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India's contradictions: snapshots from Kolkata and the Taj resort

Professor Robert Wade reflects on a luxury stay near Kolkata to provide a meditative critique of inequality, development, and the political economy of India.

My friend Silla (from Reykjavik, Iceland) and I spent twelve days in the middle of December 2025 in and near Kolkata, with my daughter, her husband, their two young daughters, visiting her husband's parents.

After several days of luxury at the Kolkata Hyatt Centric, and after visiting Kanishka's parents, we set off by taxi for the Taj resort at Raichak, 50 km south of central Kolkata. It turned out to be a two-hour traffic-soaked journey. On arrival we made an instant and shocking transition between two worlds.

Taj is a gated community of about 100 hectares and 400 staff, with opulence and service on a scale I have not encountered anywhere before. Photos on the wall of the main dining room show scenes from colonial life, including colonials and Indians proudly displaying dead tigers, and imperious colonials being transported in rickshaws propelled by four Indians, two in front, two behind.

We stayed at the Taj for three and a half days – always fascinating, partly enchanting. From our balcony, we looked out on a small tributary of the Hooghly (the branch of the Ganges that goes through Kolkata), where “traditional” boats carrying bricks and clay enter and unload, one after another, each boat carrying a crew of three, one to steer, one up front, and one invisible below bailing water – the observer sees only the arms, the bucket and the throw-out water coming every few seconds. (See video 1 below.) At the dock labourers (female and male) line up to place buckets of bricks or clay on their heads, walk ten meters, transfer to another, who walks ten meters and transfers – and on. (See video 2 below) Shocking, when pumps for bailing water have been

available for over 150 years and wheelbarrows available for 2,000 years. The contrast between our palatial conditions on the Taj balcony and that of the labourers within 100 meters was deeply unsettling.

No labourers were overweight; almost no Taj staff were either. The contrast with guests in condition seemed to mirror the broader inequalities on display. Many guests gave no, or only perfunctory, thanks to those who provided them with attentive service. The differences, and the indifferences, were glaring.

A high point was yoga at 7 – 8 am on the banks of the Hooghly/Ganges, just the three of us (though open to all), me, Silla, and daughter Imogen, with an excellent “spiritual yoga” teacher. “Calm your mind, feel the silence, focus on your toes ...”, he intoned, as a flock of honking geese chased a flock of squawking ducks around the lawn meters from where we stood.

It was a wake-up call for all three, to do more full-body stretches every day, not just “exercise” like running, swimming, gym.

The Taj magazine has an excerpt from William Dalrymple’s *The Gold Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*. Completely fascinating! It shows a map of where Roman gold coins have been unearthed. They have been found in many locations on the east coast of India, especially in Tamil country, and some on the east coast of Sri Lanka. And as far west as Morocco, and north to Hebrides, Norway and Denmark.

Returning the 50 kilometres from Raichak to central Kolkata took two and a half hours, so dense the cars, trishaws, scooters, bicycles, people, cows, dogs coming in all directions, using judgements of time and space finer than a thread. Air quality on the main roads of Kolkata and on the narrow two-lane Kolkata-Raichak “highway” is terrible – eyes sting, throats burn.

But off the main roads in Kolkata the air quality is surprisingly bearable, at least in the somewhat upmarket area of Hyatt hotel and the separate area where Kanishka’s parents live.

I have a strange resonance with India. First, because I lived in Andhra Pradesh, south of Hyderabad, for a total of about a year spread over several visits. I was doing development-related fieldwork in a town and a village (“The market for public office”, *World Development*, 1985, and *Village Republics: Economic Conditions for Collective Action in South India*, 1988.) Also, because I was conceived in Simla (summer capital of the British Raj), where my New Zealand parents married. They used Hindi or Bengali phrases in their conversation as we were growing up; Indian (also Afghani, Ceylonese) artefacts were scattered about the house.

This familiarity makes the *lack* of general prosperity over the past many decades all the more shocking to me. The average level of prosperity in Kolkata in 2025 seemed – impressionistically – the same as when I visited for my daughter’s wedding ten years before, 2015; and indeed, much the same as in Hyderabad (the city closest to my fieldwork site) in late 1970s.

But at least I saw no human-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata on this visit, in contrast to 10 years ago when there were still many. They have been replaced by rickshaws propelled by pollution-emitting combustion engines, adding to the air problem! Seeing this coexistence of extreme luxury and exhausting manual labour, at the edge of the Taj and again on the roads into Kolkata, I was led to think less about technology or capital than about education, and about how long-term failures in mass education make such contrasts seem normal and enduring.

India has refused to participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2009. In that year, India ranked 73 out of 74 countries on the PISA maths test for 15-year-olds. China was up at number two, even as it is ranked around 77th in (nominal) average income. But note that PISA allowed China a concession granted to no other country – to count only results from its four richest provinces. India's results underline how far mass education has lagged behind comparable countries. In my village of Karimudulla (population about 4,000) in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, some teachers at the primary school delegated their work to village stand-ins while they played gambling games.

Scenes like these recall questions that have long preoccupied development economists. The persistence of labour-intensive, physically punishing work alongside extreme affluence is not a puzzle of technology (pumps and wheelbarrows are readily available), but of political economy. Post-pandemic, India's growth – above 6% per year – has been one of the fastest of the major economies. What we saw from the Taj balcony was an unsettling reminder that averages conceal the contradictory fates of those far below and those far above the average.

Video 1. Boats bringing bricks and clay, with invisible water-bailer.

https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/gMwNvVTrbwI?si=0g1fIT7cPAjtU_JP

Video 2. More headloads. Why no wheelbarrows?

[youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3eTR1jap_M?si=L2xa-T61e0_r1Sm2&w=560&h=315]

Main image: Photo of Professor Wade swimming in one of Taj's infinity pools, Ganges in background.



The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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