Urban Planning, Settlement Practices, and Issues of Justice in Contemporary Kolkata

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This abstract seeks to bring together two aspects of life, livelihood, and habitation practices in the city – the phenomenon of urbanization and that of rural-to-urban migration. At the same time, it attempts to foreground the issue of social justice in the moments of juxtaposition of these two practices, materializing in various networks of entangled kinships and plausible connections, supported by different horizontal and vertical hierarchical arrangements. The chief purpose of this exercise is to investigate the location of the category of 'migrant worker' in the broader and adjacent discourses of urbanization and to initiate a scheme of research which would explore the politics of defining and stabilizing this location and find out its implications in the area of social justice for the urban poor.

This particular area of justice pertains both to the incidence of violence on the so-called 'outsiders' to the city by the self-proclaimed 'sons of the soil' and the vulnerability of the workers coming to the city in search of a better life and better employment opportunities at the face of these incidents. Moreover, apart from the instances of physical violence, there are issues of cultural and social segregation between the insiders and the outsiders which entail in the long run various disturbing questions as to the politics of identity formation and construction of authentic urban experience. It is important in this respect to situate and contextualize these incidents of physical and socio-cultural violence in the moments of conjunction of migration and urbanization practices.

We propose to do so by (1) disintegrating the unified category of migrant in its various forms and functionalities and (2) historicizing the processes through which such a unified identity is established in the last few decades. Once the singular category of migrant is disintegrated in terms of various social, political, and economic markers like gender, caste, class, age, place of origin, language, etc., and the conjoined histories of dissolution of these identities into a monolithic universal category are exposed, the structural (or endemic) relationship between the acts of violence and practices of urbanization will be evident.

As my site of study, I have chosen Kolkata (formerly, and in some quarters even today, known as Calcutta), one of the most important cities in eastern India in terms of concentration of commercial interests and cultural aspirations. Calcutta was the capital of British India until 1911 and became one of the most sought-after locations for migration from different parts of the country during the Raj. Even after the Independence, it continued to attract people from other states – especially those in the eastern part of the country like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – and seemed to offer hospitality to members of all communities, religions, and language groups. This cosmopolitan image of Calcutta was damaged a little when a demand was raised to change the name of the city from the allegedly colonial sounding 'Calcutta' to the more authentically Bengali intonated 'Kolkata.' Subsequently, in

2001, the task was performed with a strong suggestion of cultural chauvinism mixed with xenophobic impatience.

That the migrants in the city often fall prey to xenophobic rage of the locals is common knowledge; it is a well-researched area where the attacks on the lower rung of the migrant workers in urban and semi-urban settings by the cadres of militant political and cultural organizations are documented and studied in detail.[1] However, not much has been written on the connection between these parochial sentiments and the protocols of urban planning and spatial reconfiguration of the city in the last two decades following 'liberalization' of the Indian economy. As we shall see, this connection has a historical foundation predating the latest urban renewal programmes like JNNURM.[2]

The scholarship on the relationship between migration and the modes of urbanization in post-liberalization India does not take stock of this historical foundation. Most of these studies focus on the macro-level analysis of census data, commenting on the trends in migration – whether the rate of migration from rural to urban centres is increasing or not – and speculating on the possible reasons thereof.[3] Also there are writings on the exclusionary nature of urbanization in India and how official policies and programmes exude an urgency to 'modernize' the cities at the cost of massive dislocation and dispossession.[4] Although these studies command our attention due to the valuable insights they offer on the linkages between migration decisions and governmental policies, the very structure of reasoning which informs both these decisions and policies – the way of thinking which sutures the issues of urban planning, migration practices, and violence resulting from exclusionary mechanisms – remains unattended.

One may encounter flashes of this way of thinking in some of the past studies on urbanization. In the early 1960s, the famous anthropologist and Gandhian thinker Nirmal Kumar Bose conducted a study of distribution of the city space in Calcutta among different communities.[5] Apart from preparing intricate land-use maps of the city on the basis of Assessment Records of Calcutta

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[1] The most pertinent of these incidents is the one that took place in Mumbai in 2008 when clashes between workers of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena and Samajwadi Party led to physical assault of North Indian migrant workers in the city. The incidents were reported in all the leading national dailies and television media. For a chronology of how the events unfurled, see 'Chronology: MNS's Tirade against North Indians', *Hindustan Times*, February 2, 2010.

