Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1   Study Background

The city of Kolkata has been documented and interpreted by authors of various backgrounds who have portrayed the city in its multiple and complex layers. The city, as is known, rose to prominence from the mid 18th century, as the chosen Capital of British India. As a natural outcome of being the seat of power, the settlement developed as a major urban centre of the British times providing the ambience and amenities befitting a capital city. Thus, we see the development of British Monumental architecture, with public edifices strewn across the city as demonstrations of British power and wealth. As a result of this process of concentration of wealth, undeterred urbanisation occurred, and Kolkata grew to become a primate city with large concentrations of population. Parallel to the economic development of the city, Kolkata also became a cultural milieu, fostering great cultural movements. The city continues to be a primate city long after it ceased to be the country's capital inheriting the fruits of its Colonial past- a cultural legacy, the splendours of the Raj coexisting with abject poverty and squalor of the large in-migrant population.

The pressures of population on the city's economy and infrastructure over time coupled with the reduced political role of the city from a colonial capital to a provincial capital, has led to transformation of the city socially, spatially and perceptually. The many dimensions of this process of transformation have been documented through various seminal books on Kolkata both in English and in Bengali. The subjects of much of the critical writings on Kolkata are seen to focus on three key aspects of the city-a) the Colonial Splendours b) City and its poverty and c) City and its culture.

Some of the landmark works on the city of Kolkata are by: Geoffrey Moorhouse (*Calcutta the city revealed*)[1], Desmond Doig (*Calcutta, an artist's impression*)[2], H.E. Busteed (*Echoes from old Calcutta*)[3] and Sumanta Banerjee (*The Parlour and the streets*)[4].

The Cultural sketch- *Hutom Penchar Naksha*[5] by Kaliprasanna Sinha and the encyclopaedic compendium *Kolikata Darpan* [6]by Radharaman Mitra are the major sources of information on the life and culture of 19th and 20th century Kolkata.

Recent academic works which have again focussed on one or other of these aspects are Swati Chattopadhyay's *Representing Calcutta*[7] and Ananya Roy's *City requiem, Calcutta*[8].

Towards the early and mid-twentieth century, the city planning witnessed major initiatives which made the city take on its present spatial structure. The divide between the Colonial 'white town' and the native 'black town' was stitched through planned intervention and the town got its new unified structure, socially and spatially. This resulted in new parts of town being developed in a planned manner and the city reorganised itself with activities shifting to newer areas.

A document used a ready reference of the chronological growth patterns of the city is NATMO's *Atlas of the city of Calcutta and its environs*[9], comprising of a series of Company maps and more recent maps.

The Basic Development Plan prepared by CMPO (Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation), published in 1966 is treated as the first work putting forward a vision, albeit, too broad a wash, for a giant metropolis which already had a large population and an existing infrastructure groaning under

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its pressures. With the subsequent delineation of KMA (Kolkata Metropolian Area, earlier CMA), focus shifted from the core old existing city areas to new development areas which gave the opportunity and optimism of creating better facilities and new planned areas for the growing population. New transportation links of the city acting as a major impetus of development receive special attention in all the subsequent planning works. The chapter on Kolkata titled *Calcutta: The Planning Agonies* in *Million Cities of India*[10], Vol. II by Prof. Monideep Chatterjee, is one writing, among others, which provides a critical overview of the city's planned development initiatives, and the impact on the process of urbanisation of the city over the years.

Thus the city started expanding spatially with major investments and initiatives occurring in new planned areas, with new transport corridors linking the old city areas. The older parts of the city, particularly the 'native town' areas receded to the background of the planning process and it was only much later, in the 80's and 90's that the focus partially shifted back to them, in the form of piecemeal 'urban renewal projects', as a response, as it were, to the realisation of the decay which was setting in within the core areas.

The focus of the old city areas, in academic works has thus either been on the social and cultural setting which existed in the colonial times or on the recent infrastructure inputs to the areas as urban renewal projects in recent times. Some attention has also been given to individual historic buildings and their conservation. There however, remains one area of interest in urban studies, namely, academic discussions on the ***older residential neighbourhoods*** of the city, which has found comparatively lesser thrust in the context of Kolkata. The image of the city through the perception of its neighbourhoods, as they exist in the collective memory of its residents, has not been a major area of focus in academic studies. One of the ways of understanding a city is about understanding its residential neighbourhoods which form the major bulk of its building stock and are woven all over the body of the city. Significant work in this regard is found in western works, but has remained by and large unexplored in the Indian context. Kolkata, with its many layers of history and development, has many old residential areas, which were the older 'native town', interwoven and strewn across large parts of the city. The visual and social character of these areas, possess an identity, distinct even today, from the newer planned areas of the city. The transformation which has occurred in them as a result of the city's growth is also of interest, as these areas form a large chunk of the core of the city.

This research work focuses primarily on the older residential parts of Kolkata, analysing them in social, spatial, visual and perceptual perspectives, and tries to capture the dynamics of the transformation which has been occurring in them.

