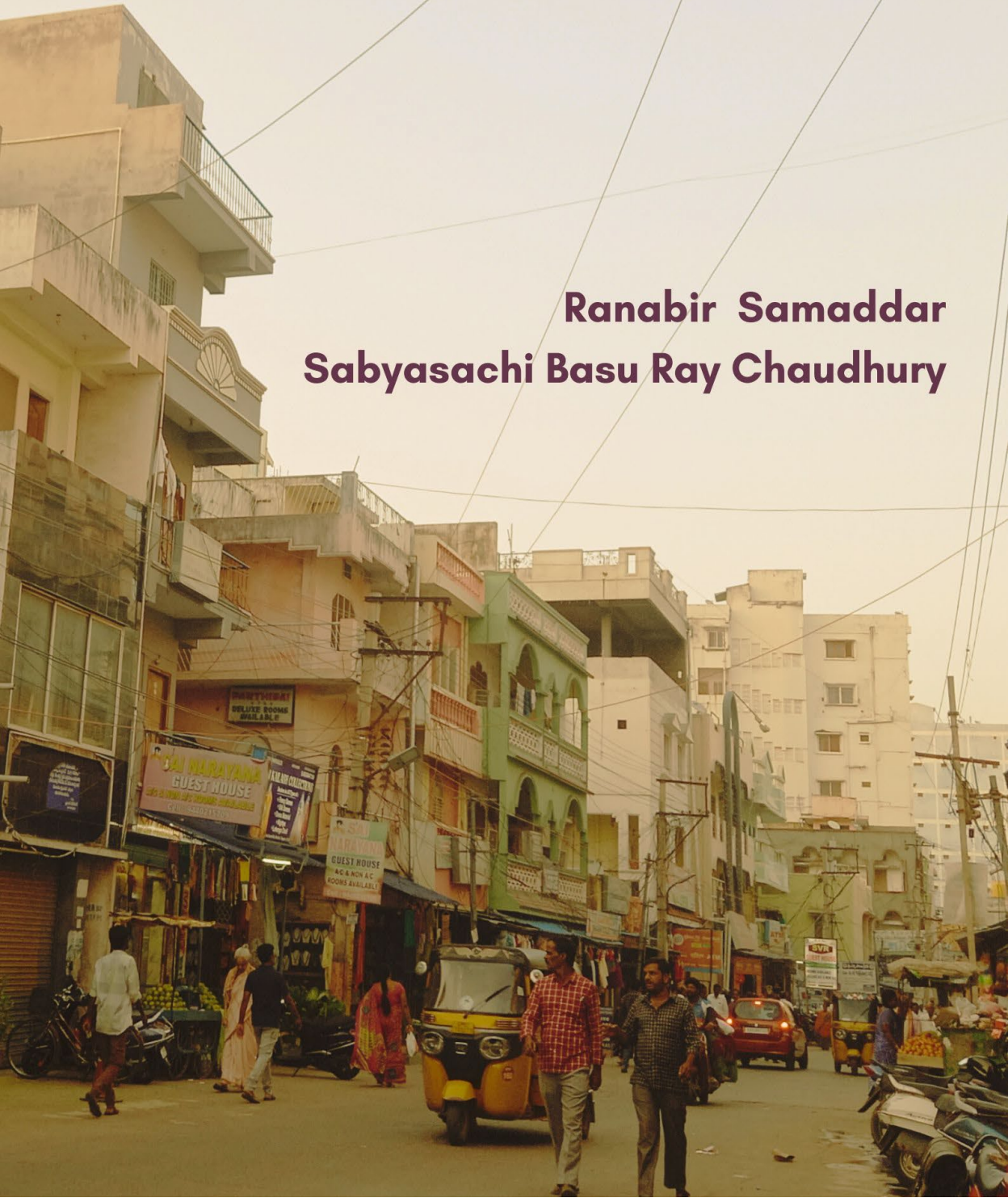


CHRONICLES OF URBAN JUSTICE

A CONVERSATION

Ranabir Samaddar
Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury



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Printed by
Graphic Image
Room No. 115, 2nd Floor,
New Market, New Complex, West Block,
Kolkata: 700087, India.

