

The Plight of Dwelling

East-Bengali Refugees and the Struggle for Land in Kolkata

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1. INTRODUCTION

"We established our rights, not legally but practically" Mr. Roychowdry declared, while reminiscing over the days of struggle and insecurity that precluded his permanent settlement in Kolkata. Like so many others, he and his family migrated to Kolkata from East-Bengal after the region had been assigned to Pakistan² in the wake of independence. In 1947 the Empire of British India was partitioned into Muslim-based Pakistan and constitutionally secular India; an historic event that instigated a massive population exchange, as millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims made their way to the country that best suited their religious background. The crude Partition of the sub-continent coincided with communal riots, extensive violence and unanticipated and multiple waves of displacement. Mr. Roychowdry and his family were among the early Hindu families that found their way to West-Bengal immediately after the Partition. He was only a kid at the time and spent most of his life in 'Chittaranjan Colony': one of the numerous refugee 'colonies' that mushroomed on the outskirts of Kolkata (see Bose 2006; Chatterjee 2006; Kudaisya 1996; Sanyal 2009). Over the course of his life Mr. Roychowdry witnessed the neighborhood change from "hut and mud to high rise". Today he lives in one of the many flats that are rapidly altering the landscape of the colony, yet he still recalls the first houses that sprouted in the locality: mud houses and bamboo huts that were built in the midst of Kolkata's swamp lands and drainage canals and poorly equipped to protect their inhabitants from water, weather and animals.

The plight of East-Bengali refugees, however, was not only characterized by the abominable conditions of these erstwhile houses and by the inhospitable nature of the land – but also by their precarious legal position within the city, for the land that they came to inhabit was largely acquired illegally through squatting, or '*jabardakhal*'³ (Sanyal 2009:74). It was only after nearly 40 years of struggle and protest that the refugees were gradually granted formal land titles and slowly managed to shake of the condition of tenure insecurity (Sanyal 2013:564). It is this struggle for land rights that Mr. Roychowdry is referring to when observing that rights were established 'practically' rather than 'legally'. His observation is a remarkable one as it seems to imply a contradiction in terms, for rights are per definition institutionalized by rule of law. The question therefore arises on what base land rights were granted, if the refugees could not legally support their cause? In other words: is it possible to assert one's rights in a way that circumvents the formal domain of law? In this article I will demonstrate that the way in which East-Bengali

¹ This research has been made possible by the financial support of the University of Amsterdam that has rewarded me with the annual AISSR Research Grant.

² Pakistan comprised both the area North-West of India and East-Bengal. After the Liberation War in 1971, the latter became Bangladesh.

³ 'Jabardakhal' can be translated as the 'forcible occupation of land'.

refugees claimed their rights had everything to do with the very practical way in which they literally claimed a physical place for themselves within the city. Hence, I seek to explore the convergence between the juridical act of seeking asylum and the everyday act of seeking shelter. In order to further illuminate this convergence I will focus on the dynamic relationship that East-Bengali refugees maintain with the land they came to inhabit. This interaction is expressed both in everyday struggles with the inhospitable environment that became their new home, as well as in the politicized strife for land rights and ownership. By continuously taking 'land' as my thematic point of departure I strive to underscore the importance of physical place in making sense of migratory experiences.

Within migration studies there is a strong focus on the politico-judicial relationship that migrants uphold with the state. It is my aim to diversify this legislative discourse on migration and citizenship by paying attention to the ways in which migrants interact and connect with the physical localities where they stay and settle. For migration is first and foremost a spatial enterprise that confronts those who partake in its process with new and unknown territories and landscapes. The spatial implications of migration become poignantly clear in the case of Kolkata, where post-partition refugees occupied "every tiny piece of vacant land they could find, whether on pavements or the 'set-asides' along the runways of airfields, in empty houses, on snake-infested marsh and scrubland, and even on the unsanitary verges of sewers and railway tracks" (Chatterji 2007:142). Sanyal (2009:79), moreover, has rightly pointed out that the Bengali word for refugee, *udbastu*, literally means 'those without a home', and therefore directly refers to a notion of place. This in contrast to the Greek term 'asylum', which refers to the absence of rights rather than to the loss of place. Respectively, it can be argued that the path to citizenship, the path of overcoming one's refugee status, is just as much an act of acquiring a home as it is of gaining certain rights.

The case of Kolkata's refugees therefore forms an apt point of departure for challenging the common notion that citizenship is a mere legal status that is equated with a bundle of rights and duties (Sadiq 2008:5). According to Sadiq, this popular conception is underpinned by the wrongful assumption "that *receiving states have a population that is documented* using standardized paperwork" and based solely on the institutional experience of Western states. That India's institutional experience with migration is an entirely different one becomes clear from the fact that over time East-Bengali migrants have been categorized in a variety of contrasting and overlapping ways (see Chatterji 2007; Datta 2012; Van Schendel 2000; Bose 2006). Since the government was not a signatory of the 1951 Convention of Geneva, its use of the term 'refugee' has been casual and "free from the legal niceties and obligations that are associated with it" (Das p.107). This absence of a certain legislative rigor calls for alternative ways of imagining the interplay between migration, citizenship and the state. This challenge has recently been taken up by ethnographers like Sadiq (2008), Das (2011), Anjaria (2011) and Chatterjee (2006) that have all contributed to the conceptual broadening of notions of citizenship, by foregrounding the everyday negotiations that take place between citizens and the state. I seek to add to this debate by analyzing how post-partition refugees have claimed a place for themselves within Kolkata.