1.2   Research in related areas

Aldo Rossi in his monumental work The *Architecture of the City* (1966)[11], considers the city as a spatial structure which is seen as a city of artefacts and a space of collective memory based on artefacts which create identities of cities. In the book *Great Streets*[12], Allan Jacob also attributes movements, specifically pedestrian movement paths as major artefacts of the cities or the most memorable aspects of the various cities that are studied in his book. Architectural writings on cities, quite obviously, talk about cities in terms of their urban structure, but history, collective memory and perceptions of the users also form important aspects of texts on cities. In *Collage city*[13] Colin Rowe et al write about the presence of the past, present and future of the city which form a complex collage over space time and say that the city exists simultaneously in all its time states. Rossi talks about the historical processes and collective memory. Allan Jacob talks about perception which is the fallout of perhaps the most important school of city writing spearheaded by Kevin Lynch in his seminal work

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The Image of the city[14]. In this work, the city and its quality of life and extents of movements and participation are gathered through perceptions of the citizens. The Perception School continues to be a major influence in the work of two other major thinkers, Tridib Banerjee and William C. Baer, who in their seminal book *Beyond the Neighbourhood unit*[15], use perception techniques to delineate the extent of what they call 'residential neighbourhood areas' which disqualifies and outdates to a great extent the neighbourhood unit concept of Clarence Perry in his work of 1929[16]. Lastly, the work of Jane Jacobs[17] and the concept of walkable neighbourhoods and streets with eyes and neighbourhoods of local history is another landmark work in understanding of the city. A relatively recent work of Habraken[18], in the long line of his illustrious writings on the city, uses the term 'structure of the ordinary' which reinforces the idea of the walking streets and interactive neighbourhood areas which deviates from the idea of the city of architectural artefacts of significance. The Perception School, and the works of Jane Jacobs and Habraken, have raised strong point against Modernist City planning advocated by Corbusier during the heydays of modernism in the 30s and 40s, which saw great architecture but not great liveable cities, where the automobile becomes the major protagonist and situates the participator (in the terminology of Edmund Bacon in another approach of Participatory approach in his book *Design of Cities*[19]) in the automobile dominated realm. Jacobs and her compatriots strongly advocate local interventions and reorganisation of the urban fabric at the local levels as against the monumental urban renewal proposals that dominated the 60s American city planning practices. The whole movement of New Urbanism is an offshoot of this world view.

In the city of Kolkata, which is the subject of the present research, many of the neighbourhoods are heavy with important architectural artefacts, but are more importantly, consistently made up of 'structures of the ordinary'. A large part of the 'native' or 'black' towns which developed over a period of time demonstrate the characters of this 'structure of the ordinary'. Interestingly, the temporal variations in the development of the different neighbourhoods, give rise to variations in their perception and character. Notably, the older black town in North Kolkata forms a contrast to the newer neighbourhood developments in South Kolkata, and the metamorphosis which they undergo over time.

Interestingly, the quintessential character of the neighbourhoods is captured in a large number of films on the city as also in its popular and critical fiction set in the city at various times. The built forms shown in films set at different time periods in the city, in a way serve as evidences of this gradual transformation or their apparent perceptions in public memory in the third dimension. From the landmark film *Charulata*[20] by Satyajit Ray, which shows the wealthy house of 'a progressive' Bengali gentry set in mid 19th Century, Kolkata to more contemporary urban films by the master - *Mahanagar*[21], *Parash Pathar*[22], *Seemabaddha*[23] all of which oscillate between the neighbourhoods of North and South Kolkata to depict subtle socio-economic and cultural differences in the characters and the families shown. Most popular films of the 60's and 70's also portray the family structures and the social interactions set in local neighbourhoods, which can only be in Kolkata. In the all the films cited above, known and unknown streetscapes are shown to situate the narratives. Landmark buildings and public spaces are captured in the frames to depict special moments and events. But largely, the residential neighborhoods portray the essence of the city, by not being visually dominating with remarkable objects of interest.

Fiction writings by authors such as Satyajit Ray (short stories[24]), Premendra Mitra (*Ghanada* series[25]), Parashuram (stories[26]) and others and memoirs starting from Rabindra Nath Tagore (*Jibansmriti*[27]) to Parimal Goswami (*Smritichitran*[28]) also contribute largely in bringing out the quintessential characters of neighbourhoods and the city.

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This process of a city's socio-cultural transformation and the correlation with the housing pattern of the city, over a couple of centuries remains strangely documented in films and literature, often contrasting to the city's real image today. Transformations in a city's morphology are inevitable, but certain images remain embedded in the public memory of place, which are associated with the very identity of the city.

Having discussed various aspects related to neighbourhoods and the context of Kolkata in particular, it can be said with some conviction, that there is a need to understand and explore the visual, spatial and socio-cultural characteristics of residential neighbourhoods which form a vital part of the core image of what is perceived as the image of the city of Kolkata, beyond its Colonial legacies, for which it has received perhaps, more than its fair share of accolades.

This work attempts to understand the city of Kolkata as a continuum of residential neighbourhoods which form a predominant structure in its urban fabric. Perception of the inhabitants, presence of the past and the future, permeability within the neighbourhood patches and the presence of the particular, the *solus locus*, as Rossi puts it, all form part of a combined approach in this study.