Cover Photo: Puttaparthi © Shatabdi Das, 2024

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The Youth Meet on “Urban Caregiving and Protection: Histories and Contemporary Practices,” was a three-day programme organised by the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, from 28 to 30 March 2024, in Bolpur, at the Sanchari Resorts. The programme came to a close on 30 March 2024, with the session “Chronicles and Urban Justice”, a conversation between Ranabir Samaddar and Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury. Ranabir Samaddar is the Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies at Calcutta Research Group as well as its former Director. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury is Professor of Political Science at Rabindra Bharati University and the President of Calcutta Research Group.

Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (SBRC): *We are going to have a conversation on Chronicles and Urban Justice, or should it be Chronicles of Urban Justice. I don't know, Professor Samaddar will answer that question. Let us begin with a couple of questions for Professor Samaddar. The spatial organization of everyday life matters to how we understand the ways people live in their communities, how they make sense of their social structures and networks as the bedrock of their daily existence, and how lived experiences of daily life respond to the transformation and reorganization of city spaces. In an essay on cosmopolitan life entitled ‘Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point*

of View', Immanuel Kant observed in 1784, I quote - "A city is crooked because it is diverse, full of migrants, speaking dozens of languages, because its inequalities are so glaring, svelte ladies lunching a few blocks away from exhausted transport cleaners, because of its traces, as in concentrating too many young graduates chasing too few jobs. Can the physical ville (ville is a French word meaning city) straighten out such difficulties? Will plans to pedestrianize a street do anything about the housing crisis? Will the use of sodium borosilicate glass in buildings make people more tolerant of immigrants? In other words, space is not neutral. Behind spatial constructs and fractures lie deep power lines, social, economic, and political, determining the futures of spaces. These are expressions of deeper value frameworks that are prejudiced, hierarchical, exclusive, and oppressive. But again, public space in the city seems to be the locus that best epitomizes the capacity of difference to question traditional spatial hierarchies and forms of belonging."¹ In this context, I'll ask Professor Samaddar that, can we ignore structural spatial injustice in today's urban space?

Ranabir Samaddar (RS): Thank you all and thank you Sabyasachi for initiating this conversation. Sabyasachi, you asked me in the beginning whether it is chronicles *and* urban justice or chronicles *of* urban justice. Now, well, while we may discuss this, I think we have to begin with whatever we have been given. So, I wish Rituparna were here, she framed the theme, and I had asked her

¹Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 1784. English translation available in Kant: *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

the same question and Shatabdi was there with her when I had asked her. Rituparna said that she meant it as “chronicles and urban justice”. Now, I am not very sure what it means, though I have thought over it a few times to understand what this means and tried to understand what Rituparna meant. But she is not here. Therefore, we cannot probably take liberty with this formulation. I will try to make sense of the way it is given. And I shall try to think in the way probably Rituparna was thinking. Therefore, Sabyasachi, bear with me a little, you may find me completely unprepared for some of the questions that you may ask, because I have not thought along any other line than the ones that can be anticipated by the title. So, I will try to stick as much as possible to the theme that is given here. Now, urban justice is a wide concept and Sabyasachi’s questions are perfectly in order and within the ambit of the proposed discussion. But on the other hand, and I shall respond to Sabyasachi’s question, as I was saying, *chronicles and urban justice* is a theme based on a difficult combination, these two meanings. And again, justice is such a broad concept that keeping in mind the theme of this workshop, I would like to stick to the notion of care and protection that we have been discussing here for the last two and a half days. In any case, we can begin with asking, what is a chronicle? Chronicle means a report or a kind of a report, given in a chronological order. That is why it is a chronicle. So, it can be a diary, or a newspaper report, it can take a few other forms, but it will have those two characteristics, namely, that it will be in chronological order and in the form of a report. Though we may say of a piece of writing that this is a fable, but at the same

time it is a chronicle of the time. We often say that of a novella, or a short story, or even a novel. We may also say that with respect to a writing of history, even of an analytical work, that it is a chronicle of the time. So, the question will be, what is the relation between that form of writing and certain issues of urban justice?

So, let us take Sabyasachi's question and out of the number of issues he mentions, let us take up two. One is the question of the public space of the city. The other is the question of justice. Does the reorganization of the space of the city or a remaking of the geography of the city ensure greater justice to the people living in the city or is justice minimized in the process? The answer of course can be in both ways. But let us take this film and let us now go to the other part of the theme - chronicle.

