

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATE

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City of Joy

* Post of the Month





Kolkata

From mountains to swamps,
consular district teems
with diversity

BY DOUGLAS KELLY AND MOULIK BERKANA

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1 Political/economic officer Matthew Asada visits the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya, Bihar, where Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, attained enlightenment. *Photo by Tinku Roy*

2 The Nakhoda mosque is one of the most important in Kolkata. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

3 Foreign Service National employee Nilotpala Sin assists a new member of the American Library. One of Kolkata's most popular institutions, the library hosts seminars, workshops and debates throughout the year. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

4 Kolkata is the only city in India that features trams as part of the daily commute. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

5 Consul General Beth Payne meets students at the Badshah Khan Girls High School. *Photo by Rafique Anwar*

6 Public Affairs Officer Doug Kelly stands near the Howrah Bridge, which spans the Hooghly River. Much of the daily life of the city—commerce, transport and even worship—centers upon the river, a branch of the Ganges. *Photo by Melissa Pitotti*

Kolkata, India, a dynamic metropolis of more than 15 million people that sprawls for more than 20 miles on both banks of the Hooghly River, defies every effort at categorization. A relatively new city in an ancient land, Kolkata (or Calcutta, as it was known until 2001) was the capital of the British Empire in South Asia from 1772 until the early 20th century, when the capital was shifted to New Delhi. When India and Pakistan came into being after the Partition in 1947, Kolkata found itself cut off from much of its hinterland, which became East Pakistan and, in 1971, Bangladesh.

Kolkata is now the capital of the state of West Bengal and the main urban center for all of eastern India, an area that is home to 300 million people. The grand architecture, replete with seemingly countless buildings in varying states of repair dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, makes for a fascinating cityscape and reflects Kolkata's past importance as the center of British power in Asia. Today, Kolkata is again on the move, with a growing information technology sector and an active effort by local governments to seek foreign investment.

While most of the inhabitants speak Bengali as their mother tongue and follow the Hindu tradition, there are also significant numbers who hail from nearby states and speak different languages. Muslims are estimated to be 26 percent of the city's population and there is a small number of Christians, many from areas bordering on Burma and Bangladesh. Until recently, Kolkata had a



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thriving Jewish community; most came during the British era from Baghdad, but their numbers have dwindled due to emigration to Israel and other countries. Adding to the cultural mix, Kolkata is the only Indian city with a substantial number of Chinese.

The city's name may have come from the name of one of the villages, Kalikuta, near the famous Kali Temple in the southern part of the present-day city. The Hindu goddess Kali has a special place in the heart of Bengali Hindus.

Local religious observances are colorful. The Christians of the Bow Barracks neighborhood celebrate Christmas with outdoor lights and dancing. Muslims parade with great fanfare during Muharram. During Durga Puja every autumn, Hindus construct thousands of temporary shrines out of bamboo and other materials to honor a goddess.

The consular district of the U.S. Consulate General in Kolkata includes 12 states and one territory in eastern and northeastern India with about as many people as the United States. From the highest mountains in the world—the Himalayas on the border with Tibet—to the tiger-filled mangrove swamps in the Ganges delta region, the Kolkata consular district has some of the world's most dramatic scenery.

Geographic, cultural and religious diversity are hallmarks of this part of India. A significant portion of the population in the hill states along the border, such as Mizoram and Nagaland, is Christian, a legacy of missionaries who arrived during the 19th

century. The Buddha attained enlightenment in the state of Bihar. Assam is home to such wildlife as the rhinoceros and elephant and, along with Darjeeling in West Bengal, is famous for its tea gardens. Jharkhand lies in India's steel-making region, and the state of Orissa has exquisite temple architecture.

Kolkata is a literary capital. Perhaps the most renowned Bengali artist is the writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia's first Nobel laureate and the only author to have penned two national anthems—India's and Bangladesh's. The rich literary heritage of the region is celebrated each year at the end of January with the 10-day Kolkata Book Fair, one of the world's largest.

The United States has had a consulate in Kolkata since 1792, making it the oldest U.S. post in India and one of the oldest in the world.

The U.S. complex includes the consulate, a small apartment building, a swimming pool and gym, and the consul general's residence. Because of recent growth in staff, some officers now live outside the consulate compound. The American School of Kolkata, which is located on the complex, opened in 2007.

A half-mile from the consulate is the American Center, which houses Kolkata's public diplomacy offices, the American Library and the eastern India office of the United States-India Education Foundation, which administers Fulbright-Nehru grants and offers educational advising to students. The center is also home to the regional office of the Foreign Commercial Service.

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An example of British monumental architecture, the Metropolitan Insurance Building sits in central Kolkata. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

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Consular Section Chief Deborah Miller and some of her staff pose in their recently renovated spaces. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

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Public Affairs Officer Doug Kelly and Kathleen Coughlin, a nongovernmental organization leader, visit students at Malancha High School north of Kolkata. *Photo by Rafique Anwar*

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Vendors at the flower market open packages full of marigold garlands. *Photo by Melissa Pitotti*

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Members of the programming section at the American Center in Kolkata carry out programs throughout eastern India. *Photo by Pankaj Dutta*

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During Durga Puja, an annual religious festival, Hindus in Kolkata construct elaborate temporary shrines such as this one. *Photo by Beth Payne*

The Consulate General is active in reaching out to the people of eastern India. Whether in Kolkata or traveling in the district, the post's officers engage communities in programs on such topics as wildlife conservation, Indo-U.S. relations and avian influenza. The Micro-Access scholarship program has allowed hundreds of area students to develop better English-language skills. Officers are also involved in reporting on political and economic developments throughout the states of eastern India, and the consular section has recently expanded its visa and American citizen services offices to meet a growing workload. The Foreign Commercial Service promotes the export of U.S. goods and services and represents U. S. business interests in eastern India.

For recreation, some employees join one of the local clubs with sports facilities. Popular weekend getaways include Darjeeling and its tea estates in the Himalayan foothills, the tiger sanctuary of Sundarbans in the Ganges delta and the beaches of Puri in the state of Orissa. Kolkata has a vibrant arts scene with many musical, theatrical and dance performances, especially during the cooler months of November to February.

An assignment to the "City of Joy," as Kolkata is sometimes called, has much to offer the adventurous officer, professionally and personally. Buoyed by its rich heritage and history, Kolkata and its people are poised to play a prominent role in the India of the 21st century. ■

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At a Glance



Country name: India

Capital: New Delhi

Government type: federal republic

Area: 3,287,590 sq. km.

Area - comparative: more than one-third the size of the United States

Population: 1.14 billion

Ethnic groups: It is estimated that there are more than 2,000 ethnic groups in India

Languages: Hindi, English and 16 other official languages

GDP - per capita: \$909

Religions: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Parsi

Export commodities: engineering goods, petroleum products, precious stones, apparel and textiles

Import commodities: petroleum, machinery, transport equipment, electronic goods and edible oils

Major trading partners: United States, China, EU, Russia and Japan

Currency (code): Indian rupees (INR)

Internet country code: .in

Source: Country Background Notes