

Mapping the Communal Space of Kolkata; History, Spatial Identity and Beyond

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Abstract: *This paper is a story of how communal space is produced within a city? Drawing mainly from Henry Lefevre's theoretical framework, we tried to map how historical events and collective memory play a pivotal role in the creation of the representational identity of a space. Quantitative Data on past communal riots has been collected from secondary sources like the National Crime Record Bureau and various works of literature. The study is being carried out with a mixed methodological approach. We argue that danga (riot), collective memory and popular imagination about such localities produce a new kind of perceived space that expresses both communal and secular spatial identity in the public sphere.*

Keywords: Communal space, Collective memory, Identity, Danga, Public sphere

During the State Assembly Election Campaign of 2021, a controversy erupts for resurfacing an old headline published on April 29, 2016, in a Pakistani newspaper called 'Dawn'. The report was about Bobby Firhad Hakim's election campaign in a Muslim majority constituency, Garden Reach. The headline was "Canvassing in 'mini-Pakistan' of Kolkata".¹ Apart from the headline, this news was made into the limelight by the opposition Bhartiya Janta Party because of the statement by the candidate Bobby Firhad Hakim within the quotation that it contains. Within quote the report says- "Please come along and let us take you to mini-Pakistan in Kolkata," says Bobby Firhad Hakim, MLA candidate of the incumbent party in West Bengal, All

India Trinamool Congress, which is on its last leg of its canvassing and voters decide the party's fate in the phase-wise West Bengal assembly elections scheduled to be held on April 30 and May 5".² During an Interview, for AnandabazarPakrika, as a clarificatory statement, Firhad Hakim said- '..the said reporter was saying that the surroundings, the alleys, people and their neighbourhood were very similar to Karachi. In response to this statement, he said with a smile that the reporter can feel at home here. He never made such comments, like 'mini-Pakistan'. It was the newspaper which put words into his mouth'.³

The above incident is not merely a political debate, we have to look beyond it. A minute watch would reveal the description of the news reporter about the similarity that he found with Karachi for the surrounding geographies. So, similar geography can create a typical representation of a particular place. From the vantage point of the reporter, the effect of Garden Reach had created a topophilia⁴ with that of his homeland. This is the way how the space is perceived by the receptor. On the other hand, one can look at the political controversy that emerged for such a place. This particular news report published by the Pakistani news agency represented a space from a vantage point of a diasporic vision or one can say home away from home or universal brotherhood of Islam. But in India, through this news report, the same place has been represented differently or we can say the news report has made a place be perceived as an anti-Indian notion as it was tagged as 'mini-Pakistan'. So, in the electoral parlance, the phrase 'mini-Pakistan' made the incumbent ruling party uncomfortable specifically when the Hindu Nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata Party was giving a tough fight.

In a particular place like West Bengal which has a partitioned memory with a Hindu Majority, such tag –'mini-Pakistan' contains a stigma which remains as a subconscious of the public perception of a space. The neighbourhood, people who live there also became subjected to questionable.⁵ West Bengal has a partitioned memory and as well as it has witnessed a series of communal riots in the 20th century and late 18th century. The partition rather series of partitions has led to a different kind of peopling process. Thus, in the backdrop of peopling process, history of communal riots and collective memory we are going to analyse the process of producing communal geographies of Kolkata.

Plan of the Paper:

The paper is based on a mixed methodology approach. At the outset of the paper temporal data about the number of riots in the state have been obtained from National Crime Record Bureau. To zoom into the city-level riots various secondary sources have been used. From these sources, data regarding the location of the riots, frequency have been collected. So, these were the preliminary data source that we have cited in this paper. Now, the second stage of the data has been represented through descriptive statistics and cartographic

methods. Using the 'Add Placemark' tool of Google EarthPro, the locations of the areas that were affected by the riot were mapped as point locations. The point locations of the sites were added to the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) environments in the Arc Map software. To have a better idea of the region that might be affected by such an occurrence, a buffer of 500 metres was created around all of the geo-coded places. In the third stage, an exercise has been carried out to understand the perceived and representational identity of a space. "#MiniPakistanin Kolkata" phrase has been searched on social media sites Facebook, and Instagram. We have tried to find out the locations associated with the posts through this hashtag. Through this digital ethnographic method, we made an effort to map the communal notions of representational space within the city of Kolkata. On the other hand, to find out if there is a counter-narrative to the communal identity of such places, an attempt has been made to find the places where community iftar party is being organised where both Hindus and Muslims participate. For this, a digital archive of the *AnandabazarPatrika* has been sourced. With the help of the content analysis method, news associated with community iftar has been analysed.