This article is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted within two refugee settlements in Kolkata: Chittaranjan Colony and Panchannagram. Both localities cover a

variety of East-Bengali inhabitants – differing in terms of socio-economic background, caste, migration history and legal status. By focusing on two, very different, localities I hope to challenge the unified picture of the refugee struggle that exists throughout the literature. For Rahman and Van Schendel (2003:576) have observed that writings on partition tend to be characterized by a narrow focus on the migration experiences of the *bhadralok* (the educated upper and middle class people), with their nostalgic memories of a lost homeland typically emerging as an icon of Partition in national narratives. I want to nuance this iconic version of Partition, with its glorified account of the refugee struggle, by focusing on people's diverging and continued interactions with the land that they came to inhabit.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REFUGEES, STATE, CITIZENSHIP.

The historic event of Partition was aimed at creating two separate nations, two separate territories and two separate populations, and as such, mirrors the spatial mechanisms of bordering, ordering and othering (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2001) that underscore projects of nation-building. Chatterji (1999) has pointed out that, in the case of India, the territorial emergence of the country has been typically depicted as the almost surgical "cutting up" of larger British India. In fact she has criticized the discursive tendency to "view partition as a single, definitive act, a clean-cut vivisection that was executed – with clinical precision – in a single stroke" (p.186). Chatterji (1999:186) herself, on the contrary, conceives of Partition as a messy, long-drawn-out process that was in no sense finally or tidily concluded. This unfinished, messy quality of partition comes to the fore when dealing with the massive population upheaval that was instigated by the event and that can be understood as the outcome of the territorial articulation of deep-felt differences between Muslims and Hindus.

The demographic impact of Partition was felt most strongly in the two border states that were divided: Punjab and Bengal. In Punjab the drawing of the so-called Radcliff line resulted in genocidal outbreaks of violence followed by an immediate and massive influx/exodus of refugees on both sides of the border (Chatterji 2007; Kudaisya 1996). In the province of West-Bengal, on the contrary, the influx of refugees was gradual and more often the result of simmering hostility and distinct instances of communal riots rather than of widespread genocide (Chatterji 2007:998). In fact, for a long time the government of West-Bengal was reluctant to acknowledge the reality of the upheaval in Bengal and East-Bengali refugees were typically framed as less 'deserving' of a permanent place to stay than their Punjabi counterparts (Datta 2012:126). Samir Kumar Das (2000:12), moreover, observes that "there was a time lag between preparing for Partition and preparing to face the consequences of Partition", as the government expected the refugees in the east to return to Pakistan after the dust-storm of Partition and communal riots had settled.

In order to uphold the myth that refugees would eventually move back to East-Bengal, government work was initially restricted to relief rather than to rehabilitation (Das 2000:12). This narrow focus on relief coincided with a narrow definition of 'refugees' and therefore of those that were actually entitled to relief. Refugees were initially defined as "persons ordinarily resident in East Bengal who had managed to get to West Bengal between the precise dates of 1 June 1947 and 25 June 1948, 'on account of civil disturbances or fear of such disturbances or the Partition of

India” (Chatterji 2001:77). Datta has observed that Government of India tied itself in various linguistic and administrative knots in trying to deny the East-Bengali refugees their ‘refugee’ status. In fact, aftermath of Partition witnessed the constant reproduction and revision of the category ‘refugee’ (Datta 2012:127), as is epitomized by the government’s discursive invention of categories such as ‘refugees’, ‘old migrants’, ‘new migrants’ and ‘displaced people’. The government’s attempts at narrowly stipulating who would be granted relief and rehabilitation and on what terms, was met with resistance from the side of the refugees. Refugee activists challenged the narrow administrative notions of ‘refugee hood’, by claiming fundamental rights for *all* refugees (Chatterji 2001:95), which included the right to determine how, when and where they would be rehabilitated (p. 96). Hence, the refugees’ claims reflect their refusal to surrender to the legislative whims and quirks of the state.

The institutional ambivalence that besieged the notion of refugee status and the fact that the refugees of West-Bengal engaged in a highly dialectical relationship with the state calls for a theoretical approach that acknowledges the flexibility and elasticity of notions of citizenship. Sadiq (2008:5) outlines such an approach in advocating a moving away from ‘paper’ notions of citizenship or, what he describes as, the problematic idea that citizenship equates a static bundle of legal rights and obligations. According to Sadiq this conception is based solely on the institutional experience of Western states, as it is underpinned by the assumption “that *receiving states have a population that is documented* using standardized paperwork” (p.5). The case of Bengal poses a challenge to this idea of “documented citizenship” – not only because it epitomizes a lack of legibility when it comes to the classification of refugees, but also because of the dynamic dialogue that took place between the state and the refugees over what can be legitimately expected from the state. Chatterji (2001:78) has observed that “[a]s both sides argued their corner, they were forced to spell out their own (often unexamined) assumptions on a range of critically important issues about the ethical prerogatives of citizenship and the imperatives of *realpolitik*”.