I was thinking of the film *Chakra* by Rabindra Dharmaraj and I think he died just after making the film. It is a well-known film and at the time when the film was made, quite a lot of discussion took place on the film, the way it was done; the theme it carried. Quite a lot of discussion was there, even though it seems now that it is almost a forgotten film. I do not remember exactly the year the film was made, possibly 1981 or '82. Now, 'chakra' means the circle or the cycle. The film tells the story of a woman who flees the village taking her son along with her after her husband kills a moneylender who has tried to rape her. The husband is then shot. She lands in a slum in Mumbai. She finds a lover, a truck driver, who looks after her and the son. But the truck driver is away most of the time, and she takes on another lover – a pimp and petty crook. He is on parole and must report to the police every day. The

woman becomes pregnant, though we do not get to know whose child it is. Meanwhile the crook reappears as a changed man but ravaged by syphilis and drugs. However, he still lives a life of crime, there is no other choice for him. He is assaulted by the police at his illicit liquor den. He assaults a chemist who refuses him medicines unless he pays for it. He grabs some medicines and makes a run for it. He is chased by the police who arrest him. He is beaten brutally. The woman was present when during the scuffle she has a miscarriage. In the end, bulldozers arrive to raze the entire slum to ground leading to an exodus of human beings. The young ones move on to a new slum. The story ends with the thing that this whole cycle of the tragedies of life - tragedies in the life of this person who has become a scoundrel, tragedy in the life of the truck driver, and tragedy in the life of the *basti* woman - comes to an end when the administration decides to demolish the slum. But does it end? All the people will have to leave, including the woman, the son, everyone. But where will they go? The film seems to suggest that they will go over to another slum. So, it's a cycle. The circle is complete, but it is a cycle that moves on.²

Thus, there is no end to it. This is chakra. I will end with two observations, and then leave it to Sabyasachi. One is that, obviously, in this scattered geography of the city, which therefore almost inexorably requires that the city will have to be remade, space

²Chakra means in Sanskrit wheel and refers to the energy points in the human body. *Chakra* is an Indian film released in 1981 and directed by Rabindra Dharmaraj – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irSHMEu_Gqc (accessed on 17 April 2023).

redesigned, and areas reshaped, there will be many areas where the workplace and the habitation place are combined - as in many large slums, informal workplaces, and shanty towns. They are not separate, yet this separation is crucial to reorganize the life of the city. What happens when they are forcibly separated, and we may ask, is urban justice assured when the city is redesigned? At the same time, for me, the more interesting question will be why is it that this feature of urban life can be framed meaningfully only in the form of a chronicle? In this case, it is the dramaturgy or the script of the film, though there are certainly good analyses of the slum life of the cities, or of the life of the slum dweller in unauthorized settlements. But remember Dharavi in Mumbai is not an unauthorized settlement, it is possibly the biggest slum in Asia. But again, these kinds of things, in other words, the interstices of what we consider to be the structure of justice can be brought to our understanding - so that it becomes our common sense, the general sense of a city life or a city consciousness - can be only through the form of a chronicle. What then is in that form that allows it to capture what other forms cannot, let us say social science forms or other scientific forms?

SBRC: *You were referring to the cycle of tragedies of life and we remember that the COVID-19 pandemic was just one among the several recurrent crises in the life world of cities, and you have written extensively on the human condition during the COVID-19 pandemic. So how do you look back at the relationship between the pandemic and the city, keeping specifically in mind the question of care and protection?*

RS: See, again, we have ‘n’ number of accounts of the tragedies of urban life caught in a pandemic. There is a phrase which is known in urban literature, it is called ‘pandemic urbanism’.³ Now pandemic urbanism speaks of a condition of urban life which is in a certain pathological state, and where life that is the urban life is governed not by economy, not by any spiritual outburst, or by some political movement or restlessness or unrest, but by the movement and ferocity of the virus. The pandemic then transcends the existing boundaries and the border-making dynamics of the city, with other dynamics released by the onset of the pandemic. A classic case would be Ebola in the African cities in the first decade of this century. Certainly, Michel Foucault’s famous description of the city life in the late 16th, early 17th century in France, in the wake of plague, or Albert Camus’ description of plague. Now, in all these cases, urban life is governed in a very particular manner by the onset of the pandemic. But what I think is important in your question is namely, how do these chronicles that include fictions tell us of the reordering of the city space in the wake of an epidemiological event? What is interesting, and I am quite sure these accounts are available relating to other historical periods, is that the present pandemic, which hopefully has ended, tells us of stories of care and protection in a unique way. These chronicles while being partly shaped by the reordering of the urban space also have the capacity to transcend those space reordering exercises. So, these narratives of care, or