History of Geographies of Riot in the City:

In this section, we would try to present detailed historical accounts of the geographies of riots that took place in Kolkata. Before delving deep into the city level, let's look at the overall picture at the state level. The following graph (*figure 1*) is showing the trend of reported communal riots that took place in West Bengal during the post-partition period. The trend is showing that the immediate decade after the partition was comparatively calm. During 1970-1980 the peak was highest. This was also the period when the Bangladesh Liberation movement took place and people moved from both sides of the country. During this period series of riots took place. This generated a collective memory which had an undercurrent of communal tension among both the community.



Figure 1 : Trends of Communal Riots in West Bengal (1953-2020), Data Source: 'Crime in India' report, National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Prepared by authors

This was the overall story. Now let us zoom into the story of the city called Kolkata and it was priory known as Calcutta. Kolkata is considered an umbrella for various arts, cultures and religions, consequently, it has experienced many communal riots since the colonial era. To understand the historical significance of those communal riots, it is necessary to maintain a chronological manner. The first communal riot was in 1891, which was followed by 1896 and 1897.⁶ The 19th-century disturbances were characterised by the conflicts between factory and suburban mill operators and labourers. This violence was caused due to overexploitation of workers.⁷

The first communal violence of the Twentieth Century

As early as 1918, a major Hindu-Muslim riot broke out in Kolkata; this was followed in 1926 and then in 1946-47. Contrary to post-1940s riots, those that occurred before the 1940s were relatively unorganized. Every outbreak was distinct.⁸

After the Bakr-Eid riot of 1910, which was caused to prevent the cow sacrifice in the mosque during the Bkr-eid festival⁹, the evacuation operation was implemented in the Muslim-dominated slums area by the Calcutta improvement trust as Marwaris tried to acquire the land of the slums of Bumanbastee, Collinga, and Park Street area and to deprive poor Muslims. By boycotting Muslim landlords, Muslim tailors, and Muslim buyers, Marwaris seek to retaliate against Muslims. A number of Marwari families, including Ram Pratap Bhimani and Baldeo das Birla, bought these areas to build houses, shops, and mansions around Zakaria street. Disturbances occur when unemployment and industrial unrest are present. There are many reasons for the riot of 1918, including damage to civic property and the discovery of blood spills inside the Nakhoda mosque. Nakhoda mosque was the hotspot of the 1918 riot. As a part of the violence, Kolutola Jain Temple, the holy place of Marwaris, was attacked by Muslims. Procession leaflet was circulated in Garden Reach, the area played a crucial role in every riot and was predominated by Muslims. 800 Muslim workers stopped working and started a strike in Ganges Jute Mill in Howrah.¹⁰ A similar scenario had been seen in Metiaburz and Beliaghata areas.¹¹ During the riot, 400 people were arrested, and 43 civilians were dead, among them 36 were Muslims, and 7 were Hindu. This disturbance occurred on Chitpur Road, Zacharia Street, Mechuabazar street, Harrison Road.¹²

Whereas, the 1926 riot was sparked by Muslims' disinhibition against playing music by the Arya Samaj Procession directly in front of mosques while they were praying. Three phases of violence took place: 1. During the week of 2nd to 14th April, 44 people died, 584 were injured, and 500 were arrested. During the period 22nd to 8th May 391 were injured, 66 were killed, 567 were arrested, 11th to 25th July 28 civilians were killed, 226 were injured, and 363 were arrested. The most affected area of the 1926 riot was Beadon Street, Strand Road, College Street, and Bow Bazar.¹³