A similar aspect of negotiation between the state and its (potential) citizens is brought to the fore by Anjaria (2011) in his article on the spatial politics of unlicensed hawkers in Mumbai. Anjaria shows how abstract notions of sovereign power are undermined by “moments of compromise that enable people to make morally infused demands on the state that exceed a proceduralist regime” (p.168). He illustrates these ‘moments of compromise’ by giving ethnographic examples that indicate the ways in which unlicensed hawkers negotiate with the Municipal Corporation over the release of their property, which is appropriated ever so often in an attempt to decongest the city. This negotiation can be verbal, but is also conveyed through the simple act of standing in front of the office and hence creating a presence that is considered to be a nuisance. Similar modes of negotiation can be observed in the case of East-Bengali refugees, whose physical presence can be considered to be just as persuasive as their verbal claims to fundamental rights. Moreover, Anjaria’s (2011:58) conception of the state as a locus for the negotiation and legitimation of spatial claims, rather than an extension of disciplinary power, is particularly insightful in making sense of the ways in which refugees negotiate over the conditions of their rehabilitation.

The work of Veena Das (2011) on slum dwellers in New Delhi can be rendered helpful in further elucidating the link between politics of claim-making and habitation. Das's approach resonates with the one outlined by Anjaria (2011) as she conceptualizes citizenship as an everyday claim that people make. By means of addressing attention to the "minutiae of everyday life" (p. 331) Das seeks to bypass the problematic dichotomy between political life on the one hand and biological life on the other. For, she argues that there is a scholarly tendency of reducing those who encounter the state from a position of marginality or illegality, such as slum dwellers, to notions of 'bare life' – stripping them of any political potential. The poor, for example, are often denied the capability of engaging in any meaningful form politics, as they are perceived as 'caught up' in the struggle of ensuring their biological existence. Das, however, hints at the possibility for a certain convergence between the pursuit of preserving biological life on the one hand and political claims to citizenship on the other. She demonstrates how slum dwellers' claims to public goods, such as drinking water, are often granted, not because of an articulation of civic rights, but because the masses of poor city dwellers form a potentially threatening biological presence (Das 2011:327). Claims to drinking water, for example, were honored because the city municipality feared for massive cholera outbreaks. Hence, here claims are granted, not because of a political articulation of rights, but because of an expanding biological presence that becomes impossible to ignore. The East-Bengali refugees similarly became an un-ignorable biological presence in Kolkata and to some extent their acts of simply occupying space can be seen as a claim to citizenship. In this article I will further analyze the dynamic interplay between the refugees' physical act of settlement and the politicized struggle for land rights, and in doing so I will strive toward a theoretical conflation of biological and political life.

3. RESEARCH POPULATION: THE REFUGEES OF WEST-BENGAL

A powerful image that is often deployed when it comes to describing the plight of the Partition refugees is that of the 'penniless refugee', arriving in India with nothing but the clothes on his body. The imagery evokes a certain unanimity of despair, epitomizing the shared necessity of those who crossed the border. The academic literature on the Partition of Bengal, however, suggests that not all refugees were equally penniless. In fact, the refugees that came to West-Bengal comprised a great variety of people stemming from different socio-economic backgrounds and crossing the border for different reasons. Those who came first, immediately after India gained independence, "consisted of the more wealthy classes, mostly upper caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes with jobs, [...] who could sell or arrange exchanges of properties" (Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury 2014:3). In the direct aftermath of Partition low-caste, Namasudra peasants were virtually absent from the groups of incoming refugees, as they lacked the resources that migration required (Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury 2014:3). They started fleeing from 1950s onwards, when Muslim/Hindu relations turned increasingly hostile and more and more riots broke out. Chatterji (2007:188) remarks that "[w]hen low-caste peasants did migrate, they tended to do so under circumstances rather different from those which persuaded the better-off to get up and leave. By and large, they abandoned the little they possessed in the east only when they were driven out by extreme violence or by intolerable hardship". Chaudhury (2009:7), moreover, has argued that people's motives to seek refuge in West-Bengal revolved

around different notions of insecurity, notably that of *dhon* (wealth), *maan* (honour) and *pran* (life). The exodus of the *bhadralok*, immediately after the Partition, can be explained in terms of their fear of losing *dhon* and *maan* as the division of Bengal had made them into a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority state (Chaudhury 2009:7; Sanyal 2009:69). The generally poor Namasudra peasants that left East-Pakistan from the 1950s onwards, on the other hand, did so because they feared of losing their lives rather than their wealth or honour, as anti-Hindu sentiments in East-Bengal increasingly assumed the form of widespread massacres and bloodshed (Chaudhury 2009:7).

