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## Once there was a city

I was in Kolkata for Holi, pondering the fact that even if I wanted to join the merriment, I simply did not have enough close friends in the city to make it worth the while. This would not be true in Delhi, or Bangalore, but sadly, in the city where I grew up, the number of close friends I have could be counted on a single finger.

An excellent recent book by Ed Glaeser, modestly titled "Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier", offers an explanation for why my friends are all elsewhere. Ed is an urban economist at Harvard and a Boston friend (though not someone who, I think, will join me in playing Holi).

Ed starts from a puzzle--the improvements in information technology were supposed to have made physical proximity irrelevant (as I write I am chatting online with my son, who is upstairs), but somehow that has not spelt the death of the city. Urbanization is going apace, especially in the developing world, but even in the US. Why are people paying all the costs of urban living (expensive housing, polluted air, crowded streets) if closeness is moot?

Ed's answer to this is that the value of face time goes up when you are doing things that are more complex--the relevant ideas and concepts are that much harder to transmit in any other form. The reason cities are still growing is because our ideas are constantly getting more sophisticated and that is making bright people want to come together to talk and argue about them. This is reinforced by the fact that able and ambitious people like winning the big game, and the big game is where other able and ambitious people are: If you are a young musician who wants to make his mark, you want to be where all the great musicians are and it helps a lot to be actually seen and heard by them.

Ed probably does not know this (he describes Kolkata as one of the worst cities in the world, but then he spent only a day there, touring the slums, and knows nothing of the pleasures of *ilishmacch* or *adda*), but sixty years ago, this is what made Kolkata one of the great centers of Indian (dare I say, world?) culture. There was a time in the 1940s and 50s when almost every great in North Indian classical music, wherever they were originally from, maintained a home in Kolkata. The great instrumentalists Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Vilayat Khan and Nikhil Banerjee, and the great vocalists Amir Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali, and the senior Dagar brothers, would spend months there every year. They came to Kolkata not because of the (muggy) weather, but because everyone else to challenge and to learn from was there. This was also why the young Bhimsen Joshi came to Kolkata in the 1940s, and famously worked as a servant at the house of the movie star Pahari Sanyal--he wanted to be where the masters were.

Music was probably the place where this phenomenon was the clearest, in part because it is the least parochial of all the cultural forms. But painting had its own unique flowering in the same period (think Jamini Roy, Ramkinkar Baij, Ganesh Pyne), as did film, theater and the literary arts.

The problem is that if talent brings talent, the exodus of talent leads to more exoduses. My cohort grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Naxalite years, when communist rule was first on the horizon and then the status quo, when industry was constantly looking at the way out, like a woman on a date that has gone wrong... Our parents told us there was no hope in Bengal, and since we believed them, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. We all left in part because we knew that everyone else like us--ambitious, well-educated, middle class children--was also planning to leave and--this is where Ed is exactly right--we wanted to be where we would get to work and play with people like us.

But there were other forces as well. The 1970s is also the period where the joint family really starts coming apart, at least among urban middle Bengalis. Young people wanted their own apartments but nice affordable apartments were not easy to find in Kolkata. This was, as Ed emphasizes, a direct consequence of the kind of land-use regulation that we inherited from the British--regulation that is aimed at keeping buildings short. Ed argues in the book, and I wholly agree, this is both against the common man and anti-environment, because it reduces the supply of apartments in center city and forces most people to live in distant suburbs and spend the whole day in buses or trains, commuting, which is, of course, also why it is anti-environment.

To make matters worse, this was in the days before the city started building quality infrastructure on its margins, so most places a young couple could move to were far and poorly served. No wonder many of them preferred to leave the city altogether.

Between 1981 to 2001, Kolkata was the slowest growing of the top 35 cities in India: The young and the restless are the ones who start new firms and manage old ones, so once they left there was nothing to hold industry back. Something similar, I fear, could happen to Mumbai, another city afflicted by an irrational fear of heights: As Gurgaon grows and becomes less of a bedroom and more of a community, would young people still be willing to pay Mumbai's absurd prices or bear its punishing commutes? Without a concerted effort to change building rules to allow really tall buildings in South and Central Mumbai (and deal with the implications of that for the already dire traffic situation), Mumbai could go the way of Kolkata.

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\*The views expressed by the author are personal.

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