[2] JNNURM or the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission is proposed jointly by the Ministry of Urban Development and the Ministry of Urban Employment and Poverty Alleviation at the Centre. It seeks to increase the rate of investment in the urban sector by initiating a range of reforms including creation of assets and development of civic amenities under the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model. For the statement of its objectives and scope, see *Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission: Overview* (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India) [available at http://jnnurm.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/PMSpeechOverviewE.pdf; accessed on March 16, 2014].

[3] See, for example, Amitabh Kundu and Shalini Gupta, 'Migration, Urbanization, and Regional Inequality', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 52 (December 28, 1996), 3391-98; Amitabh Kundu and Niranjan Sarangi, 'Migration, Employment Status and Poverty: An Analysis across Urban Centres', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (January 27, 2007), 299-306. For a similar study on Bangladesh, see Abdullah Al-Mamun Khan, 'Rural-Urban Migration and Urbanization in Bangladesh', *Geographical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1982), 379-94.

[4] Amitabh Kundu and Lopamudra Ray Saraswati, 'Migration and Exclusionary Urbanization in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, Nos. 26 and 27 (June 30, 2012), 219-27; Preeti Mann, 'Urbanization, Migration, and Exclusion in India', *Centre for the Advanced Study of India* (2012) [available at http://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/mann; accessed on March 16, 2014].

[5] Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1968).

Corporation from 1911 to 1961, the objective of the study was to understand how the urban landscape was shared by the inhabitants of the city, divided into a range of language groups and occupations. The city population was spread over a number of municipal wards and Bose's intention was to map the concentration of certain communities – religious, ethnic, and otherwise – in few particular wards. His study clearly shows that even as early as in the 1910s and `20s, the city space of Calcutta was distributed in particular zones where specific groups of people lived and earned their livelihood.

Even though Bose's survey of the 'social space' of Calcutta in the 1960s did not address the question of migration directly, his insistence on the need to study habitation practices of the 'non-Bengali' communities in the city gives out a sense of curiosity to grasp the mindset of the 'outsiders.' First of all, he divided the city population into two large mutually exclusive groups – Bengali Hindus and Non-Bengalis (including the Muslims and other religious and ethnic communities). Then he observed presence of at least four types of Hindu Bengalis in the city – (1) commercial or artisan castes; (2) upper castes; (3) scheduled castes; and (4) refugees from East Pakistan with a distinctively separate 'social identity.'[6] The non-Bengalis included everyone else – the language groups like the Oriya speakers who were mostly involved in plumbing, gas, and electrical works, or the Hindi speaking labourers who hailed from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and concentrated in the industrial area of the city. Often they had to change their location after incidents of violence. The Hindi speaking Kalwars who dealt in scrap iron and machine parts used to trade in Ward 53 – a predominantly Muslim locality, as reported in the study – but had to leave the area after the riots in 1946-47 and settled in Wards 7, 10, 13, etc. Although their tongue was not exactly Hindi, the Marwari community of Calcutta considered themselves one of the Hindi speaking groups. Bose took special care to describe the Rajasthanis or Marwaris in Calcutta, as they seemed to be particularly influential in the areas of trading and commerce. They were one of the very few non-Bengali communities which showed a consistent tendency of expanding beyond their original location in central Calcutta and continued to buy up properties in the neighbouring wards. Bose insinuated that the prosperity of the Marwaris came with the decline of the Bengali commercial castes like the Subarnabaniks during agitations against the British government – another classic example of how the locals literally lost ground to the outsiders in accumulation of resources and occupancy of the city space.[7] 'Yet,' Bose lamented, 'this did not lead the Rajasthanis to treat the city of Calcutta as their own home.'[8] The outsiders remain outsiders till the end, and that perhaps gives the locals an excuse to bear grudges against them and to act on those grudges whenever possible.

