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REPORT
Kolkata

PAST LIFE —*Kolkata*

Preface

The West Bengali city is at a crossroads. On the one hand Kolkata wants to re-establish the look and feel of its Raj glory days. On the other, it wants to brand itself as a contemporary culture and business gateway, open to the east.

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With its wide tree-lined streets flanked by gracefully deteriorating colonial-era architecture, the eastern Indian city of Kolkata evokes intense memories of another part of the world that is at once close and far away: London.

Kolkata is like a sub-continental, Dickensian otherworld. The city's old buildings have crenellated façades pock-marked by patches of peeling paint. There are Victorian fountains, the rambling Alipore Zoo and roundabouts. Indeed, city planners conceived Calcutta – as it was then known – as a kind of mini London. The city was the colonial headquarters of Raj-era India and the jewel in the crown of Britain's Empire. It was renamed in 2001 but to locals it's still known affectionately as "Cal".

Now, more than half a century after the country gained its independence, city authorities are working to regain the look and feel of London. "You will see there's a similarity between the two cities, because it was a colony of Britain for so long," says mayor Sovan Chatterjee, pointing out the discernible British flavour in the roads and buildings of the city's central and northern districts. "London has the Thames, Kolkata has the Hooghly."

Today, the swollen riverbanks of the Hooghly are receiving a makeover. Used for bathing, funerals, washing and as an



01 Major Sovan Chatterjee in his office
02 Council House Street

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| 01 Tramcar in town centre | 06 Model of the new Atmosphere building |
| 02 Park Street metro stop | 07 Police patrolling on Nehru Road |
| 03 Architect Partha Ranjan Das | 08 Rahul Saraf, developer of the Atmosphere building |
| 04 New-build in Rajarhat | |
| 05 Showroom for the Atmosphere project | |



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unofficial place to dump waste, the river's banks are being paved, trees planted and shantytowns moved elsewhere. There are plans for a marina and a giant riverside Ferris wheel – a “Kolkata Eye”.

Kolkata, which boasts the biggest library in India, will soon have its own Tate modern equivalent, the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art (KMOMA), Herzog & de Meuron's first Indian venture. The project, costing €68.5m, is expected to be completed in 2015. “This is going to be Kolkata's answer to the Sydney Opera House: a building that will really put the city on the map,” says the project's local partner, architect Partha Ranjan Das. “Its design is iconic, combining traditional features but in a very modern way.”

There is growing pressure on the city's master planners to exploit Kolkata's strategic position in India's eastern region, bordering the under-developed and impoverished (yet mineral-rich) states of Jharkhand and Orissa. Kolkata links India's remote northeastern states to the mainland and is also a major transit point to Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Burma. Already people from these regions and countries regularly visit Kolkata to shop, dine and be schooled – and there are signs that medical tourism could emerge as a major industry.

“We're actually developing medical hubs around the state,” says Partha

Culture hub

For over 150 years, Kolkata was the intellectual and artistic capital of South and Southeast Asia, led by figures such as Nobel prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore and filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Indeed, “Cal” is the only place where you'll find people singing Tagore lyrics over drinks.

But insiders lament that the city's cultural heritage has been in steady decline in recent decades. “The irony is that a lot of people doing interesting things in the arts, in film, in writing or music are Bengali and originally from Kolkata, but don't live here anymore,” says prominent writer Ruchir Joshi. Vikram Seth grew up in the city, while renowned Bengali-origin authors include Upamanyu Chatterjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rana Dasgupta. Bengalis also continue to dominate India's arthouse cinema scene and are prevalent in theatre and intellectual circles.

Chatterjee, the state's minister for commerce and industries. “Two have already started [building], one of them in Howrah [located just over the Hooghly River from Kolkata] and we have plans for many more.”

Kolkata is also vital to India's “look east” policy – a national trade strategy that hopes to capitalise on its proximity to Southeast Asia. “Kolkata could emerge as a hub for this entire region,” says Binod Mishra, visiting fellow at the University of Calcutta's Institute of Foreign Policy Studies. He insists the city is key to not just the eastern and northeastern regions of India, but neighbouring countries.

Sadly, the city has been languishing in genteel decay for too long. Kolkata was effectively left out of India's growth

story, while other Indian metropolises steamed ahead. In the 20th century the city became synonymous with Mother Teresa's charitable mission, which helped scores of undernourished residents. Despite the city's growth, the state is still saddled with a debt of almost €30bn and the interest payments on that are more than the state can generate in revenues.

