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The struggle to belong *Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*

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Howrah – a case study on urban poverty and slum transformation in Kolkata

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Abstract

India has seen a dramatic, and ever increasing, change of its social and urban structure in the last 20 years. Though unlike many other newly industrialized countries, India still remains mainly a rural society. Currently only between 30 and 35 per cent of India's population are living in urban areas. However, it is expected that in the next 20 year almost 600 million people will be joining the current city dwellers. This dramatic amount of urban growth has never been recorded in history. It is expected that the strongest growth will be in slums.

The term slum has changed significantly in recent years. Having its origin in the Victorian period of England's underclass settlements known for their very poor hygienic and living conditions, the meaning of the term varies nowadays from continent to continent and even from country to country. Many scholars have gone so far as to abandon the term slum completely, as it has lost its original meaning and connotation. Nonetheless a possible working definition for slums could be: overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, insecurity of tenure as well as a lack of privacy. Slum-dwellers are certainly among the neediest people in any city, however, slums do not have space for all the urban poor. Furthermore, it is important to mention that not all slum-dwellers are poor. Nevertheless, the issue of slums is strongly correlated with urban poverty and marginality.

This paper focuses on the persistency of poverty in Kolkata, India's third most populated city with over 18 million inhabitants. On an initial and overarching level, it looks at the general urban condition of Kolkata. More specifically this contribution will focus on the slum transformation in Howrah, an extended urban area within Kolkata. Howrah represents a marginalized, deprived and often overlooked 'Westside' of this megacity. It has been undergoing important urban transformation despite, or rather because it has always been at the fringe of the city, physically as well as in public perception, in contrast to its actual high geographical centrality. More than 60% of Howrah's population are dwelling in slums. The specially analysed area is located right next to the very city centre of Howrah, a former shantytown in vertical transformation, where still slum-like conditions exist. The term vertical slum is coined and used for a very recent development of multi-storey, self-built brick buildings replacing former squatter settlements.

Hypothesis

Despite the extreme poverty in Howrah, it will be argued that cities should be seen as part of the solution and not as problem; as they are still considered by many Indian observers focusing too much on rural poverty. Howrah is therefore seen as a 'normal' contemporary Indian city, and by no means understood as a pathological phenomenon, or as an urban anomaly.