

In the mid-80s, while studying in Kolkata (then Calcutta), I would come across similar experiences every day - demonstrations by some group or the other, incessant power cuts, water logging in the streets after rains, and telephone lines that did not work.

Discussions amongst students concerned how to get out of Kolkata, migrate abroad if possible, and if not, move to another Indian city. Student and labour unions ruled the roost. Those memories constantly remind me of how Kathmandu and Kolkata are so similar.

The metro train in Kolkata, just close to 20 kilometres, took 30 years to complete, and as my cabbie told me on a recent visit, it will take another 30 years to build a few more kilometres. The discourse on projects in Kolkata is very similar to discussions of such projects in Kathmandu.

There are numerous local political groups that want their say in projects and do not care if the whole country's development is impacted and whether people leave the country as a result.

So if one needs to understand why discussing hydropower projects in Nepal is the nation's favourite pastime, then one can learn about how discussing projects in Kolkata is also a favourite pastime, be they



Kolkata skyline.

# Kolkata Connection

new roads, industrial, parks or other infrastructure projects.

In Kolkata, the Left Front, a coalition of left parties, had an undisputed majority for over 30 years since 1977. But they did not do much for development and instead, promoted rent-seeking, a stark contrast to entrepreneurship.

This can be compared with the Panchayat rule in Nepal, where despite a majority to push for reform and development, infighting, staying in power, and using politics for personal gain became key features.

In 2011, the Trinamool Congress, a breakaway splinter group of the main Congress party in India, toppled the Left Front government. There was a ray of hope for change, but then Trinamool's performance has been dismal.

This can be compared to the election of the then CPN (Maoist) to power in the first elections of the Federal Republic of Nepal and their engagement in petty politics, power struggle, and amassing personal wealth.

In Kolkata, you cannot figure out where the sidewalks or footpaths are, as they are covered with vendors, shops extending their wares, and people parking their two and four wheelers.

In Kolkata, you cannot figure out where the sidewalks or footpaths are, as they are covered with vendors, shops extending their wares, and people parking their two and four wheelers.

When campaigns to remove the vendors begin, there is serious political uproar as everyone wants to be seen as a messiah of the marginalised and the destitute.

The street vendors do not pay any official rent or taxes (of course, informal taxes to political forces, goons, and cops) and command a privileged position as there is no level-playing field when compared to tax-paying, rent-paying shops and establishments.

In Kathmandu, in recent years, we have seen the encroachment of public spaces like never before. Every inch of open space is being used as an extension of shops and parking for two wheelers and

eateries.

The widened roads of Kathmandu have surely helped this phenomenon to mushroom. Political parties are very sympathetic to these people, as their local muscle power benefits from these establishments and everyone knows very well the need of muscle power in South Asian politics.

Evictions are greeted with street closures by 'sangharsha samitis' or action groups. The marginalised surely find supporters from some foreign Samaritans who have decided to make the upliftment of the downtrodden in countries like Nepal their agenda, behaving as if there are no problems or downtrodden folks in the countries they belong to.

They get generous treatment by the media, who provide them with the space to pen and share their opinions. Political leaders show the opinion pieces of these supposed foreign experts to defend illegal occupation of public space for business or shelter.

In the mid-80s, when Kolkata students were chanting slogans and not giving their exams, students in Bangalore were quietly enrolling themselves in engineering colleges and learning computer science.

After 30 years, it is very clear where Kolkata and Bangalore stand. Not wanting to live in the city is very much a phenomenon in Kolkata as in Kathmandu. The first in line are politicians and bureaucrats.

If one were to carry out a survey in both Kolkata and Kathmandu as to where the children of bureaucrats and politicians are, most likely, the results from both the cities would be similar - they all have migrated.

Bureaucrats in both the cities take pride in their trips to foreign lands after retirement and how they have become excellent babysitters for their grandchildren in different parts of the world.

People who do not have their future or the future of their children invested in the city or the country they live in do not think of the future of that city or that country. It does not matter whether cities reel under severe power cuts or the streets are flooded during monsoons.

This tendency of really living in the present provides great opportunities for business people who are willing to take advantage of any arbitrage situation, be it shortage of a commodity or manipulation of labour wages.

The tax havens of Burrabazar in Kolkata and Indrachowk in Kathmandu provide opportunities to do business by taking advantage of the short term. It is not necessary to adapt to the culture or understand the business environment, quick learning of the language is enough to rule. This breed of outsiders rules the market.

Until such short-term arbitrage-hungry and rent-seeking business people thrive, there will be no room for real entrepreneurship. But real entrepreneurship is required to change the fate of both Kolkata and Kathmandu.

Only this will ensure a vibrant economy with long-term stability that is not limited to providing basic food, clothing, and shelter to a large population.

— EDITORIAL DESK  
ANN/ The Kathmandu Post