In the twenty-five years following Partition approximately six million Hindu refugees entered West-Bengal (Chatterji 2007:998). As we have seen this massive influx was diversified in terms of caste, socio-economic status, time of departure, and reasons for leaving. These differences are to some extent reflected in the modes of settlement among the refugees. Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury (2014:7) have observed that “[w]hen the first wave of mainly high caste Hindu *bhadralok* refugees had arrived in West Bengal, they had their own resources and kin-group support. Many of them resettled themselves in squatter colonies in and around Calcutta, and the government after initial hesitation endorsed that mode of rehabilitation”. The practice of squatting, or *jabardakhal* (the ‘forcible occupation of land’) started from 1948 onwards and exemplifies the way in which refugees took destiny into their own hands and enforced their own rehabilitation (Datta 2012:129). These attempts at self-settlement coincided with considerable hardships, due to the inhospitable qualities of the occupied land and the general condition of tenure insecurity, yet nonetheless self-settlement was in many ways preferable above settlement in one of the government camps. In order to deal with the unprecedented influx of refugees the government set up different types of camps: transit camps, work-site camps and permanent liability⁴ camps (Sengupta 2011:103). It were typically poor peasants that ended up taking shelter in the camps, as they lacked the social and economic capital to settle on their own terms (Chaudhury 2009:20).

In addition to socio-economic status, time of arrival also affected people’s mode of settlement. For, those who left East-Pakistan after the riots that occurred in 1950-1951, did so under circumstances of significant turmoil that compelled them to abandon their houses instantly and resulted in people arriving more or less empty-handed and without any means for securing shelter other than taking residence in one of the camps (Chatterji 2007:1009). The camps themselves proved painstakingly inadequate in their function: the provision of relief, notably *doles* and shelter. In fact, Chatterji (2007:1007) remarks that it became “a standard practice in the camps to starve the inmates into complying with government orders”. One issue that the government and the refugees did not agree on was their future resettlement. The West Bengal Government advocated for rehabilitation outside of Bengal, as they took up the view “that the refugees were not its sole responsibility but, rather, a burden which ought to be shared jointly among the federal government and those of the neighbouring states” (Kudaisya 1996:29)⁵. The

⁴ In the permanent liability camps those who were perceived as otherwise ‘unfit’ for rehabilitation, such as the old, the invalid and the widowed, were accommodated (Das 2003:123).

⁵ In fact, the refugees that entered West Bengal between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971 (Bose 2006:64), the so-called ‘New Migrants’, were only considered eligible for relief if they agreed upon settlement outside of the border states (Chatterji 2007:1005).

sites that were selected as resettlement schemes were typically inhospitable places where the refugees would be expected to engage in demanding forms of physical labor, such as crushing rocks, as a means of contributing to Government construction and infrastructural projects. The most infamous resettlement scheme was the Danadakaranya project, located at the intersection between Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The refugees that were sent to Dandakaranya were used to clear and cultivate the thickly forested area that was suspected to be rich of unexplored mineral resources. (Kudaisya 1996:32). Although the scheme was meant to develop into a site of permanent settlement, the living conditions were appalling as “[e]lectricity was not available over large areas and there was often an acute shortage of drinking water. The lack of medical services and the rough terrain led to frequent epidemics with a high rate of child mortality that unsettled the refugees” (Sengupta 2011:107). These conditions of hardship increasingly led to cases of desertion and the horror stories of Dandakaranya strengthened the refugees back in West Bengal in their claims to “the right to determine how, when and where they were to be rehabilitated” (Chatterji 2001:96).

The two different colonies I focus on in this research are outcomes of different aspects of the struggle for rehabilitation in West Bengal. Chittaranjan Colony originated in 1950 as one of the many ‘jabardakhal’ communities that sprouted in South Kolkata at the time. In addition to squatting, which in itself can be viewed as an act of political resistance, the inhabitants of the colonies became very proactive in politically articulating their demands to housing and land (Sanyal 2009:77). They campaigned against evictions and advocated for “more equitable laws imposing ceilings on the amount of urban land which the privileged could own” (Chatterji 2007:293). In doing so, they worked in tandem with the Communist Party. Chakrabarti (1990) has exemplified this relationship of mutualism by elucidating that whereas the Communists provided the refugees with leadership for their struggle for rehabilitation, the refugees provided the Communists with the electoral support that would eventually bring them to power in West Bengal. The fact that the Communists relied heavily on the support of the refugees, led them to encourage the camp refugees to agitate against rehabilitation outside West Bengal (Kudaisya 1996:32). Panchannagram, the second locality that I focus on in this paper, originated in 1967 as an outcome of this struggle, for the area was designated as an urban resettlement scheme for camp refugees that refused to be relocated outside of Bengal. By focusing on both self-settled and camp refugees I strive to do justice to the great socio-economic variety of the refugees that came to live in Kolkata. In addition, by presenting the narratives of residents from two very different localities, I seek to diversify our understanding of the ‘refugee experience’ and to help divert the trend in Post-Partition historiography of taking *bhadralok* migration as a *pars pro toto* for the large and complex set of cross-border migration that was fueled by Partition (Rahman and Van Schendel 2003:576).

