



HUMANITY'S URBAN FUTURE

AN OVERVIEW OF RANABIR SAMADDAR'S CIFAR FELLOWSHIP ACTIVITIES

A REPORT

A NOTE ON PAST ACTIVITIES (2024-25)

The protean nature of Southern cities is best captured through an inter-disciplinary, multi-sectoral approach, one that considers infrastructural developments, dynamics of work, leisure, and consumption, factors determining access to resources and spaces, and the question of representations, over which there are continuous struggles and contestations. An examination of how such cities are made and re-made through time and the socio-historical circumstances of this material and symbolic production become crucial in imagining what the future of these cities could look like.

For CIFAR's 'Humanity's Urban Future' project, the aim of **CIFAR Fellow Prof. Ranabir Samaddar** has been, since 2024, to unpack, map, and critically analyse the dynamic and layered processes of urban developments and transformations in Kolkata and beyond. To this effect, a number of programmes were undertaken under the guidance of Prof. Samaddar by Research Assistant **Poushali Basak** and others at the Calcutta Research Group (CRG), between 2024-25:

- A series of **eight public lectures** titled '[City Lights](#)' was organised between September 2024 and May 2025 across various parts of Kolkata, in an attempt to make research more accessible to the general public.
- A two-month online **certificate course** on '[Making and Unmaking of Cities](#)' was organised in February-March 2025, drawing participation from research scholars, teachers, journalists, professionals, social, legal, media and urban rights activists. The lectures from this course have been uploaded on the Calcutta Research Group's [YouTube channel](#).



Image 1: City Lights lecture series poster



Image 2: Poster of the online course

- Two **research reports**:
 - '[Dream Deferred: Girl Child Education in post-Covid Kolkata](#)' by Poushali Basak (published by CRG) and
 - '[Ecology, Extraction, City: The Making and Unmaking of Kolkata and Its Hinterland](#)' by Shatabdi Das, Samaresh Guchhait, and Ranabir Samaddar (published by Frontpage) were completed as a part of the fellowship activities.



Image 2: Dream Deferred by Poushali Basak

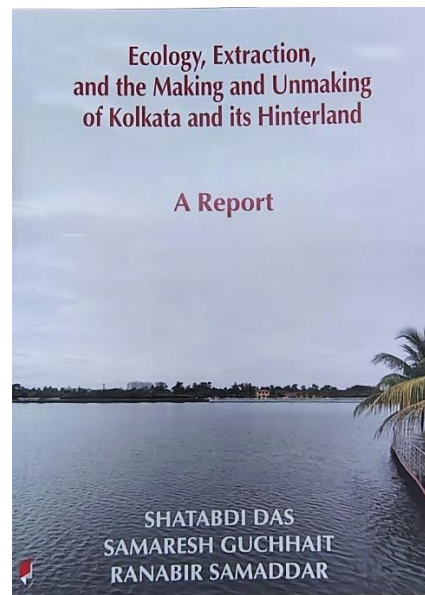


Image 3: Cover of the research report published by Frontpage

- A two-day **conference** on '[City as the Southern Question](#)' was organised in November 2024, the proceedings of which have been compiled into an **edited book volume** titled 'The City as the Southern Question: Alternative Histories of Urbanisation After Gramsci', edited by Ranabir Samaddar, Enrica Morlicchio, and Sandro Mezzadra, and published by Routledge in December 2025.