³S. Harris Ali, Creighton Connolly, Roger Keil, *Pandemic Urbanism: Infectious Diseases on a Planet of Cities* (Wiley, 2022).

how life ends, again going back to Rituparna's point, that only chronicles can capture. There are stories of people waiting for nearly 48 hours to cremate or conduct the final rites of a dead father, or let us say, the dead wife. There are stories about how people inform each other of the availability or non-availability of oxygen cylinders. There are stories about how people are sharing or relaying information on the resources that are available for sharing, and one can go on. How much of it will be, again I shall go back to the original problem that has been set out for today's discussion, how much of it can be captured in the language of social science? I have my doubts.

It is true that based on available information, certainly something can be written. We may take the approach of studying a life history. Let us take the life of someone like Florence Nightingale. Now, Florence Nightingale was a woman who at one level was very Victorian. She was guided by values which were humanitarian, full of piety, virtue, but also shaped by the consciousness of race and colonialism of her time. She went to serve in the war fields of Crimea. Later she turned out to be, most astonishingly, one of the first suffragettes who led the movement for women's working rights. There will be these exceptional figures like her on whom light can be thrown, and we can in this way bring out the unevenness of the time and the rough nature of the world of care. As I said in the previous session, the world of care too has its interstices. There are fault lines within, and history fails at times to capture and investigate those fault lines and the truths coming out therefrom, until and unless history has access to the chronicles of those fissures. Until then the

history of care remains untold in a fulsome manner. But here again, let us recall Marquez's *Chronicles of a Death Foretold*, one of the most famous stories of the 20th century. One of the very few, I mean, there cannot be a more elegant and more disturbing story like that. It is a chronicle, and chronicle of a death foretold. It is also a chronicle of how urban justice was conceived of at that time. It is said that Marquez wrote that story based on something that was narrated to him, and though earlier it was thought that Marquez had really witnessed that murder, but apparently his brother had told him the story, and it had happened in 1951, thirty years before Marquez wrote *Chronicles of a Death Foretold*. It is a story at one level of how justice is done or achieved. It is achieved with regard to an act of, you know, faithlessness, etc. Now, clearly, the form of chronicling has much to do with appreciating, capturing, and putting on record the way the wheels of justice move.

So, coming back to your first question, the spatial reordering of the city, there are so many analytical pieces on the slum life. I will tell you one or two things more, I hope you are not bored with any, and I am determined that I will not speak the language of social science today keeping in mind the injunction of our dear young colleague. I do not remember if I had discussed with you the relation of the films of Paolo Pasolini and Naples. Now, Naples is a city, it is a city of crime, it is a city of extreme religiosity. Antonio Gramsci had written on Naples as the city which lives with Catholicism, not Catholicism, but Catholic virtues, or at least what are thought to be Catholic virtues. The Pope had an enormous sway over the city. It was at one point of time the biggest city of Italy, even though it was not an

industrial city. And it is a city that had been the most accursed city, a city most cursed by God in the life of the country called Italy. It is a city where you can see at one level the waterfront, in other words, the sea-facing part of the city inhabited by migrants; then the inner quarters of the city, the city part inhabited by the urban bourgeoisie, the trading aristocracy, the money aristocracy, and the high religious figures. And, therefore not surprisingly, it is a city which is marked by enormous amount of violence and at the same time, or probably as part of it, by pity, sympathy, protection, what not. Walter Benjamin, who had visited the city twice, spoke of the porosity of the city. Benjamin's word, "porosity" is now a well-known word and has been used and reused by the students of architecture and urban history. What does this word 'porosity' used by Benjamin mean? Benjamin writes of these different segments of city life, as if they are porous, as if they are not separated by boundaries. Boundary is the line, if you think of the line that Samir had drawn on the blackboard in the previous session. Benjamin was saying, these lines are porous, the segments are entering into each other. What is therefore Naples? Naples is finally an entity made precisely by different porous segments. This is precisely the kind of city on which Goethe has written, you recalled Kant in the beginning. Naples is a city on which Antonio Gramsci has written, it is a city that brings to your mind the figure of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who in 1975 was murdered brutally in a way that recalls the brutal life of Naples. I remember Pasolini's film, *Decameron* (1971) based on the fourteenth century allegory of Giovanni Boccaccio, a classic Neapolitan film, where I think the final line is,

