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Paper Title

**The world is not flat.
The dream of linear progress and existential multiplicities of a 'globalized' town in
transition (1985-2012) - the case of *Gurgaon* (India)**

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Abstract

Gurgaon [गुडगाँव] is a metathesis of *Gurugram* [गुरुग्राम] which means the guru's village. Located in the *Ahirwal* region of Haryana, the countryside surrounding it is dominated by the erstwhile cattle keeping agriculturist *Yadav* community. Located twenty kilometers south of Delhi, Gurgaon is skirted by the picturesque *Aravali* hills on its east and south east boundary. *Dronacharya* is said to have tutored the *Kurus* here during the days of the *Mahabharata*. The British placed a garrison, built the civil lines and developed a new market in Gurgaon for strategic reasons after 1857. Although planned urbanization in the *Haryana* state began after 1966, Gurgaon remained unknown to most Indians till the 1980s. Progress and small towns like Gurgaon, where time either stood still or changed too imperceptibly to be noticed, were antithetical in the Indian imagination of modernity till globalization arrived. The establishment of the Indo-Japanese automobile and motorcycle plants, and rapid growth of Gurgaon as an affordable suburb of Delhi in the mid 1980s, made it the fastest growing town of *Haryana*. Globalization, unleashed since 1991, transformed the demography, industry, urbanization and environment of this erstwhile agrarian backwater. The urbanization of Gurgaon has spilled over into places like *Manesar*, *Dharuhera*, *Rewari* and *Bhiwadi* which have become the suburbs of Gurgaon in record time ! Globalization has caused the emulation of the Gurgaon model throughout India. My paper has two objectives in the above mentioned context. First it interrogates the discourse of globalization and modernity with which the town's name has become synonymous. Second, it attempts a contemporary visual narrative of Gurgaon with the assistance of oral history. This supplements the text, and questions the apotheosis of modernity,

by highlighting the historical multiplicities of Gurgaon usually glossed over by the bourgeois discourse of globalization. Gurgaon has been chosen as the topic of this paper because it is characteristic of the rapid concentration of wealth and money promoted by capitalist globalization on one hand and the social disparity of third world urbanization, with multiple cultural times co-existing with modernized western notions of time, on the other. The contemporary importance of the city can be gauged from the fact that after Delhi and Mumbai it has the highest per capita income in India and generates more than half of the Haryana state's revenues. The rise, and likely fall, of Gurgaon as a model of comprador cosmopolitan urbanization superimposed upon a largely rural landscape and society offers an excellent opportunity to the social scientist to develop a practically demonstrated critique of corporate urbanization. This paper is critical of globalization without being a doomsday prediction for the National Capital Region (NCR). It highlights the problems of urbanization in contemporary India. It is predicated on the fact that the rent seeking Indian state and an unethical private sector have created this urban dream together. The dream is probably working for a few thousands who rake in the profits but for the hundreds of thousands of middle class and poor people, the forests and wild-life habitat and the *environment* in general it has already soured in myriad ways.

Why Gurgaon ?

The choice of Gurgaon is determined by the following reasons. *First*, Gurgaon has been the fastest growing urban conglomerate in the NCR and Haryana since 1991-92. Census figures tell, that between 1991-92 and 2011-12, Gurgaon almost registered a nine fold growth compared with Faridabad which only grew two fold in the same period. Gurgaon's growth and wealth can be assessed by the fact that it alone raises about fifty percent of the Haryana Government's total revenue. *Second*, contemporary Gurgaon displays an urban duality typical of most third world urbanization. Gurgaon is, primarily, a rich man's dream to which the poor are marginal at best. In Gurgaon the most sophisticated and expensive residential condominiums and commercial buildings of India coexist with the usual squalor and surplus extraction characteristic of working class life in south Asia. *Third*, the author has lived almost continuously in Gurgaon since 1992. Before this, he regularly rode and drove to Gurgaon between 1986 and 1992 generally from the Mehrauli side. In those days the Mehrauli-Gurgaon (MG) and Faridabad-Gurgaon (FG) roads were narrow two lane roads full of potholes and cattle let loose by the peasants who lived in the villages lining these roads and dotting the Aravali range. Outsiders usually avoided these death traps after dusk because of the risk of being molested by the bands of local youths. The author's memories of a town in demographic transition and his close observation of the rich and poor in Gurgaon from the perspective of a historian located within the middle class are significant to this paper in every possible ways.