Many locals insist that the real impediment to their region's success is the very woman that conceived the grand London-as-Kolkata beautification scheme. Last year the state elected a new Trinamool Congress Party government and deposed decades of communist rule. Its leader, Mamata Banerjee, who is also the state's chief minister, quickly established herself as a populist leader. She is a curious figure in Indian politics: an unmarried, cheerless career politician, she evinces deeply mixed feelings. Some decry her apparent inability to understand economics, others simply describe her alternatively as a megalomaniac or

There is pressure on city planners to exploit Kolkata's strategic position in India's eastern region



01 Renovation work
in central Kolkata

Looking east

The Sumitomo steel plant might not yet be green-lighted, but Japan is eyeing West Bengal as a potential future destination for investment. Already, 67 Japanese companies are present in the state, out of more than 800 across India.

Economic cooperation between the two countries received a boost last year when they agreed to work towards eliminating almost all tariffs within a decade. Japanese investment elsewhere in India is substantial: Japan's involvement was pivotal towards building the metro rail system in Delhi. And even more significantly, Japan is contributing around €3.4bn over the next five years towards one of India's biggest infrastructure projects to date, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor.

cranky. "These people are hardly capable," says local businessman and writer V Ramaswamy, voicing a despondency that is a regular local refrain. "The only good they did was to oust the previous government. If they do anything at all, it will be a blessing for the city."

Banerjee is a powerful figure in national politics as her party holds the balance of power in the ruling coalition. It was Banerjee who put an end to the central government's attempts last year to loosen foreign direct investment rules, which would have permitted multi-brand retailers (such as supermarket chains) to operate in India. And in recent months she unseated the railways minister after he dared to raise ticket prices to help fund much-needed upgrades – even though he was from her own party. Many in the state agree that for West Bengal to progress, Mamata Banerjee needs to go.

These days, the top issue is that of land acquisition. There are numerous examples of industry, including foreign companies, being prevented from establishing units in the state as the local government was unable to, or refused to, procure sufficient land. One plan for a joint steel venture between Japan's third largest steel producer, Sumitomo Metals, and India's Bhushan Steel was derailed after the state refused to free up the 2,500

acres of land required for the project. The investment would have been €15bn.

However, there is evidence to show that the new government is committed to reinvigorating the city's economic fortunes. After all, where would London be without its financial district? Work has already started on a project to turn the sleepy village of Rajarhat on the northeastern fringes of Kolkata into a commercial, industrial and residential district. Authorities hope the area will become the country's second-largest financial zone, with banks and other institutions. Rajarhat already houses international companies including IBM, Ericsson and HCL Technologies.

Despite decades of poor governance, Kolkata is starting to attract young talent. The city has a burgeoning tech sector and a skilled young workforce, hungry for opportunities. "We have the largest talent pool in the country with engineers and skilled labour," says minister Partha Chatterjee. "In on infrastructure where we're lagging behind. But we're working

- 01 Inside one of Kolkata's Jain temples
- 02 Princep Ghat and Vidyasagar Setu Bridge
- 03 Indian Coffee House
- 04 New buildings going up in Rajarhat
- 05 Zen 6 Restaurant inside The Park Hotel
- 06 Recently renovated building near the state governor residence (Raj Bhavan)
- 07 Street near Raj Bhavan

to fix this." Kolkata has great hopes of becoming a playground for the wealthy expats and elites from the neighboring states of Jharkhand and Orissa. The culture and the landscape of the city is starting to mirror this change; in the pipeline is an apartment building called Atmosphere, featuring modernist architecture unheard of in the region. Comprising twin buildings with a cloud-shaped structure suspended between them, once complete it will contain 80 luxury apartments, as well as swimming pools, a putting green and a jogging track.

Already built is the International Management Institute building in the south. The structure has a rainbow-glass coloured, wave-shaped façade. "Over the next 10 years we'll really see the Kolkata skyline change," says Abin Chaudhuri,



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Kolkata has a burgeoning tech sector and a young workforce that is hungry for opportunities

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the architect responsible for the IMI design. "Even now, we have to fight international architects to win jobs here." Kolkata Museum of Modern Art is clearly a pivotal sign of things to come, promising a "culture village" of courtyards, alleyways and market-like experiences. There will be an amphitheatre and auditorium for shows in what is being billed as India's first global museum.

Many are hoping this monumental addition will usher in a cultural revival. "There used to be a saying 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow'," says Binod Mishra, back at the University of Calcutta. "With a little more form, a little more spirit and cooperation between the state and central government, this could again be how things are."

To fully regain its position as the South Asian centre of cultural and economic enlightenment, the city needs its politicians to capitalise on Kolkata's geostrategic position, utilise its ecological attributes and realise the potential of its skilled workforce.

The city's intellectual heritage could be central. To join India's success story, Kolkata needs to mirror London's economic might as well as its genteel and Dickensian architecture. Kolkata clearly has the ambition to reinstate its past economic and cultural glory. — (M)



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