

## Conference

### City as the Southern Question

13-14 November 2024, The Sonnet, Kolkata

Calcutta Research Group and Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna

#### **Title:**

Who buys? Who sells? Understanding the changing contours of property in Kolkata

#### **Abstract:**

Scholars have noted that from the 1990s, Kolkata experienced urban restructuring as ‘the city began to figure more prominently in Left Front politics’ and the state government turned towards investing heavily in new infrastructures such as fly-overs, highways, and bridges; thereby ‘intending to garner support from a new force in post-liberalization in India, the middle class consumer citizen, in order to stay in power’ (Donner 2012:132). Several public-private partnerships were introduced to attract investors and develop the city. Roy (2002:10) observed that middle-class housing developments on agricultural land were sponsored by the Left Front government and the rural-urban interface became the territoriality of liberalization in the state. In 2011, things changed when people voted for Trinamool Congress (TMC) which marked the end of an era. With TMC coming to power, several people shifted their allegiance and started working for the newly elected government. However, in recent years, the political situation has been experiencing newer challenges from the Center.

The paper draws from qualitative fieldwork conducted in Kolkata between 2017 and 2018 to sociologically study the city's changing property relations among the middle classes. During fieldwork, it was observed that varied transformations—cityscape, built structure, residents in the locality, and so on—were often murky and involved a close relationship between the real estate developers and ‘local men’ affiliated with political parties. This may be considered as the darker side of the process of buying and selling a property but it is also an indispensable part of this entire story. Here through empirical data, I argue that the state capacity is two-fold. On the one hand, the state becomes a mere spectator who only observes these urban transformations unfold. For instance, when several pockets of wetlands along the E. M. Bypass are illegally converted into urban land suitable for real estate construction, sometimes even by going against the Ramsar Convention. On the other hand, through various public-private partnerships, the state is making interventions to meet housing delivery on those converted lands. Therefore, I argue that who is buying and who is selling urban properties in Kolkata can become a significant entry point to understand the city as a southern question.