As we have noted earlier, the Muslims of Calcutta were clubbed with the non-Bengali groups. Although Bose acknowledged the presence of Bengali Muslims in the city, his chief focus remained on those who spoke either Hindustani or Urdu and arrived in the city from Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar before Independence. They settled mostly with people of similar occupations like merchant trading, craftsmanship, or leather-works in various central-Calcutta wards. Some of

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[6] *Ibid*, 27.
[7] *Ibid*, 36-37.
[8] *Ibid*, 37.

them concentrated in slums in Wards 32, 33, 34, and 35 after the post-partition riots. The importance of Bose's brief study of the Muslims in Calcutta was felt by the Anthropological Survey of India and it entrusted M. K. A. Siddiqui with the task to initiate a full-fledged survey of the conditions of Muslims in the city. In 1974, Siddiqui brought out a volume on the socio-cultural status of the minorities which once again made it clear that most of the Muslims in Calcutta concentrated in a few adjoining municipal wards – 'Ward Nos. 50, 51, 53, 55, 57 and 60 around Park Circus extending up to Tapsia, a newly developing slum area' – irrespective of their 'varying regional, linguistic, ethnic and occupational backgrounds.'[9]

Notwithstanding the political incorrectness of some of Nirmal Bose's remarks in his landmark study of the social space of Calcutta, the immense significance of his survey is evident. For the first time, it pointed to a peculiar aspect of migration settlements in the city: the tendency of concentration of the so-called 'outsiders' in an urban setting – or the distribution of the city space among its inhabitants – according to one's language, religion, caste, occupation, and social status. This leads to a more crucial realization that the politics associated with migration practices entails zoning of the city into various quarters of habitation and attempts to cross the boundaries of these zones are often met with anger and disquiet on part of the self-proclaimed insiders. This realization is even more relevant today amidst the hue and cry around reshuffling of the ethnic identity of the metropolis. The emergence of a new monied class in the city endangers old, established value-systems and threatens to bring change in the already settled habits and habitat. It is precisely at this juncture, we propose to take up a study of migration practices in Calcutta/Kolkata which would focus on the re-distribution of the city space in relation to the movement of workforce from outside the city.

We intend to start this study in the backdrop of certain earlier works on migration in Calcutta. These works offer some observations which we need to examine closely and compare with our findings. One of these observations tells us that the growth of the core city has been stalled since the last few decades, as the population influx to Calcutta proper has declined over the past fifty years.[10] On the other hand, the size of the non-Bengali population shows a steady growth from 34.06% in 1951 to 40.08% in 1971. The proportion of migrants from other states to the total population has decreased from 25.24% in 1951 to less than 17% in 1971. In 2011 census, the decennial growth rate of the Kolkata district is recorded at -1.88% – an all-time minimum in the history of census in India – with a falling rate of population density from 24718 per square kilometre in 2001 to 24258 per square kilometre in 2011. This is more or less the scene in all over the country where the big cities are failing to draw population from outside, as the employment opportunities in these cities seem frustratingly low due to use of capital intensive technologies in the industrial sector.[11]

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[9] M. K. A. Siddiqui, *Muslims of Calcutta: A Study of Their Social Organisation* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1974), 25, 26.

[10] Asok Sen and Alak Banerjee, 'Migrants in the Calcutta Metropolitan District, 1951-71', *Occasional Paper No. 62, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta* (August, 1983), 15.

[11] See Amitabh Kundu, 'Urbanisation and Migration: An Analysis of Trends, Patters and Politics in Asia', *Human Development Research Paper 2009/16, United Nations Development Programme* (April, 2009), 2.

The situation of Kolkata is even more alarming, since it is one of those 'service cities' where most of the 'low-profile' jobs are to be found beyond the locked-out gates of the factories. With an almost absent or ailing industrial sector, the migrants look for jobs in the informal sector such as non-government transport services or street-hawking. Some of these works are performed by members from particular religious, language, or caste groups. For example, the tannery workers in Calcutta belong to the Ravidas or Ruidas community – a collective of followers of Guru Ravidas, a fifteenth-century religious leader from the Chamar caste. On the other hand, most of the non-Bengali taxi-drivers in Kolkata seem to have come from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, although, even a few decades back, the job was largely performed by the Punjabi migrants in the city. A study of workers in these sectors would help disintegrate the homogenous category of migrant worker and shed new lights on the variety of services offered by them. At the same time, a contemporary study of the urban poor in Kolkata needs to capture the migrants both at the locations of their work and habitation. A detailed ethnography of their working and living conditions would also include interviews with the leaders of their respective unions and personnel from the NGOs that are trying to address the issues of their wellbeing.

