"You can call it a *Mufassil* Town, but nothing less": Worlding the new census towns of India

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ABSTRACT

In the census of 2011 in India, more than 2500 new settlements have been classified as urban. Placed under the category of 'census towns', not much is known about the urbanization processes unfolding at these sites. This article presents learnings from a qualitative case study of a town in West Bengal, to argue that not only do census towns represent a subaltern urbanization but also that they are produced through a range of parallel and competing projects and practices that do not lend themselves to any easy and formulaic understanding of the urban. Borrowing the idea of "worlding" as a conceptual tool to make sense of these processes, I argue that persistent hierarchies of power in the form of caste relations, form the foundation of this urbanization process even as multiple and divergent claims and discourses seek to mould the making of the town. This calls for renewed attention to the question of social justice when reading Indian urbanization.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to make an intervention into the dominant understanding of the contemporary urban condition through an in-depth case study of a town in West Bengal, India that exemplifies the phenomenon of "subaltern urbanization" (Denis et al., 2012). It further seeks to complicate the understanding of what it means to occupy a subaltern position within the imagination of global urbanity, and to deploy the practices of "worlding" (Ong and Roy, 2011) to secure space for the small and the South within urban theory. In keeping with ongoing calls for dislocating the hegemonic centre of urban theory (Chattopadhyay et al., 2012; Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009a, 2015, 2016) both geographically and notionally, I would like to situate the paper within the larger project of producing urban theory from "off the map".

In the 2011 Census of India, 2553 new settlements have been classified as census towns (CTs). CTs represent one of the lowest size-rank of urban settlements in India. They are defined in the census as settlements fulfilling the demographic criteria of 5000 population, 400 per square kilometre density, and 75 per cent of the male workforce employed in non-agricultural activities. Despite their census categorization as 'urban' CTs continue to be administered by rural local governance institutions (known as Panchayats), until legislative intervention by the state to accord them with Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).

This is an unprecedented and unforeseen growth in the number of CTs, which previously accounted for only 7.4 per cent of the total urban population and are now responsible for one-third of the decadal urban growth (Pradhan, 2012; Kundu, 2011). Of all the states in India, West Bengal is home to the largest number of new CTs (526) where they account for more than 60 per cent of the decadal urban growth (Pradhan, 2012). Taking this to be a point of entry, this paper will draw from my fieldwork in Garbeta town in West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Following the political impetus of this paper, I foreground the local and the particular by starting with an introduction of Garbeta town as place and the Indian bureaucratic logic that constructs it as a CT. This is followed by a conceptual discussion of subaltern urbanization, worlding practices, and their relationship to the idea of a universal urban theory. The third section carries a methodological discussion. In the fourth and fifth sections I discuss observations and findings from the town, through the lens of the conceptual framework. This is followed by a concluding discussion.

2. Garbeta town as a place in the world

In the southern parts of West Bengal, and the surrounding regions of neighbouring states like Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, "Garbeta" is a well-recognized name. It is an important station on the rail route connecting the state capital Kolkata to the district town Puruliya and thereafter to the adjacent state capital of Ranchi. "Garbeta" is also the name by which three of the six blocks[1] of the Medinipur sub-division are known – i.e. Garbeta I, Garbeta II and

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[1] The system of rural local governance in India is organized in three tiers consisting of villages at the base, followed by blocks and then districts. At each level there are elected bodies (Panchayats) with provisions for representation of women and marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis. For more see glossary.
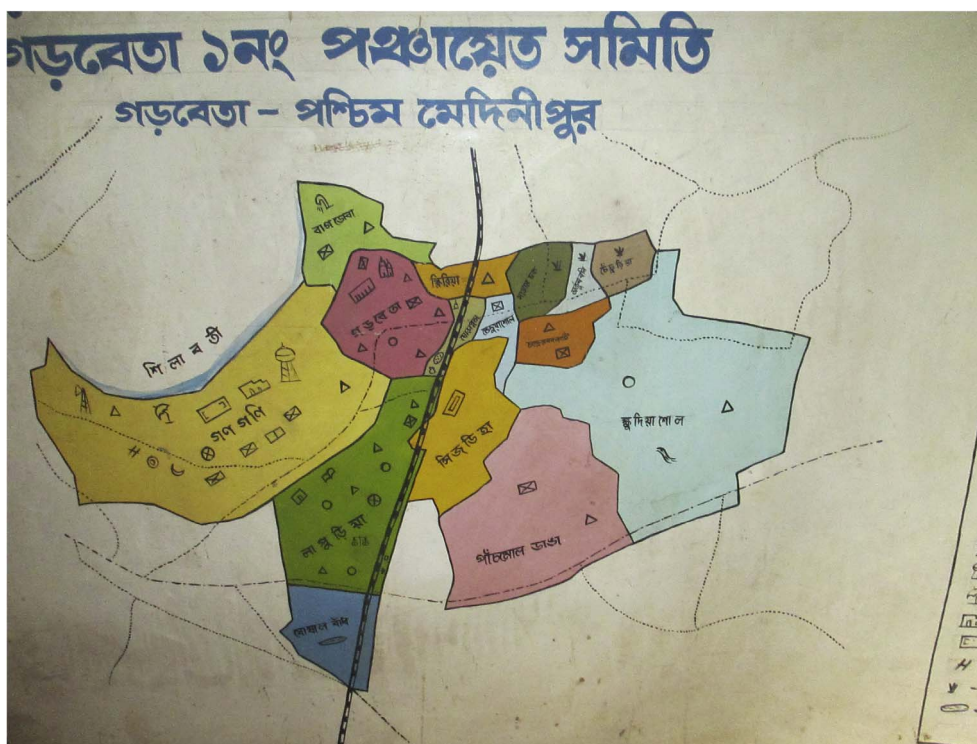
Fig. 1. Location of Garbeta Town in West Bengal, India.