“Why complete a work when it is so much better just to dream it?” This is the brutality of city life; the reality always pushes you to dream, while in the same reality you can never do away with the brutality and deceit.

I will stop here and put the question back to the participants of our workshop: What is it in these forms of writing, recording, narrating, representing, that makes the interface of two separate registers possible? *Urban justice* is one thing, *chronicle* is another, two separate registers, but what is the kind of interface between these two?

SBRC: *Now, given what you have just said, is it possible to embed justice in the process and outcomes of urban policy making?*

RS: It is possible. However, I am very skeptical about these things. You see, policymaking is a complex terrain..., there is something in it and to clarify what I want to say, let me visit a different register to see the possibility, or as I would like to put it, the impossibility of this problem. Because, after all, urban policymaking is not new. Epidemiological history shows that from the ancient time when epidemics started visiting the city, the city is being remade. Pericles perished in plague. The Athens-Sparta war stopped due to plague and resumed after a few decades. Meanwhile new laws were introduced in Athens, regulations against foreigners were tightened. Cities were remade in this way. The history of Rome has been written and rewritten in the wake of successive epidemiological outbreaks. And, of course, today urban policymaking is the order of the day, because in some sense, what Antonio Gramsci

terms as passive revolution, begins in terms of global governance with cities. You have all kinds of urban policy regimes and urban policy packages. These urban policy packages circulate, they travel from one city to another. So, if something has proved successful in Johannesburg, experts will bring that package to Kolkata, and tell the city administrators that this is the way you should reorder the city with the help of the said policies. This is a vast subject, therefore two quick answers. One: each policy framing and policy execution, ostensibly for the solution of the problems they are designed to address, say, by and large succeeds in improving the conditions of the urban inhabitants, and some of the dis-privileged sections of the city. Yet, each policy revolution or each policy regime has its sacrifices. So, today, if in India the Adanis have been handed over the task of remaking the Dharavi in Mumbai, or if something has been done following the McKenzie report on Mumbai, or certain *basti* cleaning drive in cities of India, each of these policies, or rather each of policy revolutions will demand a cost. You know, these development agencies are not elected bodies. Calcutta Improvement Trust began in this way, and now you have CMDA (Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority) or Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, etc. Each such revolution extracts its own sacrifice. There is no free lunch. And who, or which is the constituency, the urban constituency, that will become the sacrificial goat or sacrificial human being? So, we must ask, does a policy regime or do policies establish justice? Are they able to establish justice? And there to go back to the question of time, the *chrono*, you will see that justice calls into

consideration the time frame of the policy, it may be a long time or a short time. It can be argued that in the short run, yes, we know some sacrifice is needed, but in the long run it will improve the lot of the people. So, you may have a city like Shanghai, where at the beginning of this century the Chinese state opened the old, state-sponsored, state-financed, and loss-making, huge textile industry to private capital. Many factories moved from coastal areas to the poorer interior of the country. It is said that the withdrawal of the State affected thousands of people. Perhaps the Chinese communists or the Chinese city planners said that in the long run, the city got over the problem of industrial sickness. In this case then the sacrifice or the cost was measured in the long run, in the long frame of time, namely that the policy addressed the ailment of industrial sickness. But it can be argued the other way round, that, yes, it brought some dividends, did some good, but if you think of the damage that it caused, and if you keep on counting the cost, you may say that the cost was much more. So, part of the answer will depend on the time frame in which we want to address or to understand the question.