The immediate historical context of contemporary third world urbanization

A perceptive essay on imperialism and colonialism, which re-emphasizes the conquest of knowledge as the most lasting achievement of the modern Western colonial powers, asserts that

the native always arrives late on the stage of history¹. Following the political decolonization initiated by the breakdown of western colonialism during the Second World War the race to 'catch up with the West' became a serious national project among the ruling elites of the erstwhile colonies. Among the scores of newly independent countries which joined this race only a select few possibly managed to 'catch up' while the rest fell behind to become the devastated victims of a Cold War the effects of which can still be felt and seen in Africa, Asia and South America. Finally the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union subverted decolonization and created a new unstable world order dominated by western capitalist countries led by the United States of America. The end of the USSR led to the weakening of socialism and the decline of the mixed economy experiment attempted in third world countries like India. The long term recession in the world markets which started after the end of the post World War II boom during the 1970s and the implosion of the USSR following its defeat in Afghanistan created a serious economic crisis in the underdeveloped world. By the mid 1980s the 'development consensus' in the majority of developing countries gave way to the 'Washington consensus' and Western imperialism assumed the economic form of 'structural adjustment' popularly known as globalization. Globalization signifies crucial political shifts in the discourse of economics – the shift from development to growth, from state to market, from public to private, from welfare to profit, from labor to capital and from citizen to consumer.

Nowhere in India are these shifts more visible than in the urban spaces created by the collusion of the state and big capital during the last twenty years. The urban master plans of globalized India, the super profits made by the real estate companies at the expense of citizens and the public exchequer alike, the revision of rules and regulations in the interest of the builder lobby and *against* the possible provision of affordable housing to the poor and the lower middle class and the consistent favoritism showed to the private sector by the state in all matters urban and rural underline the growth of boom towns like Gurgaon².

Gurgaon and the problematic of south Asian modernity

Till the early 1980s, when the real estate spillover from south Delhi into Haryana began, Gurgaon rarely figured in the imagination of the average Delhi resident. The first time I paid attention to Gurgaon was when a friend's uncle died in a road accident on the Faridabad-Gurgaon road during the mid 1970s. People in Delhi spoke more often of Faridabad than Gurgaon and in united Punjab, old men have told me, the former was supposed to have had a greater future. After all Faridabad is located on the Delhi-Agra route – an old and busy artery of trade and commerce. People from Delhi regularly visited the Badhkal Lake in the Faridabad region for winter picnics and the annual handicrafts fair organized by the Haryana government in Surajkund. Comparatively speaking, fewer people went to Gurgaon. Those who did commute between Gurgaon and Delhi everyday left no imprint on the urban imagination of Delhi residents. Even today there is no dearth of people in Delhi who believe that Gurgaon is called so because of its connection with sugar and sugarcane. No doubt, in common parlance, the word Gurgaon is *Gudgaon* [*Gud* or *gur* means jaggery made of sugarcane juice]. When you enter

¹ Vinay Lal, *Empire and the Dream-Work of America*, Dissenting Knowledge Pamphlet Series (No.4), Multiversity and Citizens International, Penang and Goa.

² For more on this see Shalini Singh, 'Behind Haryana land boom, the Midas touch of Hooda', *The Hindu*, 31 October, 2012.

Gurgaon in the elevated Metro on the Yellow Line the first station in the town is called *Guru Dronacharya*. This is so because Gurgaon is actually *Gurugram*, the village of Dronacharya the legendary Guru of the Kurus. Small insignificant towns like Gurgaon have become cities *because* of globalization which is supposed to be the apotheosis of modernity according to the dominant discourse of our times. Gurgaon entered our imagination and consciousness at the time when we saw the Maruti 800 on Indian roads during the mid 1980s. By the late 1980s huge trailer trucks drove out of the Maruti Udyog Limited factory loaded with Maruti Suzuki vehicles almost every day. Thus Gurgaon entered the national consciousness of the Indian middle class. The real estate boom, setting up of various factories in Gurgaon's Udyog Vihar and call centre outsourcing happened later during the period of globalization.

In the media Gurgaon is a *happening* place because of its glittering malls, brand new hotels, high rise condominiums, cyber cities and the Kingdom of Dreams. It will soon have a monorail and then the real comparison with its South East Asian cousins will begin. From the elevated Metro and the flyovers on the NH8 Gurgaon does appear like a successful dream of modern endeavor. The photo-history underpinning this paper highlights the poverty, environmental degradation, high pollution, absence of civic amenities and poor infrastructure in Gurgaon. It examines the impact of urbanization on the environment in today's Gurgaon.

Does a single historical time prevail in Gurgaon ?

Modernity creates the illusion of urban uniformity and the universal acceptance of bourgeois linear time. Contemporary Gurgaon demonstrates that the time rhythm of the popular domain characteristic of a pre-modern civilization survives and becomes the form of working class resistance to the bourgeois in a geographical and demographic space transformed by globalization. Without its working class no city can function but working class resistance to the very process on which it depends for sustenance is perhaps the most interesting aspect of modern urbanization. Notions and use of time is crucial to this resistance. The power of this resistance is the greatest where the working class is unorganized – i.e. the informal sector. The great majority of the working class in Gurgaon is unorganized and therefore does not enjoy even the limited benefits of unionization. A notion of time deriving legitimacy from its pre-capitalist past is the informal working class' chief weapon against the bourgeois domination of urban time in the absence of trade unions and working class parties. This subaltern interpretation of time inserts the element of 'inefficiency' and 'backwardness' into the discipline of urban modernity preferred by the anxious bourgeois sections of the population.