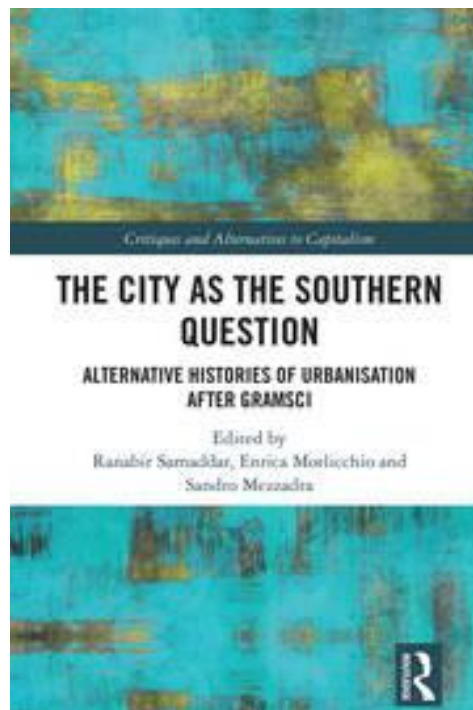


Image 4: Book cover, City as the Southern Question

IN CONTINUATION OF THE AFOREMENTIONED PROGRAMMES, THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES HAVE BEEN UNDERTAKEN AS A PART OF THE CIFAR FELLOWSHIP IN 2025-26:

- **An ongoing study on urban planning in Kolkata and its exclusions by Madhubanti Talukdar:** Madhubanti Talukdar is a researcher at CRG, working under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Ranabir Samaddar. In this study, she employs a combination of archival research and discourse analysis to explore the intersections between urban planning, socio-political transformation, and systemic exclusion, with a focus on housing in Calcutta/Kolkata since the mid-1960s. In addition to planning documents, the study looks at newspaper and magazine reports, scholarly articles and books, policy papers, and legislations.

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Calcutta Research Group's Tenth Annual Research and Orientation Workshop in November 2025. The full paper is to be included in an edited volume of reflections on Kolkata, which is currently under development.

- **Online course on 'Urban Futures in South and Southeast Asia':** From the 17th of January to the 7th of March 2026, the Calcutta Research Group, in collaboration with the Center on Gender and Forced Displacement at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, organised a 16-hour online course on '[Urban Futures in South and Southeast Asia](#)'. Coordinated by Madhubanti Talukdar, Dr. Samata Biswas, and colleagues at AIT, the course used the 'urban future' as a critical lens to examine how cities exist, thrive, and negotiate challenges, faultlines, rupture and collapse. Throughout the duration of the course, the 'future' was understood to be multiple and contested – a concept beyond the temporal – practiced, fashioned and refashioned in the present, and hence a field of contention and struggle.

This year, the course was designed around six key themes:

- a. The political histories of subaltern classes and their demands for a humane and just urban order
- b. The experience of public disasters, and the solidarities of care and mutual protection that arise in response
- c. The literary, artistic, and cultural imagination of a desirable city
- d. The visions of planners and administrators shaped by intergovernmental aid, investment, and public-private partnerships
- e. The presence of refugees, migrants, and outsiders lending cities a plural and cosmopolitan character in tension with nativist claims
- f. The evolution of an urban economy in place of the industrial economy, and the central role played by informal economies and public finance in shaping these trajectories

The course included a set of **thirty-two participants** from diverse backgrounds – graduate students, researchers, lecturers, architects, and urban practitioners – representing **fourteen countries** of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. The lectures were delivered by 16 distinguished resource persons from India, Nepal, Thailand, United Kingdom, and Belgium. Each of these 16 sessions was accompanied by spirited discussions and engaging Q&A sessions, offering further insights on the lectures.

A week before each lecture, a set of readings and resources were shared through a Google Classroom link. Participants were encouraged to engage with resource persons through questions and comments. Each participant was also required to complete a creative assignment before the conclusion of the course, with the option to submit an essay, a photo story, poem, book/film review, infographic, poster, video clip, zine, or any other creative work related to one or more themes of the course. The course completion certificates were handed out after careful consideration of participants' attendance and evaluation of their assignments.