In short, I think this is what I wanted to say as response to the question: Do policies address questions of urban justice? First, policies extract sacrifice. Second, the way our policies are studied is not the way in which the histories of the time, the histories of the effect of the policy, etc., can be understood. So, what is the cost? What is the sacrifice that it extracts, it needs? Let us recall Walter Benjamin's idea that time is never homogeneous. The bourgeoisie thinks that time is homogeneous, time is empty. But it is not; time is

uneven. So, issues of justice keep on surfacing. Is policy then the right kind of apparatus to address the issue of justice? Is it the right frame in which we address questions of justice? Or should we invent or think more along the line of a daily procedure, kind of a daily dialogue within the city, kind of a daily plebiscite on these so-called successes or failures of this policy or that, which the city elders decide from time to time. So, do we need to see it in the frame of a policy? Or should we see it much more in the daily terms? Now, this production of the daily, in terms of addressing justice, is again something which we have not thought of very far. Theories of the daily life, the daily features, have spoken of the banality of our life and actions. But these theories are perhaps not very helpful for us to understand how actually we devise new modes of addressing justice. Either we can say that, daily dialogues can be geared towards achieving justice, that is *minimal justice*. Or, we can say, the daily mode is not the mode to redress; the daily mode is punctuated by exceptional things and that is how justice is achieved. There is a very fascinating book that came out last year, I think in February or March. The name is, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*.⁴ It is a remarkable book, written partly in the language of Tilly. Contradictions within the city life govern the city. That is the way the question of justice is to be seen. The history of urban justice is contentious. With some exaggeration we can say, city shapes the way we see justice.

⁴Mark R. Beissinger, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion* (Princeton, 2022).

SBRC: *You have referred to the urban revolutions and Charles Tilly. Now, in recent times, we have seen in the West, movements like the Black Lives Matter or in India, anti-CAA movements, and farmers' protests. And these are the latest in a series, we can say, of significant movements that have upended the "social and political order of cities", in pursuit of justice, equal opportunity, and dignity for those left behind in the neoliberal pursuit of urban development. So, under the circumstances, can you or how do you visualize biopolitics from below that you have been talking about in recent years?*

RS: This is a great question. I do not have a satisfactory answer to that. But I think we should all pursue this line of thinking and think of the urban present in a new way. I am very happy that this youth meet has attempted to see things from fresh perspectives. I did not attend all the sessions, but I gained from some of the deliberations in which I participated. You know I took objection, and I am sorry, I beg apology for my observation, when I thought that there was a disjunction between the theoretical part and what we found in these deliberations. Theory does not always enable us, this was my point, the prescribed theory may not enable us to realize what is happening. There is a different form in which you visualize, life becomes visible, life with all its vicissitudes, its unevenness, tragedies, as well as its meaningful and satisfactory things. They often become visible through other modes than the theoretical mode. Now, you can ask, is it then only the mode of observation, the non-theoretical mode, through which we should see life? I am not reducing it to that level, namely that you can only observe, and

thereby you see. I am quite sure that there are other ways. The famous theorist of aesthetics, John Berger has this book, *Ways of Seeing*.⁵ It is a slim book. There are many commentaries on this book. For me, the book tells finally that there is something where, let us say, political analysis ends, and aesthetics begins. So, there is the question of aesthetics.

When Walter Benjamin was speaking of porosity, he was not speaking of architecture, even though he was saying that buildings almost merge into one another, floors merge into one another, streets merge in the same way. He was saying precisely of the different, a perhaps perverse kind of fluidity in urban life. It is not a fashion straightaway in which you find, but if you see the urban life carefully, you will find fluidity in urban life as against the boundary making exercises in a city on which we have enormous amount of literature today. With such new kind of optics, you will see the imprints of biopolitics in urban life. I was therefore only suggesting that biopolitics from below is a frame, it gives you different optics to see what is happening around us. I am quite sure that movements like Black Lives Matter or other solidarity movements, or the urge to protect and give care to people witnessed by us in the wake of the pandemic, or the anti-CAA movement – these movements leave imprints on the urban life which cannot be easily effaced or erased. They will remain. And they will remain not as inputs for public policy. I mean, if they were to become inputs of public policy, then probably that would have been the end of it. We would have said, nothing remains uncolonized in public

⁵John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972).