The Outbreak of 1946

The most organised outbreak was seen in 1946, The Great Calcutta Killing. Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, and Hindu Sakti Sabha conducted propaganda campaigns in advance of the 1946 Calcutta outbreak. The common thread of the propaganda not only represents the religious threat to Muslims but also affects them politically. 1946 riot took place due to the Muslim League's opposition to Cabinet's proposal, as they wanted to strengthen their political identity and establish Calcutta as the capital of Pakistan through the call for Direct action on 16th August. The Hindu Mahasabha rejected the call and ordered Hindu shop owners to remain their shops open. The confrontation was between Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. Muslim League party hired goondas from adjacent districts of 24 Parganas, Hooghly and announced a rally that would be beginning from Calcutta Maidan. A poster was published that portrayed Mohammed Ali Jinnah with a sword. On the morning of the 16th of August riot began in the city. Various reports of stabbing, and throwing stones came up. These events occurred in the north-central part of Calcutta, around Rajabazar, Kalabagan, College Street, Harrison Road, Colootolla, Burrabazar and Entally. Mostly, thieves, goondas, smugglers, rickshaw pullers, and butchers such types of the lower economic class engaged in the riot. The most vulnerable areas were along the Bowbazar street, around Upper Circular Road, on the north by Vivekananda Road, and on the west of Strand Road, Jorasakho, Taltola, Park Circus, Entally, Amherst Street, Bowbazar, and Manicktola. The worst scenario had been seen in the areas of Rajabazar, Watgunge, Mehdibagan, Nikaripara, Manicktola, Zakaria Street, Ram Bagan, Lalbagan and Sova bazaar. Muslims were shouted for the victory of Pakistan and announced jihad. The slogan of the Muslim League party is "*Larke lenge Pakistan*". On the other hand, the slogan of the opposition Hindu party was "*Akhand Hindustan*".¹⁴

A previous study mentioned an incident in Bichalighat, where seventy-seven Muslims and fifty-nine Hindus were murdered in the first major communal clash. On August 17, approximately 400 Oriya workers at Kesoram Cotton Mills were slaughtered in Lichubagan slums, Metiaburz. In another incident, 48 people were butchered on the riverbank. Other dreadful sites of murders were Nakashipara, Karamtolli and Sahebbagan. Terrible murders and butchery were witnessed by North Calcutta, around Vivekananda Road, central avenue. A tremendous attack was noticed in the Beliaghata area and the Miabagan slum. The religious places were also under attack, 7 temples were attacked in comparison to 52 mosques, and 17 dead bodies were found in the area of Bow Bazar.¹⁵ In 1946, Calcutta experienced unforgettable violence.

The communal riot of 1964

The 1964 riot was due to the disappearance of the relic, mysteriously removed

from the Islamic shrine in the last week of December 1963. Muslims believed it was a deliberate act by Hindus to desecrate a holy relic from Kashmir's Hazratbal mosque in December 1963 which led to the riots. This event immediately affected the district of Khulna, Jessore, in East Pakistan. During the rally of Hindu minorities at the deputy commissioner's office, Hindus were unexpectedly attacked by some Muslims. Against this backdrop, the Calcutta disturbance took place between 10 and 13 January. On 10th January, Hindu students boycott their schools and colleges to protest against the Khulna, Jessore incidents, where a sudden involvement and confrontation of police cause the death of B. A first-year student, Bahudeb Sen. These incidents resulted in Hindu-Muslim clashes on the next two days of 11th and 12th January. The violence was confined to the region of Amherst Street, Sealdah, Taltola, Entally, Beniapukur, Beliaghata, and Garia. 82 people died and 44 people surrendered to the police. During the riot, Muslim slums along the Sealdah Ballygunge railway line were the most heavily affected. Many were razed to the ground and their residents expelled. 262 Muslims were injured, whereas, the corresponding figure for Hindus was 117. In the last two days, Kolkata was filled with the voices of Muslims "Pakistan Jindabad" (Long Live Pakistan). Immediately adjacent districts like North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, and Nadia were affected. It was believed that the disturbance was succeeded result of Pakistani provocateurs. The situation was normalized on January 13th.¹⁶

The outbreak of the late twentieth century

After three decades, Kolkata was again fired up by the impact of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which stimulates insecurity among Muslim communities of Kolkata. The violence was situated between 7th to 10th December in the part of South-West and Eastern Kolkata. Unlike the previous riot of 1964, this riot was concentrated in the area of Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Park Circus, Tangra, Topsia, Tiljala, and Beniapukur slums. Though the hotspot of the riot was Metiaburz and Garden Reach, the impact spread to the locality of Badartala, Bhangakhali, Kanchantala, Nimtala, Nadia, Lichubagan, and Kashyap Para, which was prevailed by Muslims. Tangra, Tiljala, Entally, Park Circus, Karaya, and Taltal were not excluded from the violence, but continuous disturbances were hit on the Muslim slums of Bibibagan, Dhobiatala, Motijhil, and Meher Ali Lane. Previous research explained the scenario of Tangra, Tiljala, and Topsia which experienced frequent bomb blasts and lootings. 1992 can be considered as a land acquisition riot where Metiaburz and Garden Reach became the victim. Many Muslims from neighbouring regions of Bihar, Bangladesh migrate to these places and forcefully evicted the dwellers. Those migrants were related to antisocial smuggling activities which enriched them. In the aftermath of the 1964 riot, the 1992 riot stemmed from the superiority of Hindus over Muslims, which manifested the power of the RSS. As an example, 150 Muslim youths were detained and tortured while being forced to chant "Jai Shree Ram."¹⁷ In