Image 10: Poster of the online course on 'Urban Futures'

- **The Tenth Annual Research and Orientation Workshop, November 2025:** [The Tenth Annual Research and Orientation workshop](#) of the Calcutta Research Group titled 'Cities Migrants and Insecurities' was organised from 18th to 22nd November, 2025 in Kolkata, in collaboration with the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR), the European Master in Migration and Intercultural Relations (EMMIR), and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR). Designed as a combination of online and offline segments, the workshop explored cities as spaces of opportunities, possibilities, contentions, vulnerability, and conflict, by examining the intersections between migration and gender, caste, class, and ecological and epidemiological crises. The workshop was divided into three modules, each led by their respective module coordinators:

- a. Gender and Urban Insecurities
- b. Climate, Epidemiological Insecurities and the City, and
- c. Migrants, Insecurities and Sanctuary Cities

15 participants from India and Nepal participated in the five-day residential workshop, in addition to six EMMIR students. Other than paper presentations, creative sessions, and module lectures, the workshop included:

- a. An inaugural lecture by Prof. Mahalaya Chatterjee on 'The Future of the Metropolis: The Kolkata Case'.
- b. A special lecture on 'Exclusionary Urban Zoning: The Limits and Potential of European Human Rights Law' by Prof. Thomas Spijkerboer.

- c. A second special lecture on ‘Living the climate crisis in Darjeeling’ by Roshan Rai.
- d. A film screening of *Calcutta: A Migrant City*, directed by Saibal Mitra in 2019, and
- e. A book discussion on Ranabir Samaddar’s *Biopolitics from Below: Crisis, Conjuncture, Rupture*, published by CEU Press in 2025.

The last day of the workshop featured presentations from EMMIR students, followed by the valedictory lecture on ‘Climate Hazards, Cities and Urban Poor’, delivered by social worker, activist, and urban practitioner Anita Patil Deshmukh. The best two papers presented at this workshop were awarded the CIFAR-CRG Award for ‘Humanity’s Urban Future’.



Image 5: At the Tenth Annual Research and Orientation Workshop, November 2025: Hotel Sojourn, Kolkata

- **In-house discussion with Prof. Shalini Randeria:** On the 10th of January, 2026, anthropologist and sociologist Prof. Shalini Randeria was invited to the CRG office for an in-house discussion on ‘*The (Un)Making of Policy in the Shadow of World Bank: Entangled Legalities, Accountability and Resettlement in Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP)*’. Randeria’s work, bridging the anthropologies of policy, development, and law with urban studies in the context of the World Bank-funded Mumbai Urban Transport Project, demonstrated how complex, entangled legalities at the local, national, and international levels, ambiguity in policy implementation, and the government’s tendency to disperse power and dilute responsibility had the combined effect of weakening citizen’s rights and dispossessing the urban poor. As thousands of displaced people demanded resettlement according to World Bank policies, the Maharashtra government played the role of the ‘cunning state’, claiming to have had no choice while accepting policy terms, citing weakness and incapacity when it came to implementation, and evading responsibility by leaving policy implementation to a network of NGOs and private real estate developers. The talk highlighted how different policy actors – the World Bank, the MUTP project authority, the Maharashtra government, NGOs, and private real estate developers – with unclear and sometimes overlapping responsibilities and jurisdictions, created a complex maze of institutions and legalities that citizens were forced to navigate, while policy decisions were taken behind closed doors without any participation of those who were affected by the project. The design and implementation of the project and ensuing events was a case of donor-driven norms fragmenting territory and sovereignty, the paradoxical erosion of citizen’s rights with the proliferation of legal mechanisms, and the emergence of inspection and surveillance as an important part of modern democracy.

- CRG-CIFAR Photography Awards, January 2026:** Under the CIFAR Fellowship activities, the Calcutta Research Group announced a Photography Competition in July 2025 on the theme ‘Migrants, Kolkata and Insecurities’. Applicants were requested to submit photo essays exploring the themes of identity, belonging, and displacement in urban spaces by foregrounding the experiences of migrants in the city. Soumyadeep Ghosh’s [poignant exploration](#) of ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’ through the story of Mr. Sheng Hsiung Liao – a man of Chinese descent brought up in Kolkata – deftly highlighted conflict, class disparity, urban transformation, and the politics of citizenship, and was adjudged the winner of the competition and presented with the CIFAR-CRG Photography Award in January 2026. The runner-up of the competition was Sudip Maiti, whose [evocative set of photographs](#), centring on the figure of the hand-rickshaw puller, looked at the intersections between the body, labour, and insecurity in Kolkata.



