

Becoming a City: Kochi in Transformation

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Pharis Abubaker, a controversial businessman hailing from North Kerala, in a Television interview¹ in 2007, quipped that Kerala has no city and this has deterred business. The observation opened up for me a lot of questions about the spatiality of the state. This paper tries to map the recent shifts in ways of imagining Kochi and the changes in its spatial form. It attempts to understand the transformation of Kochi 'from a small town to a city'. This process of transition is a contested one and is still on. It involves reimagining Kochi in terms of urban forms and practices. I attempt to trace the transformation of Kochi by looking at changes in the urban form, real and imagined. It explores the idea of 'cityness' in policy documents and discursive practices around Kochi's development. Through this, I seek to critique previous conceptualizations of Kerala as 'rururban' or as a rural-urban continuum. I argue that the 'rururban' spatial form of Kerala is being consistently challenged by contemporary discursive and material processes. These material processes rely significantly on the movements of global and local capital and migrant labour. The complex interlinkages between urban transformation and migration can only be comprehended if we cease to define urban transformation only in terms of population movements. The process of becoming a city is governed by material and discursive practices which also govern the movement of labour. Migrants contribute to the changing geography of the city. This geography is reflected in terms of the inequalities that etch the city space in terms of ghettoisation and segregation of migrants as well as in terms of the labour they contribute to build the city - skyscrapers, roads, flyovers and shopping malls. Migration shapes and

¹ Kairali TV. Interview with Pharis Abubaker by John Brittas. Telecast on 1 & 2 August 2007.

is shaped by these material practices. The paper is an attempt to trace these contested transformations in material and discursive practices.

Section I discusses the literature on the nature of urbanization in Kerala and emphasizes the need for an alternative approach. Section II examines theoretical literature on city and urban transformation. Section III looks into the discursive practices around Kochi and attempts to understand the change in material practices in the city. Section IV traces the conflicts and contests that mark this transformation by examining the case of a port project. Section III and IV builds upon a critical reading of news and policy documents and ethnographic fieldwork. Section V concludes the discussion.