4. BUILDING A PLACE TO STAY

Kolkata’s experience with Partition has typically been framed in terms of relentless human congestion and a severe scarcity of space. Old newspaper photographs underscore the sheer

magnitude of the refugee 'problem'; depicting fully crammed trains coming in from Pakistan to deposit their human load⁶. In Kolkata the platforms of Sealdah railway station were among the first urban spaces to be involuntarily transformed into refugee settlements. Many of those who arrived from East-Pakistan, especially people without relatives in the city, simply pitched camp amidst the everyday chaos of hurrying passengers, hoping that the government would eventually come to their aid (Sanyal 2009:70; Kaviraj 1997:104). Chatterji (2007:142-143) describes how this accumulating presence of East-Bengali arrivals gradually transformed the overall geography of West Bengal:

"Refugees had literally filled up every empty space in and around the big towns, particularly in the great metropolis of Calcutta, occupying every tiny piece of vacant land they could find, whether on pavements or the 'set-asides' along the runways of airfields, in empty houses, on snake-infested marsh and scrubland, and even on the unsanitary verges of sewers and railway tracks".

The above quotation does not only demonstrate the challenging conditions under which East-Bengali refugees settled in the city, but also hints at a rather drastic process of spatial transformation incited by people's appropriation of urban spaces. In Kolkata, the absence of satisfactory places for settlement not only led the refugees to occupy and recycle certain public spaces, such as railway platforms, parks and garden houses (Kaviraj 1997:104), but also instigated the reclamation of land from water bodies and the cultivation of low lying marshlands. In fact, the pieces of land that Post-Partition refugees came to inhabit in Kolkata hardly existed of actual 'land' at all. When asked to describe how their neighborhood used to look like, most of my informants would immediately start talking about water. The water used to come up to people's knees and formed the main element of a landscape consisting of jungle, swamps and wetlands. Hence, the struggle for settlement was a struggle with both land and water.

In Panchannagram the mastering of land and water proved to be a slow and rather painful process that was time and again undermined by the hostility of the terrain. Today Panchannagram scheme covers a large and congested area, located directly next to Kolkata's main transportation artery: the E.M. Bypass. In 1967, when the first residents came to the locality the E.M. Bypass was still a muddy, unpaved road that led through an area consisting predominantly out of water. A senior resident recalled that the nearest bus stop could only be reached by boat, as the water would reach five feet high. He was among the first 121 East-Bengali families that settled in Panchannagram and that set up modest tent camp at a small peninsula surrounded by ponds and fisheries. It took over seven years for the community to transform the nearby wetlands into useful and livable plots of land. To this end, the ponds were filled with a mix of mud and wasted coal. Ashim Biswas, a member of the local communist party, described how young men would stand in the water all day long to fill the ponds; the legs of their trousers tied tightly around the ankles as to prevent leeches from creeping up. It took a long time before the space that was generated in this manner actually served the needs of its inhabitants. In many ways this new place of settlement did not seem livable at all. The small island that formed the base of the first improvised

⁶ This popular image is for example displayed on the cover of "Savage Harvest. Stories of Partition" (Singh Sarna 2013) and "The Holocaust of Indian Partition: An Inquest" (Godbole 2006).

tent camp was swarming with flies and mosquitos and used to function as a public toilet for laborers running a laundry business at the lakeside. Tara Bisas, a 70-year old lady, recalled not being able to see the mud of the soil when she first came to the area because it was covered in flies. The swarms of mosquitos, moreover, forced people to spend most of their time under a mosquito-net. "We became the guests of mosquitos and flies" emphasized writer Gopal Hira, citing from the small book that he has written on the history of Panchannagram. He described how people were no longer able to recognize each other as their faces had been altered beyond recognition by the many mosquito bites. Another resident, Shyamal Biswas, vividly described how people's arms would turn red because of the extensive scratching and bleeding. He moreover complained about the horrible smells that would suffocate their locality when the wind came from the direction of the nearby leather factory. All in all it seemed almost impossible for the East-Bengali residents of Panchannagram to effectively separate themselves from their challenging environment and to successfully secrete a distinct place of residence.

In Chittaranjan Colony (C.R. Colony), refugees found themselves in a similarly sensorial encounter with their direct living environment. This now thriving neighborhood, located south of Jadavpur University, used to look like a 'remote village' when it first originated in 1950. When asked to describe how the area looked like in his youth Pankaj Roychowdry elaborated: "Imagine travelling by train, sitting next to the window. Land passing by; there is no petty, no cultivation, just barren land. There are some huts, but you cannot spot the last hut, because it is beyond the scope of vision. You will not find a single piece of brick, just some huts." In depicting this landscape of the past, my informants tended to use the word 'kaca' in order to describe the erstwhile structures of their direct living environment. 'Kaca' means 'raw' or 'unpaved' and is opposed to 'paka' which can either mean 'ripe', 'paved' or simply 'good'. The first houses, roads and drains were all 'kaca', something which resulted in relatively flexible boundaries between inside and outside. The first houses did not offer much protection to their inhabitants as they were typically made of *bera* walls (woven bamboo panels) and roofs consisting of *hugla* leaves. In fact, the overall landscape was characterized by the absence of adequate physical boundaries. Hori Chand Mondol, who is originally from Faridpur, for example explained how during the rainy season the many ponds in the area would overflow; causing houses to flood and streets to transform into canals where fish would swim. Pankaj Roychowdry, moreover, recalled how young men used to wade through the water and mud every day in order to reach the main road, from where they would start their daily quest for work.