Image 9: The CRG-CIFAR Photography Award being presented to Soumyadeep Ghosh by Prof. Shalini Randeria

- A Manifesto for our Urban Future:** Written by Prof. Ranabir Samaddar, and published jointly by Srijan Prakashani and the Calcutta Research Group (CRG), the [manifesto](#) puts forward the argument that humanity’s urban future shall depend on the way in which urban future is forged in the Global South, and that the general trends and characteristics of Southern cities will influence and shape the overall urban condition of the world.
- A comprehensive list of CRG’s holdings (books and documents)** related to ‘city’ and ‘urban’ was prepared jointly by Madhubanti Talukdar and Lina Dey. This list, containing books, links to journal articles, research papers, research reports, videos of lecture series, and blog posts, has been put up on the CRG website, and was circulated among the participants of the research and orientation workshop, CIFAR’s HUF conclave, and the online course.
- CIFAR’s Humanity’s Urban Future Programme, January 2026:** The HUF meeting in Kolkata centred around rethinking urban futures through the entangled relationship between Death and Life, understood relationally rather than as binaries, in order to explore questions of habitability, power, and survival in cities at a time when both places and conditions of life are being radically transformed. Across sessions, Death and Life emerged as analytical lenses to examine how cities are made, unmade, and remade through disruptions, inequality, violence, infrastructure, governance, and everyday practices, and how life persists, or could persist, within conditions of decay, exclusion or abandonment.

The conclave included **two panels on Kolkata**, titled ‘Logistical Kolkata’ and ‘Gender and Subaltern Life and Labour in the City’. In the first, the speakers, Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, and Iman Mitra examined the intersections between inter-community relations, communal violence, and urban reconstruction in Kolkata, and the role of the Kolkata port in making and remaking the city, and its relationship with cross-border labour movements, capital flows, and politico-economic processes. In the second panel, the speakers Paula Banerjee, Debarati Bagchi, and Samata Biswas explored the relationships between sex work and the city, the role of community schools in the making of subaltern neighbourhoods, and the intersections between subaltern agency, gender security and urban space through an analysis of an urban protest movement.

Two **field trips** were arranged by the Calcutta Research Group as a part of the CIFAR HUF conclave. The first involved a glimpse of the Bengal Renaissance and its role in making the city, including a visit to poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s ancestral house in Jorasanko, a passing view of the house of the distinguished actor, playwright and director Girish Chandra Ghosh, and the Belur Math and Dakshineswar temple. The second field visit involved taking a ride into the East Kolkata Wetlands, the waste processing and recycling centres of the city at Dhapa, and the Bantala leather complex. This trip was arranged to provide visitors a glimpse into the ‘logistical city’ – where flows of materials, goods, and waste intersect with processes of recycling and reuse, often beyond the boundaries of formal infrastructure, thereby offering insights into the intricate networks of informal trade, labour, demand and supply that underlie vast metropolises like Kolkata.

SOME GLIMPSES OF THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE



Jorasanko Thakurbari
The ancestral home and birthplace of the poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the Jorasanko Thakurbari is an iconic landmark in the city and houses the Rabindra Bharati University and Museum. It also served as the residence of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, the founders of the Bengal School of Art. The building stands as a testament to the Tagore family’s unparalleled contributions to the Bengal Renaissance and the shaping of India’s cultural and intellectual identity.



The house of Girish Chandra Ghosh
Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) is considered to be one of the pioneers of modern theatre in India. He was a distinguished actor, acting coach, playwright and director, and one of the first to introduce female actors to the Indian stage. Despite protests from elites and intellectuals of the 19th century, he trained sex workers to act on the stage. Binodini Dashi and Tinkari Dashi were the most memorable actresses of Girish’s time, hailing from the Sonagachi red light district, located near Girish Chandra’s house.