life, nothing remains unannexed in collective life, that everything has been absorbed into the policy making machine. But on the other hand, whether it is Black Lives Matter, or you know, Sabyasachi, I was in Marseille, when these race riots happened last year (2023) in June. In the Marseille riots, I saw the exceptional kind of fury against racism, against the kind of public housing that is a scandal all around France, in the name of making houses available for the poorer classes of the city. Remember, the race riots in Marseille and other cities of France including Paris happened on almost the same issue on which the *Black Lives Matter* began, with the same slogan, *I cannot breathe*. The same thing - a young boy of seventeen trying to escape a red light in Paris, and was about to cross, and in this case also he did not have any gun, the police came and point blank shot this young Muslim immigrant. The race riot immediately began. In Marseille, when the race riots began, the rioters were addressing the issue of justice. This is why I said that policy revolutions do not, but direct claim making things do, respond to the great question of urban justice. That is why I invoked Tilly, these kinds of direct methods, where a public library is about to be set on fire, in this case in Marseille the library fortunately escaped the fury, where restaurants were put on fire, cars destroyed, where the police had to withdraw, and the city for almost 48 hours was left to the mercy or control of the rioters. Not everyone was a rioter, someone was a bystander. Someone gives witness, someone gives support to the riots, there are all kinds of responses in the city. Yes, some of it will be recorded, some will be theorized, but on the other hand, these kinds of things will happen, and they can never

be anticipated. So, what I am trying to say, and I will end with this comment, and for you to judge how much of it makes sense, namely that, a study of daily life per se does not give us a clue to the path of urban justice, because in that sense the moment we have bifurcated our senses; we have partitioned our sensibilities into the daily and the exceptional. But on the other hand, we must give space and keep space, keep that scope within our way of thinking where we know that the unanticipated can happen. Biopolitics from below may appear as the daily, but its emergence is in the event, which we think to be exceptional.

This is what we may call as “the event-centric history”, the history which is being made and unmade by events and not by our regular lives. And these events then allow us to think of life in a different way. So how should we think of urban life that would be just? How do we think of the steps that need to be taken to bring justice? How should we think of our collective existence as something which always borders on the regulated and the unregulated? How should we think of the whole idea of public space in a manner that is neither public nor private? Is it possible to avoid that binary? Feminists would say that the personal is the political, the private is also public. That may be one way to see. But there is another way where life has transcended the division. Think of the slum in the city, the slum life. Is it visible life or an invisible life? In fact, the slum life is something relating to which you can say that the slum-dweller can watch the city, but the normal city-dweller cannot watch the slum. The slum is always there beyond the pale of visibility, but at the same time it is always there to keep a watch on you. It knows what is

happening in the city while we do not know what happens within the slum. So, can you think of a space which therefore escapes, which interrogates the given divisions of life, the given partitions of life, partitions of our own ways of thinking?

I will stop here with saying that the movements we respond to leave their imprints on urban life, but it is not so much a case of a retrospective sketch that will become the basis of our thinking, but one of a sudden emergence of those traces that we thought had been erased.

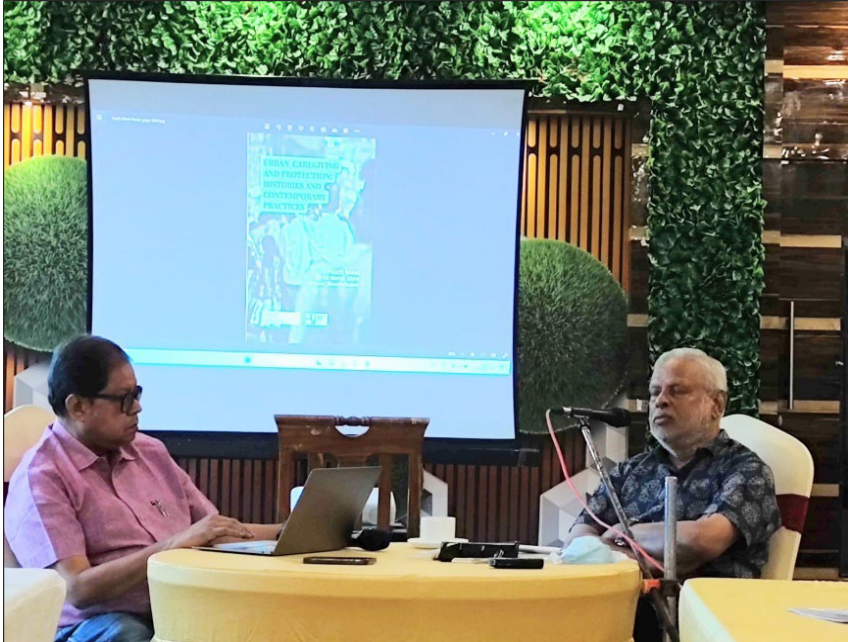
SBRC: *It is almost an hour and therefore we should conclude. So, my last question and you can have a brief answer to that. You have been concerned about and writing on the ethics of care and protection. What can be the ethics for a city? Is it possible to imagine an empathic city, if I may use the word?*