Despite the considerable everyday hardships that the residents of the colonies faced in their efforts to inhabit the inhospitable terrain that surrounded them, their productive labor of creating a satisfactory place of settlement continued. Gradually the tents in Panchannagram were replaced by small houses made out of *bera* or '*pather kath*'⁷ (a very thin layer of wood) and the vulnerable 'hugla' roofs in C.R. Colony were eventually replaced by tiles. Horidasi Mondal, a female resident of Panchannagram, saw her house evolve slowly over time: first the flimsy roof of *pather kath* was replaced by tiles, next the walls were transformed into *bera* structures before they were eventually entirely replaced by brick. The locality thus gradually improved as more permanent and effective dwelling structures were erected. Notwithstanding this slow process of urban

⁷ Literally 'pather kath' means 'wood leaves'.

development, the struggle with the landscape continued long after the actual plots of land had been developed. During the monsoon the nearby ponds and drains would overflow, causing the water to enter people's houses. Many of my informants recalled spending most of the rainy season sitting on the bed with the whole family in order to stay dry. Hori Chand Mondol, described how his family used to create a small barrier of mud and wood in front of the house in order to protect their belongings from all the water, but more often than not this boundary would prove insufficient and the family would simply seek refuge on the bed until the water would eventually withdraw. Another threat presented itself in the form of typhoons. Ashim Biswas described how those families whose rooftops were made of galvanized sheet instead of tiles used to hold on to the roof with ropes during the storm, in order to prevent it from blowing away. Despite those improvised attempts at protection many families went through the ordeal of respectively losing and rebuilding their house. "The houses were simply too weak", Rabindranath Sorkar explained, "and often families would again be rendered homeless".

The constant process of building and rebuilding that the inhabitants of the colonies engaged in is indicative of their constant interaction with the environment. People were at times almost subsumed by the sensorial qualities of the wider landscape and, at first sight, their almost all-encompassing struggle for shelter and subsistence did not seem to allow much room for political potential, let alone resistance. Veena Das (2011), however, has warned against the scholarly tendency of stripping poor city dwellers from their political qualities by framing their struggles solely in terms of 'bare life'. The notion of 'bare life' was first coined by Giorgio Agamben (1998) in order to make sense of the lives and suffering of people placed outside the domain of law, and has been popularly applied by scholars dealing with issues of refugees and illegal migrants (See for example: Lentin 2007; Schinkel 2011; Pope et al. 2013). Veena Das (2011:319) has rightly pointed out that an application of Agamben's philosophy results in a rather rigid distinction between biological life on the one hand and political life on the other. In her article on citizenship among slum dwellers in New Delhi, Das circumvents this binary dichotomy by conceptualizing citizenship not as a judicial status but as a mere claim that people make. She shows how for example claims to clean drinking water are granted, not because slum dwellers have a legal right to drinking water, but because the municipality fears for cholera outbreaks that will eventually spread to the rest of the city (2011:327).

This tension between notions of 'bare life' and the simmering spirit of possibility that is inherent to life itself was also apparent in the narratives of the refugees I spoke to in Kolkata. In fact, several of my informants evoked images of 'bare life' when describing the conditions under which they first arrived in Kolkata. Pankaj Roychowdry emphasized that the refugees arrived 'penniless' in Kolkata; they had no land, no house and no food. Mr. Dasgupta, moreover, stressed that most refugees arrived with only the clothes they had on them. Hori Chand Mondol further underscored the unified character of the refugee struggle, as he explained that: "At that time everybody was very poor. People struggled; everyone was new here. Everybody struggled to get shelter and food". These declarations of suffering and endurance, however, generally served a more uplifting story, as they were used to underline what had been achieved over time. Hori Chand Mondol emphasized the strength of his father during this initial phase of suffering; Mr. Dasgupta proclaimed that all refugees are hard workers as a consequence of the hardships they

endured; and Pankaj Roychowdry spoke of a 'glorious history' when recalling how they fought unitedly to acquire a place to stay. He added proudly that he built the roads within the locality with his own hands. Hence, in these narratives the struggle for shelter and survival does not emerge as a degenerative, a-political strife for subsistence, but rather as a token of the strength, endurance and unity with which the refugees acquired a place for themselves within the city. This observation resonates with the line of arguing that Sanyal (2010) unfolds in her analysis of practices of dwelling and building in refugee camps. Sanyal (2010:877) states that the built environment within the camps bears testimony of a certain agency that refugees are often discursively deprived of; observing that "squattening not only produces shelter but is also an act of rebellion". In the next paragraph I will address further attention to the rebellious potential that derives from inhabiting certain spaces, by focusing on the ways in which refugees' productive labor of generating land and shelter coincided with attempts to ensure a place within the political entity of the city.