1.3   The Purpose and Process of Research

The present research work tries to identify the 'quintessential' Kolkata neighbourhoods and examines them in the context of the city's development patterns. The work follows a combination of the inductive and deductive approaches of research, switching between seeking answers to pre-decided questions on one hand and trying to analyse the patterns emerging from the data collected for the study, to evolve generalised conclusions. The research may be broadly divided into two parts, distinct yet inter-related.

The first part of the study establishes the morphology of the city and identifies parameters and attributes of defining the neighbourhood typologies which fulfil the requirements of 'quintessential' Kolkata residential neighbourhoods. The term "Grey Zone" as a definition of such areas is coined. In this part, a detailed inventory of works on city morphology and neighbourhood structures, available in research works across the world, is critically examined and then the appropriateness of these available models, when applied to Kolkata, is also adjudged. The spatial structure of the city, its chronological growth and impact on older city areas are analysed. Selected case study areas are then identified as representative samples of residential neighbourhoods in transformation, from the possible qualifying zones.

In the second part of the work, detailed surveys (physical, socio-economic and cultural) of the two chosen case study neighbourhood areas of Kolkata, are undertaken. An examination of the data collected, reveals patterns of development and neighbourhood transformation. The transformation of neighbourhoods and also individual residential properties, are documented through chronological spatial data analyses and socio-economic surveys to understand household level transformations and the impact of these on neighbourhood characteristics.

The study concludes with an analysis of the key attributes, which help retain the essence of 'quintessential Kolkata neighbourhoods'. An attempt is also made to assess the vulnerability of neighbourhoods to total transformations and identify the different attributes which are responsible for the transformation correlating their own inter relationship, which affect the dynamics of change. Based on the cumulative impact of the effect of these attributes, suggestive intervention strategies are put forward, with a commentary on the possibilities of taking this research forward.

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The broad methodology followed is as given below:

- Undertaking detailed Literature Review related to the subject, tracing the historic evolution of neighbourhood development models from international experiences.
- City level study- documentation of chronological growth of Kolkata (from secondary sources), pattern and characteristics of residential neighbourhood distribution in the city's fabric.
- Correlation with established academic frameworks – examining neighbourhood distribution patterns in Kolkata within frameworks enumerated in Literature review.
- Neighbourhood level study- selection of neighbourhoods- bases and criteria of selection, parameters of documentation; detailed documentation of neighbourhood transformations.
- Household level study- documentation and analyses of social and physical transformations at the household and premise level, as a result of changes in family structure; Impact on population characteristics at the neighbourhood level.
- Formulation of inferences and establishment of generalised patterns of neighbourhood transformation, and correlations with the combination of main causes.
- Commentary on findings, and identification of future possibilities of further research.

A detailed discussion on research methodology is provided in Chapter 3 of the report.

1.4   Chapterisation of Report

The research work elaborated in the preceding sections is structured in the report in the following sequence of chapters. There are significant links and correlations between the contents of the various chapters, but they have been segregated and classified in the sequence given, for ease of data handling and logical structuring with cross references wherever required.

Chapter I: Introduction

- Introduction – positioning the context of the research.
- Research in related areas
- Purpose and process of research
- Chapterisation of report

Chapter II: Literature Review

- Existing academic frameworks of looking at cities
- Newer trends in city expansion – old city decay – urban sprawls and outmigration from the core
- Existing Neighborhood literature
- Documentation of total body of work- identification of major approaches

Chapter III: Research Methodology

- Research Background
- Research Proposal- Research Hypothesis & Questions
- Research Methodology
- Research Techniques- list of methods used
  - Data Collection Methods: Secondary data sources
  - Primary data Collection Techniques

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Chapter IV: Kolkata: City Morphology

- Development and growth of the city
- Transport networked city and homogeneity of the neighborhood spread across space-time
- Correlation with academic frameworks in this context
- Definition and delineation of 'Grey Zones'
- Selection of Case Study Areas

Chapter V: Case Study of Area 1: Ramdhan Mitra Lane Area

- Detailed documentation of each case on chosen parameters.
- Photo- documentation of streetscapes and neighbourhoods.
- Physical transformation
- Socio-economic profiling
- Perceptual Profiling: Cognitive mapping & Kitescape neighbourhood
- House transformations
- Documentation & Analyses of neighbourhood specific findings

Chapter VI: Case Study of Area 2: Kalighat Park Area

- Detailed documentation of each case on chosen parameters.
- Photo- documentation of streetscapes and neighbourhoods.
- Physical transformation
- Socio-economic profiling
- Perceptual Profiling: Cognitive mapping & Kitescape neighbourhood
- House transformations
- Documentation & Analyses of neighbourhood specific findings

Chapter VII: Conclusions

- Comparison across neighbourhoods- evolving generalised observations
- Identification of key factors of neighbourhood transformation
- Application of developed analysis tool to predict future scenarios and intervention possibilities in case study areas.
- Possible intervention strategies based on the key factors identified.
- Possibility of future development of research methods and their applications.