



Towards a Genealogy of Suburbs in India

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ABSTRACT

Much of the recent transformation of Indian cities has occurred in the edges of the city. In the last two decades the housing market has flourished in the peripheries of cities, swallowing up vast tracts of the erstwhile countryside and displacing a large number of owners and tillers of rural land. The process has frequently involved violent confrontation between the state and the peasantry over expropriation of rural land. As metropolitan boundaries expand and morph into a new vision of suburbia, it continues to inform us about the changing dynamics of class relations in India and the fragile relation between city and country. There are two intriguing aspects of this new suburbia. First, is the contradiction between the model it seems to be espousing, that of the Anglo-American suburb, and the physical form it is taking. Second, is the changing conception of the city edge that the new development appears to have embraced, that in some respects marks a rupture from past practices? Yet there are conditions and techniques that endure, not least being the difficulty of subordinating the surrounding countryside to the control of the state and municipality. In this paper I plan to address some key 19th and early 20th century developments in the fringes of Calcutta to plot out some of these difficulties and locate their significance within a larger history of Indian suburban development. It would, I suggest, help understand the distinctiveness of the genealogy of Indian suburbs.

KEY WORDS: Suburbs, social geography, colonialism, India.