this severe conflict between two communities, many people from lower castes, activists, CPI(M), and Left parties restlessly tried to solve the dispute and finally succeed.

The fundamentalists and stereotyped people led the violence in the city which created communal space in various parts of the city. Metiaburz, Chitpur, taltala, Entally, Zakaria Street, Beliaghata are geographically significant as an urban places of insurgence and have played vital roles in communal violence. These parts of Kolkata had witnessed a large number of outbreaks and mass killings. Due to the greater number of communal violence Park Circus, Garden Reach is often described as 'Mini Pakistan' in the public sphere. Other politically significant places Beniapur, Bow Bazar, College Street, Amherst Street, Kalabagan experienced approximate two riots in the twentieth century and till date these regions have the imprint of communal violence. Though the wound of Calcutta violence has healed over time, the crack has been opened in the urban polity.

Mapping the riot:

The published literature cited above about the communal riots that took place in the city used as a source to identify the locations of the riot areas in the city. Using the 'Add Placemark' tool of Google EarthPro, the locations of the areas that were affected by the riot were mapped as point locations. The compilation of

geo-coordinates of various acts of violence made it possible to conceptualise the geographical proximity of several areas that were going through riots. The point locations of the sites were added to the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) environments in the Arc Map software. To have a better idea of the region that might be affected by such an occurrence, a buffer of 500 metres was created around all of the geocoded places. The number of previous riots was used to categorise each place as well as the area immediately around it.

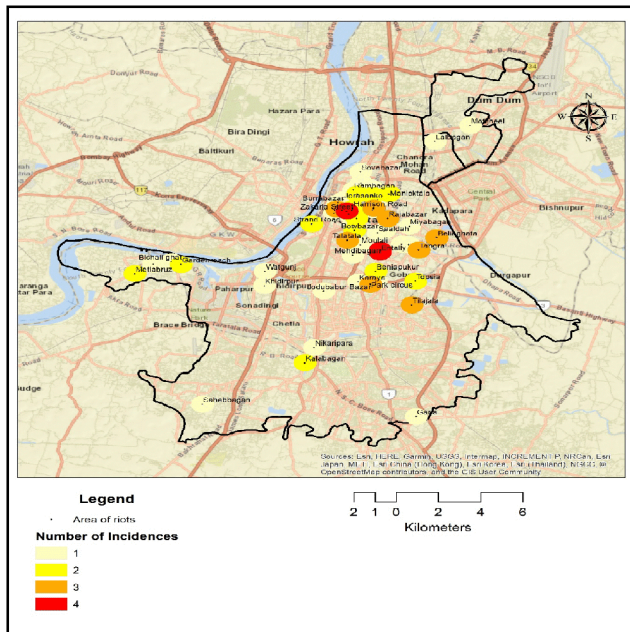


Figure 2 Mapping the hotspots of Riot, Source: Prepared by Authors

Discussion:**The 'Production of Space' theory:**

The main theoretical framework of this paper is Lefebvre's 'theory of the production of space'.¹⁸ There are two schemes that Lefebvre talks about. In scheme A, there are three aspects regarding the production of space which are as follows¹⁹ a. Spatial practice, b. Representations of Space and c. Spaces of representation. Spatial practice means the material dimension of social activity which takes a physical form and is a real space. The second concept representations of Space can be understood as the conceptual spaces in the knowledge domain through plans, layouts, images, and policies. Lefebvre calls these 'spaces of savoir (knowledge)'²⁰ belonging to the 'instrumental space' of engineers, planners who create spaces in the blueprint as per their imaginations. Now the third concept, Spaces of representation is the symbolic dimensions of space expressed through the process of identification, that links itself to a (material) symbol²¹ or spatial practice as defined earlier. This space is usually referred to as the 'third-space', which can be evolved over time as a product of both the real and the imagined. To put it in this context the first component is how spatial agents interact within a particular space through social relations. Social relations are the outcome of the social and spatial structure. The social relations depend upon the nature of the neighbourhood or we can say the population composition of that area²²; whether it is a mixed neighbourhood where people from diverse ethnicity lives or it is concentrated settlement of the people from the same socio-cultural background.