Dakshineswar Temple
Home to a 170-year-old temple dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Kali (also referred to as Bhabatarini), along with a set of 12 Shiva temples, Dakshineswar is known for its association with Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, one of the most illustrious socio-religious icons of 19th-century Calcutta. Despite lacking formal training in modern education or knowledge, Ramakrishna attracted a diverse range of disciples across castes and classes, owing to his ability to communicate complex philosophical ideas in simple language, and his message of inclusivity, tolerance, and harmony. Built on the riverbanks of the sacred Ganga, Dakshineswar is also popular for having been built by a female landlord of Calcutta, Rani Rashmoni, who belonged to the fishing community and gained much prominence for resisting against the British East India Company’s imposition of fishing taxes. She was a businesswoman, philanthropist and social reformer, who managed to earn the title of ‘Lokmata’ (Mother of the People) due to her defiance of caste and Brahmanical patriarchy. The temple follows the nine-spire style of temple architecture, and is one of the most notable icons associated with the city.



Belur Math
Established in 1897, the Belur Math was one of the primary philanthropic missions in India built by a group of disciples of Ramakrishna and headed by Swami Vivekananda, another icon of 19th-century Bengal. A philosopher and social reformer, Vivekananda attended the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893, introducing Hinduism to the world through a speech that earned him international fame and recognition. In 1897, he built the Ramakrishna Mission with the aim of spreading knowledge and the ideology of service for the poor and distressed. The organisation gradually attained exceptional prominence in the socio-religious and cultural landscape of not only Bengal but India as a whole. The Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math have, and continue to play a significant role in social welfare since the pre-independence period.

Image 6: Flyer for the first field trip, ‘Glimpses of the Bengal Renaissance’