In specific terms, I intend to focus on the settlement practices of the migrants in Kolkata in the last few decades. Since our primary concern in this project is to address the questions of 'urban poor' and 'social justice,' I am not looking at the settlement practices of groups which are economically sustained and socially adjusted to the cosmopolitanism – even though highly superficial and elitist in nature – of the city. More categorically, my focus will be on the experiences of settlement of the workers in the informal sectors. Most of them are forced to live in the slums or bustees in different municipal wards. The decision to choose the bustees of Kolkata as a prospective site of migrant settlement is influenced by an interesting orientation in some of the documents of urban planning prepared by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA). In their various reports based on sample surveys of the slums of Kolkata, KMDA has put serious thought to the issues of accommodation of the migrant workforce, their living conditions and social adjustments, and the rural-urban linkages manifested in their frequent visits to their places of origin, in connection with the questions of urban planning and development. Though a full categorical definition of the 'migrants' was provided for the first time in a 1996-97 study of the 'socio-economic profiles' of the urban households in Calcutta,[12] the deliberations on the issues and problems related to migration started to feature in the KMDA (erstwhile CMDA) reports since the late-1980s.

The first couple of studies by CMDA in 1980 on the small-scale industrial enterprises within the slums did not mention whether the workers in these establishments had come from outside the city.[13] However, it was evident that the bustees did not only offer shelter to the urban poor, they also

[12] Nandita Chatterjee, Nikhilesh Bhattacharya and Animesh Halder, 'Socio-Economic Profile of Households in Calcutta Metropolitan Area: 1996-97' in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume V (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 397-662.

[13] 'Socio-Economic Survey and Development of Small Enterprises in Twelve Bustees in Group I, July 1980' in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume II (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 61-650; 'Socio-Economic

provided them with job opportunities within the same premise. The plans of urban development like 'Calcutta 300: Plan for Metropolitan Development' often touched upon both the issues of migration and bustee improvement, but did not make any necessary connection between the two.[14] It was the 1989-90 study of the 'socio-economic profile' of the slum dwellers of Calcutta which identified a considerable number of them as migrants.[15] Based on a medium range sample survey (sample size: 7810 slum dwelling families) conducted in 1989, this study located the moment of 'origin' of the Calcutta slums in the nineteen-thirties and `forties when, following intensification of industrial activities in and around the city to support the war efforts of the British government, a huge number of people from the eastern and northern states of India started to flock into the city in search of work. The slums were constructed for cheap accommodation of these migrant workers in the form of 'huts made up of mud and bamboo.'[16] The hutments were constructed and rented out by a group of middlemen 'popularly known as thika tenants, on land leased out to them by landlords.'[17]

Curiously, not only did the study recognize a close relation between migration and bustee settlements, it also identified migration as the primary reason of construction of these settlements. It will not be much productive to take this identification at its face value; instead, the politics of such easy associations and comfortable categorizations must be studied, interrogated, and challenged. It is also important because institutions like KMDA participate most actively in the processes of policy design and implementation. If one wants to look into the relationship between policies of urbanization and migration practices in post-liberalization Kolkata, he or she cannot avoid exploring the tremendous impact that these 'official' histories of migration settlement have on the government's prerogatives of decision making.

Two other points which interestingly came up in the 1989-90 survey of Calcutta slums were: (1) the observation that the slums could be classified (and the city could be zoned) according to the predominance of particular language groups living in these settlements and (2) the issue of rural-urban linkages established through the migrants' visits to their native lands. According to the study, 55.94% of the total households surveyed were Bengali speaking; 21.9% were Hindi speaking; and 20.8% were Urdu speaking.[18] A table also classified the average size of the households among different language groups, thus making a connection between regional specificities and economic sustenance and rationality (based on the presumption that large family size is detrimental to

Survey and Development of Small Enterprises in Twelve Bustees in Group III, July 1980' in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume II (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 651-891.

[14] 'Excerpts from Report 'Calcutta 300: Plan for Metropolitan Development" in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume IV (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004).

[15] Asok M. Chakrabarti and Animesh Halder, 'Slum Dwellers of Calcutta, Socio-Economic Profile – 1989-90, March 1991' in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume IV (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004).