Table 1 Lefebvre's Schemes of Production of Space, Table prepared by authors following²³

<i>Scheme A</i>	<i>Scheme B</i>	<i>Nature of Space</i>
<i>Spatial Practice</i>	<i>Perceived</i>	<i>Physical</i>
<i>Representations of Space</i>	<i>Conceived</i>	<i>Mental</i>
<i>Spaces of Representation</i>	<i>Lived</i>	<i>Social</i>

There is a scheme B for the same triad which talks about perceived, conceived and lived spaces. The 'perceived space' is the materiality of the space which is tangible. The second axis is 'conceived space' which is constructed mentally. This represents a certain place when we hear the name of a certain place, what is our mental image of the place, what is our imagination about the place. We may not physically experience that place, even then what would be our thought about that place is what the second triad is all about. The third space here is coined as the 'lived space'. The name indicates this is an experiential space of people based on everyday spatial interaction. All these triads is interlinked. Through this interconnectedness, the space which is being produced is a kind of social space.²⁴ In a nutshell, the 'material order that emerges on the ground can itself become the vehicle conveying meaning' encompassing a 'spatial symbolism'²⁵ that is intertwined with materialities, a sense of tangibility, everyday experiences, meanings and

metaphors as well as norms, values and imaginations.

Mini-Pakistan and Producing the communal spatial identity:

In this section, we will talk about how the material past events of riots (spatial practice), collective memory create a perception (conceived space) about a particular spatial entity. This spatial identity plays an important role in lived experiences (lived space) of the people. From the *figure 2*, it has been identified that historically some locations such as Rajabazar, Khidirpur, Metiaburz, Garden Reach, Chitpur, Taltala, Entally, Zakaria Street, Beliaghata, Park Circus, Tangra, Topsia have reported most of the riots (from late 18th Century to Late 20th Century).²⁶ The neighbourhood of most of these locations is Muslim-dominated and with poor socio-economic conditions. Such locations had also reported much crime rates.²⁷ Scholars²⁸ have argued that there is a proportional relationship between crime and the poor socio-economic condition of the neighbourhood.²⁹ Due to this history of violence, crime and the seeing the population composition of these places, a stigma has been attached to these places (representation of spaces). In the public sphere,³⁰ these places are often described as "Mini-Pakistan". This phrase is an absolute expression of communal notions (spaces of representations) as the describer tries to associate the religious composition of the place with violence and simultaneously question the patriotism/ loyalty to the nation of the community.³¹ This is a lived experience (lived spaces)³² of the people who inhabit these places. On the other hand, it is also part of the conceived notion of such places that may not inhabit. Circulation of the collective notions (through social media) informed by the partition memory and associated communal hatred gives rise to tags such as "Mini-Pakistan"; this is how a communal space is being produced (through the interaction of physical/spatial practice and mental/conceived space).

A systematic search of the term '#Mini Pakistan' on Facebook and Instagram reveals another layer of the stigma. The '#' (hashtag) feature in the new media enabled people to tag their posts to a location or a particular topic. On another note, one can say the feature of hashtagging is a tool to tag some identity to something. The new media '*MiniPakistan*' brings news/videos/posts related to places like Rajabazar, Khidirpur, Metiaburz, Garden Reach, Zakaria street, and Park Circus.³³ Most of the post shows fear about the community and the violent nature of the space itself. This is how a conceived communal space is being produced within Kolkata through certain representations of spatial identity.

Conclusion:

In the trailer of the Movie *Zulfiqar*³⁴, while describing the Khidirpur, Metiaburz, Garden Reach area it says, "This area is a small country inside the city of Kolkata. Yes, a country, only without a National Anthem and a flag". This is how popular perception is being created through representation in a

certain way. These are imagined geography, communal spaces or stigma-tagged spaces within a city. History, collective memory has a pivotal role in shaping such geographies. In such representation, Zakaria street may bear the stigma of “mini-Pakistan” but simultaneously it is also a spatial symbol of harmony where a community iftar party is being organised where people from both the community participate. This is another way to represent a space (conceived space) through which a new image of space is being created.

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