scholarship on the emergence of cities has focussed on various aspects of their growth. Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*, squarely links the city with the condition of the working class; Walter Benjamin talks of cities as a place of desire of commodities produced by capitalism; Henri Lefebvre terms cities as 'produced space'; postcolonial studies look at cities as sites of the politics of the governed and so on and so forth. The culmination of all these perspectives leads to what is now called the 'urban turn'. Cities today conjure up the 'people' the 'mass' and the 'multitude' and these are sites of investment and logistical services providing multi-functional services like acting as trading marts, converging points of mega infrastructure projects, sites of specialised services, haven for refugees and migrants, and centres of administrative management, besides functioning as venues of parliamentary-democratic politics notwithstanding the impact of their location and the controls of regional geography.

Cities, thus, are an amalgamation of too many factors at play, the understanding of which requires a multipronged approach. Cities are now living monsters. They suck anything and everything including human life. As if, they do not need the countryside. They do not require hinterlands. As if, they have no pre-history or history. Yet the discussion on cities often fail to face frontally this unprecedented phenomenon of the city becoming a part of human history. We now have different categories of cities—port cities, steel cities, car making cities, smart cities, railway towns, trading towns, tourism hubs, capital cities, etc. But various categories of cities were there earlier too. Some probably became less vibrant in the course of time, while some new were added. The question still remains, what drives the hyper growth of some cities of the global South today? What is its broader significance?

The genesis of cities is crucial to understanding contemporary political and economic orders. As the world grapples with uncertain challenges exacerbated with the threats of climate change, disease outbreaks, diminishing resources, etc., it becomes crucial to study cities for what they are becoming now. It is no accident that of the twenty largest (most populous) cities of the world, seventeen are from the non-Western world. The other three in this league are Tokyo, Osaka, and New York City. The U.N. designation of a city includes a mixture of city proper, metropolitan area, and urban area and these huge urban holdings are evidence that cities are pushing growth today economically and demographically—worldwide and nationally. The important rise of global Southern cities now calls for the attention of scholars and public policy analysts working

on Southern histories and their global significance. As the cities are in a constant state of ‘becoming’, it is also important to talk of how the futures of these will look like.

Antonio Gramsci’s unfinished note ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’ (1926), known simply as ‘The Southern Question’ sheds light on the geopolitical context of the problematic of the politics and culture in the Mediterranean region at large, a region which can be conceived of as an expression of the larger construct, now referred to as the Global South. While the Southern cities are now integral part of world capitalism, yet they carry the marks of Southern globalisation and the lineage of the colonial time. Large Southern urban concentrations are islands of industry, services, and development—working at the same time as giant branches of Northern corporate capital and 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. In this sense, the Gramscian hypothesis may have to be little modified in order to understand the nature of the ‘Southern urbanisation’ of our time and its crucial role in twenty-first century globalisation.

The Conference on **City as the Southern Question (13-14 November 2024, Kolkata)** aims to talk of cities and the questions that need to be asked and thought of by taking into consideration Gramsci’s ‘The Southern Question’. The Calcutta Research Group (CRG) in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, invites papers from academicians, scholars, researchers and practitioners on the following themes (but not limited to):

- Urban Future(s)
- Urban Care, Protection and Responsibility
- Urban Space and Civic Organisations
- Diseases and Public Health
- Urban Planning and Logistics
- City, Refugees, Migrants and the Stateless
- Urban Violence and Justice
- City, Climate Change and Sustainability
- The City in Literature, Films, Plays and Popular Culture

Submit the application with an abstract (500-600 words), a title and institutional affiliation by **15 May 2024** at <https://forms.gle/MF5D5RJ2xS1oRkvi7>

*Selected participants will be notified once the selection process is over following which full papers would be due by 12 October 2024. To facilitate participation in the conference, CRG will only be able to provide accommodation in Kolkata (Check-In: 12 November 2024; Check-Out: 15 November 2024).

Queries with the subject line “Annual Conference 2024” may be sent to forcedmigrationdesk@mcrg.ac.in with a copy to debashree@mcrg.ac.in