RS: Again, a very pertinent question and writers, thinkers, philosophers, all have thought of the ethics of a city. In the old days there was no philosopher who did not think of the city ethic. So, I think the question is very relevant, but possibly we should reframe the question of ethics. For example, if we ask, is there an ethic that is not an ethic of hospitality? What else is ethics? Can we think of ethics which does not admit hospitality, which has no relation with hospitality, no relation with care, no relation with giving shelter? Can we think of such ethics? It may well be that we can say that by helping someone, we have helped ourselves. That can well be an answer. But can we think of any ethics that has nothing to do with hospitality? Derrida

would say that probably the answer is a conditional answer. He says that a city should be a city which has the right to give asylum, or which has the duty to give asylum. These are cities of refuge, and he draws inspiration from old biblical heritage of those eighteen cities, which were declared as cities of refuge, where fleeing people from the hostile cities, or cities that were designated as enemy cities, were given shelter. So, an urban ethic would certainly be one of hospitality. But what I emphasized here in today's discussion is that, that like all other phenomena, ethics also must admit the possibility of fault lines and divides, the possibility of interstices within the structure of ethics itself. The implication of what I am saying is that for these reasons the city life must be a plural life, the city sphere must not become a monolithic sphere, and we need to practice daily dialogues. It further means that we need to have a much more dialogic structure in the running of the city, in imagining the roles of associations and individuals, the role of various segments, whether it is gender or caste. All these things will have to be admitted as elements of the structure of public life. In this sense, the ethic of a city life will take its inspiration not from the thought of philosophers, but from the biopolitical practices of the lower classes of the city. I know of a historian, who has written on Tunis. And I think I told Sabyasachi about him. He is a British historian working on the history of the Maghreb region. He wrote a paper on firefighting practices in an unauthorized settlement on the outskirts of Tunis. The history of that unauthorized settlement of thirty years or thirty-five years is a history of fighting fires, because these unauthorized settlements are all made of plastic and

other combustible material. Any day and every day, one thing or another leads to fire. For one reason or another, fire breaks out. Maybe there are two or three fires a year. It is a history of how in the event of fire this unauthorized settlement recollects itself, remobilizes itself, as if the duties are already laid out, who will do what, so that it ensures the minimum casualty, minimum injury or minimum deaths, the minimum destruction of whatever assets are there, and most or all lives are saved there. Now, can you imagine a history of a public life which is a history of saving people from fire? History never imagines public life in that manner. But it is only when you will have the vantage point of the lower depths of the city, the lower tiers, and the lower classes of the city, only then you can reimagine questions of life and ethics in an interconnected manner. Public life, or for that matter, the new life-giving practices, or ideas in our work will have to be drawn from life itself. There is no other source of ethics. Life is the source.

SBRC: *Thank you very much, Ranabir Da, for your very exciting and insightful comments. We have to conclude. I was in conversation with Professor Ranabir Samaddar, who is the Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies at Calcutta Research Group, and belongs to the critical school of thinking. Thank you very much.*



“Chronicles of Urban Justice”: In conversation Professor Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (left) and Professor Ranabir Samaddar (right), 30 March 2024.

Acknowledgement: *This publication is a revised version of the conversation between Ranabir Samaddar and Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, in the valedictory session (30 March 2024) on "Chronicles and Urban Justice" of the Youth Meet themed Urban Caregiving and Protection: Histories and Contemporary Practices, 28-30 March 2024, held in Bolpur, Shantiniketan, India, organised by the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna.*

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