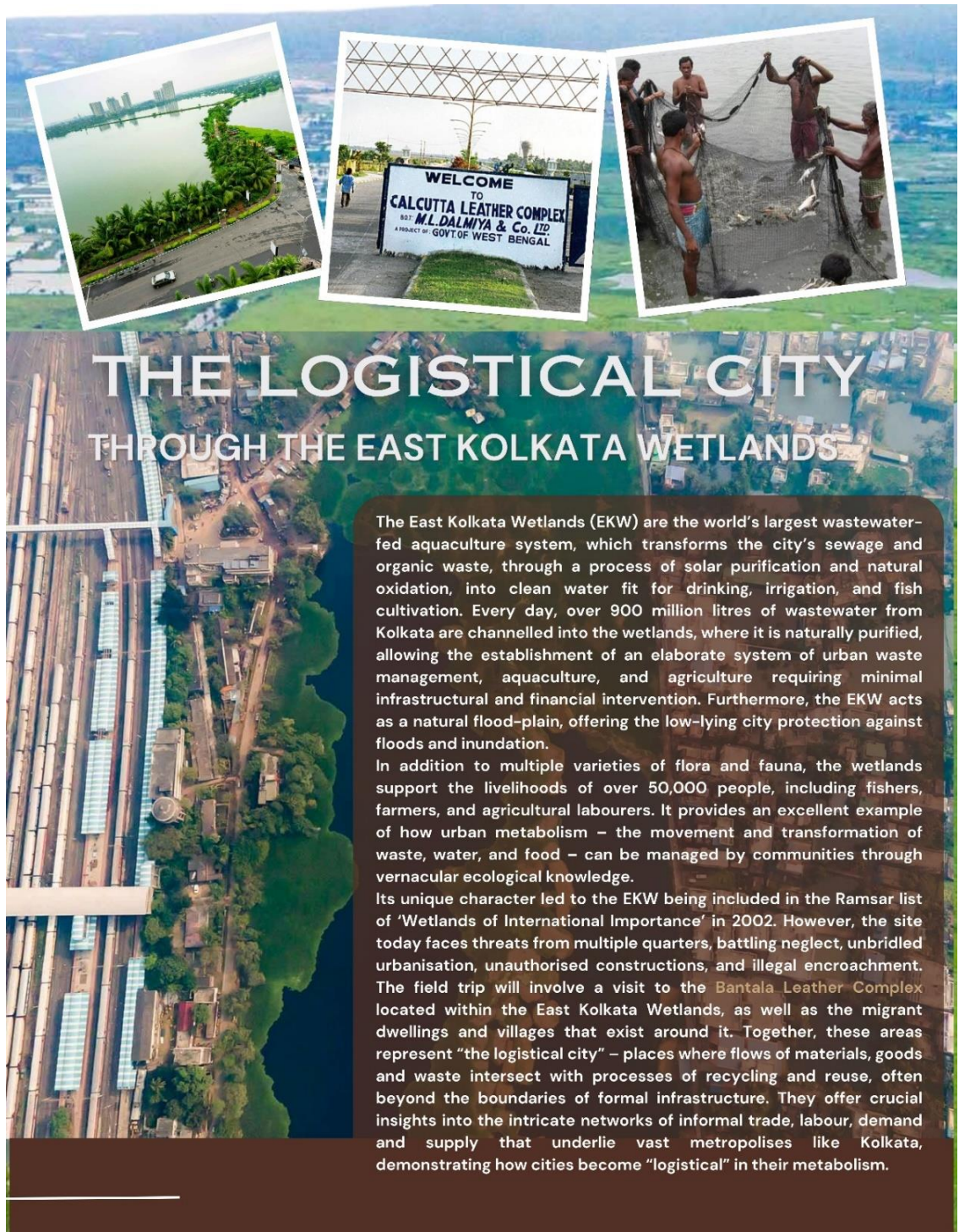


Image 7: Flyer for the second field trip, 'Logistical Kolkata'.

Two film screenings, of [Calcutta: A Migrant City \(2019\)](#) and *Jana Aranya* (1975) were arranged as part of the conclave.

- **Calcutta: A Migrant City**, directed by Saibal Mitra in 2019 and produced by the Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, is a film that looks at the many histories of migration that make up the city of Kolkata, highlighting the crucial role played by migrants in building and sustaining the city, and addressing their marginalization in mainstream urban history.

- **Jana Aranya**, directed by Satyajit Ray in 1975, is a classic portrayal of middle-class life in 1970s Calcutta. It is a story of the many uncertainties that accompanied the massive socio-economic upheaval and political turbulence of the times, and an exploration of moral degeneration and loss of innocence, making it an invaluable resource in understanding the city and its present disposition.



Image 8: Film posters – ‘Jana Aranya’ and ‘Calcutta: A Migrant City’

A **photo exhibition** was organised as part of the conclave, which included:

- Dipanwita Saha’s [“Trail of Blood: Calcutta Riots of 1946 and its Aftermath”](#), a product of the collaboration between Calcutta Research Group and the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, aimed at memorialising the 1946 riots of Kolkata through the creation of a photographic archive of people, spaces, and landmarks associated with the event.
- The winning entries of the CIFAR-CRG photography competition were also displayed as part of the same exhibition.

FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

The following activities have been planned for the year ahead:

- An **edited volume**, containing a set of **essays and reflections on Kolkata** is in the process of being prepared as a part of the CIFAR fellowship activities. Divided into eight chapters, this book shall delve into the many facets and features of the city's diverse and rapidly transforming urban landscape, including its history of subaltern movements and contestations over urban space, the intersections between social justice and climate change, the relationship between neoliberal urbanism and globalisation and their connection to informal economy and public finance, and the city's cultural evolution and cosmopolitanism, through a lens of art, literature, migration, and food.
- At least 4 **book discussions** on the recently published 'The City as the Southern Question: Alternative Histories of Urbanisation After Gramsci' have been lined up for 2026.
- A number of **discussions** on Ranabir Samaddar's '**Manifesto for the Urban Future**' are currently being planned in multiple cities across the world: Bologna, Athens, London, Bangkok, Seoul, Kolkata, and Mumbai. The global release of the manifesto is to be held online, on the 2nd of May, 2026.