[16] *Ibid*, 268.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid*, 288.

economic wellbeing).[19] The issue of rural-urban linkages, however, was conceptualized in terms of two 'explanatory variables' – the frequency of visits to the places of origin and the remittances sent back to these places.[20] Associated with this conceptualization was the categorization of the migrants into those who stayed back in the city for more than one generation and those who were present generation migrants. In other words, a distinction was made between those who were more prone to share their income with the family behind and those who were keeping the savings to themselves, and hence within the city or the state. While almost 60% of the households, the survey revealed, were present generation migrants, the rest of the 40% families were rooted in the city for more than one generation. 'It is worth mentioning here,' the study concluded, "that except for Darapara and Belgachia bustees the predominant language group in the bustees belonging to the...group of having low incidence of transfer of income away from Calcutta is Bengali."[21] Though mentioned with an indifference of statistical certainty, this comment seems to presage a cultural bias disguised in the garb of economic logic.

One may find in this remark a reverberation of Nirmal Bose's discontent over the non-Bengali people's lack of commitment to the interests of Bengal. In that sense, there is continuity between these two observations but, on the other hand, the latter remark is more politically motivated in relation to the future plans of development of Calcutta. In the following decades, this attitude might have played a crucial role in translating the desires of urban zoning and gentrification into the harsh reality of forceful eviction and displacement in the name of aesthetic and ecological concerns. This could not have been achieved without a categorical fixity that must adorn the official documents and inform the policy recommendations. The 1996-97 study of the socio-economic profiles of the households of Calcutta, therefore, attempted to demarcate the migrants from the 'original residents' by proffering a fixed 'historical' narrative of development of the city. Migrants were defined as 'persons who came to this metropolitan city from some other place in or after 1947 (the year of independence and partition of Bengal).'[22]

The fecundity of this historical narrative was thought to be so strong that even accounting discrepancies were ignored as minor confusions in categorization. The percentage of displaced population (mainly refugees from East Pakistan) was held to be only 2% in relation to the total population of the city while the number of displaced households was calculated to be more than 14%. This discrepancy was explained by the peculiar definition of the 'displaced household': its status was determined by the fact of its head's or his or her parents' displacement. This resulted in a beautiful paradox: 'a household can be 'displaced' but some members of that household could be 'original residents'.[23] This paradox shows how the botched histories of development can play around the notion of 'origin' depending on its suitability to the purpose at hand. This project seeks to look at these perverse histories of development and plans to engage with them in the specific

[19] *Ibid*, 289.

[20] *Ibid*, 371.

[21] *Ibid*, 373.

[22] Chatterjee, Bhattacharya and Halder, 'Socio-Economic Profile of Households in Calcutta Metropolitan Area: 1996-97', 593.

[23] *Ibid*.

context of policies and practices of urbanization and the invention, interpretation, and location of the category of the 'migrant' in today's Kolkata.

I shall start with a study of the Bustee Inspection Books of Kolkata Corporation. These books are supposed to contain detailed lists of the names of the thika tenants and sub-tenants and the shifts in the amount of rent in most of the slums in the city since 1981 – the year in which the Kolkata Thika Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act was passed. By this act, the West Bengal Government acquired all the bustee lands in the city and prescribed certain regulatory mechanisms to save the dwellers and landlords from the alleged exploitation by the thika tenants.[24] The remedy to the troubles created by the thika tenants was, as put succinctly in the Act, to imagine 'as if the State had been the landlord in respect of that land.'[25] This urge to become the most powerful stakeholder in the case of the bustee settlements proves how much importance is given by the state to the questions of existence and improvement of the city slums in connection with urban development. A study of the transactions in the last two decades regarding changes of hands of settlements and changes in rent will prove useful to map the changing demography of the city as well as the migrant workforce that it survives on. I shall also continue to explore other relevant documents, especially the reports by KMDA and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to study the connections between migration practices and policies of urbanization. The other main focus of my research will be on the current conditions of these migrant settlements and what the implications and consequences are of the shifts in the urban policies (for example, the adoption of the PPP model) in a post-liberalization regime. For that, I plan to conduct a moderately extensive fieldwork in some of the bustees under the threat of eviction and study the politics of resistance and negotiation building up in these quarters.

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[24] This act was in correspondence with the West Bengal Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act and Rules, 1976.
[25] The [Kolkata] *Thika* Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act, 1981, West Bengal Act XXXVII of 1981, 299.