Garbeta III. In its most recent avatar, "Garbeta" is also the name of one of the seven new census towns recognized in the district of West Medinipur. It is this avatar of Garbeta that brought me to it in the first place and therefore merits some discussion.

As noted above, settlements in India are classified as CTs based on demographic characteristics outlined in the census. However there is a considerable time lag between the settlements attaining these characteristics on paper and them being recognized as CTs. I have discussed the process of selection and classification of settlements as CTs in detail elsewhere (Sircar, 2017) but suffice to mention here that demographic data collected in a particular round of census operations is only reviewed in the following round which takes place a decade later. This means that CTs recognized as such in 2011 were very likely to have fulfilled the prescribed demographic criteria already in 2001. This process is not widely known to the public and had to be mined out of interviews with multiple census officials. There is a further time lag between CTs being categorized as such and them being included into the systems and institutions of urban governance (discussed further in Sircar, 2017). For this paper it is relevant to mention that at present this time lag for the state of West Bengal ranges between seven to ten years (Samanta, 2014).

Beyond the rigmarole of bureaucratic classifications, these time lags have consequences for the everyday production and imagination of Garbeta as a place. Below (Fig. 1) is a map of Garbeta town, that was curated through several interviews and group discussions, assisted by photocopies of hand-drawn outlines of two Village Panchayat maps in the Garbeta I block – namely Garbeta and Amlagora – and then digitized with the help of Google Earth Pro and ArcGIS. The process of classification of CTs does not involve any cartographical inputs or consideration of the spatial positioning of the settlements, relative to other villages or towns. In this case, Garbeta and Amlagora are both settlements that were, prior to 2011, census villages (or moujas[2]) of the

same names, within Village Panchayats also of the same names. As I learnt in course of my stay, these two Village Panchayats are also contiguous in space. The two specific moujas that are now CTs are not contiguous in terms of administrative boundaries, but belong to a larger continuous built-up area that extends beyond the boundaries of the two moujas. As per the Garbeta I Block Panchayat records, the combined population of Garbeta CT and Amlagora CT in March 2011 was 10,272, not including the population of the surrounding contiguous built-up area (see Fig. 1).

In Medinipur, when one asks to be taken to Garbeta town, one is directed either to Garbeta railway station or to Garbeta bus stand. Both of these, as the map indicates, are located well outside of the area officially designated as Garbeta CT. In the absence of an official map of the CT itself, the methodology for bringing together the map in the figure, had to be inventive. It started with a hand-drawn map of the constituent moujas of Garbeta GP that hung on the wall of the Panchayat President's office (see Fig. 4 in Appendix A). Copies of this map were used as tools in group discussions and semi-structured interviews to map the physical extent of Garbeta town as perceived by current residents. After the first few interviews, the need to look at moujas beyond the confines of Garbeta Village Panchayat became evident. A similar hand-drawn map of the constituent moujas of Amlagora Village Panchayat was then included in the participatory mapping. The features that emerged as important in the interviews and group discussions were then collated into the figure presented here in Fig. 2.

It is evident from the image that what is known in popular parlance as 'Garbeta town' is different from what has been identified as Garbeta CT. It is much larger in territorial extent and subsumes both Garbeta CT and Amlagora CT, along with extensive parts of neighbouring moujas. One of the participants described Garbeta town as "ten to twelve plots on both sides of the road, from Kumar Bagan to Fatehsinghpur".

In terms of morphology, the entire area of Garbeta town is built-up with no significant clear spaces, cultivable land, forest cover or fallow land. The buildings, both residential and otherwise, are predominantly brick and concrete structures with a few exceptions in the fringes of

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[2] A sub-unit of a Panchayat in West Bengal; at times corresponds to a census village – the smallest unit used for census operations. For more see glossary.