5. CLAIMING A PLACE TO STAY

The potential of resistance and political agency that, according to Sanyal (2010), simmers beneath the surface of the built environment is inherent to the term that was used for the ways in which East-Bengali refugees appropriated land in Kolkata, namely '*jabardakhal*' or the 'forceful occupation of land' (Sanyal 2009:72). Chittaranjan Colony is an example of a settlement that originated through practices of '*jabardakhal*'. Like in the case of so many refugee colonies, the occupation of land was overseen and initiated by Left Wing community leaders. In order to facilitate political decision making, a Colony Committee was founded immediately after the first people had settled in the area. Its members gathered regularly at the central *khelar math* (playing field) in order to plan and map out the development and distribution of the land. These first attempts at spatial organization were undermined by the fact that the land itself, though largely uncultivated, officially belonged to local landowners. These local landlords plead their case with the authorities, demanding that the police should evict the refugees. As a consequence, the new inhabitants of C.R. Colony found themselves literally battling over land. Sukhomo Roy, a 77-year old musician, recalled the police entering the neighborhood to evict them. However, they never succeeded in doing so as the refugees were united under the leadership of the Colony Committee and fought back – for once taking advantage of the inhospitable terrain that allowed them to effectively hide from the police. Pankaj Roychowdry explained that all families contributed 2 Rs to invest in a local night guard system. In fact, he himself used to be one of the night guards and recalls fighting the police with bamboo sticks.

The refugees, however, did not merely engage in a physical encounter with the long arm of the state, but also found more conventional political channels for objecting against their attempted eviction. Sanyal (2009:77) observes that "[s]quattening was only part of the challenge refugees posed to the state regarding their rehabilitation. Refugees became proactive at a political level as well in order to demand the right to housing and squattening." The political potential of the refugees becomes evident in their effective opposition of the so-called Eviction Bill that was drafted by the government of West-Bengal in 1951. The draft stipulated that the government had the undisputed right to evict squatters in order to protect private property (Chatterji 2001:100). The refugees

ferociously protested against the implementation of this law, as they united themselves under the umbrella group of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC). UCRC's demand for the recognition of all refugee colonies and the massive rallies that were carried out in Maidan, eventually led to a revision of the draft (Sanyal 2009:77). The exception was made that "no order for eviction or compensation would be executed against a displaced person, who on 31 December 1950 was in unauthorized occupation 'until the Government provided for alternative land'." (Das 2003:145) The new version of the bill was titled "The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorized Occupation of Land Act" (Sanyal 2009:77) and can be seen as an attempt by the government to reconcile the property rights of landowners with the necessity of accommodating the requirements of the settlers (Das 2003:145). For the compelling reality was such that there was little room left in Kolkata to accommodate the crowds of refugees. So here we have a fine example of how certain claims were granted, not on the basis of civic rights but simply because the refugees became too large of a group to ignore. The case of Chittaranjan Colony (and that of similar Colonies in South Kolkata) therefore epitomizes the capacity for effectively reworking the control over urban spaces that underpins acts of occupation, and as such, underscores the political potential of seemingly unimaginative everyday acts of using and inhabiting space.

Although acts of squatting were implicitly allowed after the initial years of contest and combat over the land, the distribution of land titles and therefore the legal recognition of the fact that the East-Bengali refugees were in Kolkata to stay, took a great deal longer. On the first occasion that I spoke with leader Pankaj Roychowdry, he highlighted the plight of Kolkata's refugees by emphasizing that the inhabitants of C.R. Colony struggled for over 40 years to earn legal ownership over the plots they were inhabiting. During those years of struggle many community leaders were put behind bars, yet according to Mr. Roychowdry, this never resulted in a crisis of leadership as there would always be new leaders to step forward. Under the overall leadership of the URRC *lakhs* of refugees rallied and demonstrated in front of the State Assembly on a daily basis. Mr. Lahiri, who was only seven when his family came to Kolkata, recalled how throughout his childhood all his relatives used to demonstrate in front of the State Assembly. Everybody was marching in those days as they protested for 'recognition, economic development and social development'. The upsurge of the refugee movement went hand in hand with the rise of communism in West-Bengal. Manas Ray (2002:151), who himself grew up in one of Kolkata's refugee colonies, writes: "[t]he Left very early on utilized the widespread frustration among refugees about the lackadaisical rehabilitation initiatives of the local government. In the course of time, the refugee population would provide the Communist Party of India (CPI) with cadres and also some of its prominent leaders". Considering this relationship of mutualism⁸ between the refugees and the communist party, it is hardly surprising that it was shortly after CPI(M) – the Marxist affiliation of the CPI – came to power in 1977, that efforts were finally being made to grant the refugees legal ownership over the land. The land was (re-)distributed under the joined supervision of the Refugee and Rehabilitation Department and local Colony Committee and from 1981 onwards the inhabitants of the *udbastu* colonies gradually received their land deeds. The land-agreement was stipulated as a '99-year lease' (Ray 2002:175), which was restricted by the condition that families could not sell the land within ten years after receiving their land titles.

⁸ See also Prafulla Chakrabarti (1990).

In the case of Panchannagram the struggle for land evolved somewhat differently than in C.R. Colony, considering that this struggle by and large preceded the refugees' actual settlement in Kolkata. The first 121 families that arrived in Panchannagram invariably came from one of the worksite camps in West-Bengal. Taking shelter in one of the government-run camps was often the only option for the many agriculturalist refugees that found their way to West-Bengal in the early fifties (see Kudaisya 1996:20). This particular group of refugees typically belonged to the scheduled cast and often lacked the social and economic capital to settle on their own terms, also because the condition of increased violence in East-Bengal had given them little time to actually prepare for their migratory move (Chatterji 2007:1009). The camp refugees were granted a minimum of food and cash, but those that were healthy and strong enough had to work in return. The work included digging canals, cutting mud and constructing roads and the laborers and their families were shifted from one worksite to the other (Das 2000:17). Over time the government of West-Bengal came up with a plan to resettle the camp refugees in other states of India; finally recognizing that the refugee problem was by no means temporary. These plans were informed by the 'theory of saturation' which postulated that it was no longer possible for West-Bengal to receive and rehabilitate any more migrants (Das 2002:136). Consequently "it was officially decided that only those who were willing to move outside of West Bengal for resettlement would thenceforth be provided with Government help and assistance" (Das 2002:136). The plans to resettle refugees outside of West Bengal were viewed with increasing distrust by the camp refugees themselves. Rabindranath Sorkar, who was among the first batch of refugees that settled in Panchannagram, remarked bitterly that the government's attempt at resettlement was just a way of getting rid of low-caste refugees. Rumor had it that the land that was reserved for the refugees was barren and not at all cultivatable. In some of these areas, for example the Dandakranya scheme⁹, the government ran projects that required slave-like physical labor such as crushing rocks. People therefore grew particularly suspicious of the motives of the government for resettlement. Kalipada Datta, yet another inhabitant of Panchannagram, expressed the opinion that the Nehru government strategically sent low-caste refugees to areas where they would slowly die; forest areas where they ran the danger of being eaten by tigers or areas that were particularly dirty and unhealthy.

This growing distrust of the government resulted in an uprising of camp refugees who started demonstrating for resettlement in Bengal. Like in the case of C.R. Colony the struggle of the refugees was indissoluble intertwined with the political advance of the Left front. The fact that the Communists relied heavily on the electoral support of the refugees, led them to encourage the camp refugees' agitation against rehabilitation outside West Bengal (Kudaisya 1996:32). Ghoshal (2012:29), moreover explained that "[f]rom the early 1960s, the CPI started organizing *anasan satyagrahas* (hunger strikes) as an effective method of agitation". Gopal Hira recalled how the communist party would unite hundredths of people to demonstrate; using slogans such as: "We will not leave Bengal. Even if we have to sacrifice all our blood, we will not leave Bengal". Initially the government responded by cutting off food and other services that were provided within the camps, such as medical treatment and education. Rabindranath Sorkar explained: "When we

⁹ The Dandakaranya resettlement scheme, located at the intersection between Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, became particularly infamous due to its thickly forested and inhospitable terrain (see for example Kudaisya 1996).

refused to take rehabilitation outside West Bengal the government stopped paying *doles*". He continued to elucidate how many refugees in the camps started weaving and trading mats, made out of *hugla* leaves, to earn some money. This new found profession was a reason for the refugees to demand settlement close to the city of Kolkata, as they needed a market for their products. It was in the year 1967 that some of the camp refugees eventually saw their demands being honored as they were granted the opportunity to resettle in the Panchannagram. In the selection of Panchannagram as a site for resettlement an important role was played by Debrendanath Sorkar, whose statue has been erected in Panchannagram to commemorate the legacy of his advocacy. He represented a group of likeminded camp refugees at the Refugee Rehabilitation Center; stressing their desire to settle near Kolkata. On a map of Kolkata Panchannagram scheme was pointed out to him as potential scheme of settlement. After an initial visit to the actual site, Debendranath Sorkar enlisted 121 refugee families with whom he would settle at the small island of rubbish that Panchannagram was at the time.

Although C.R. Colony and Panchannagram have distinct and diverging histories, both cases show how the refugees successfully put themselves in a position of negotiation with the state. On the side of the refugees this negotiation coincided with the politicization of their overall struggle for shelter and subsistence. This becomes clear in for example, the slogans that the refugees used during their marches of protest. Gopal Hira recalled one these slogans, which clearly revolves around a notion of basic needs: "Give us blankets or we will use force". Another story that the writer shared, similarly demonstrated the politicization of notions of necessity. He told how after the locality of Panchannagram had once again been devastated by flood he accompanied Debendranath Sorkar to the Writer's Building to advocate their case. The community leader instructed that they should go in a *lungi* rather than putting on their finest clothes, so that the officials would be able to assess the severity of the situation. Hence, here we see how the articulation and performance of necessity serves to make moral, rather than legal, claims to the State. Veena Das (2011:324) has argued that the texture of moral claims to citizenship is characterized by notions of life and law bleeding into one another. This is clearly visible in the case of East Bengali refugees in West Bengal, for Chatterji (2001:98) has observed that "[m]uch of what the refugees claimed as of right was economic in nature: food, clothes, medicine, housing, education and jobs". In a sense, however, these very practical demands are implicit claims to citizenship. This is true in particular when it comes to claims to landownership; for the demand for land can both be seen as a practical claim to shelter and as an expression of the wish to obtain the legal right to stay. What the case of Kolkata and its refugees, therefore, aptly shows is that negotiations over citizenship do not only take place in the legislative, discursive sphere of formal politics, but are also carved out in the landscape of the city itself as people build and appropriate a place for themselves in the city.

This indissoluble relationship between notions of refugeehood/citizenship and the land that people came to inhabit becomes clear in the narratives of my informants as they reflect upon how the identity of their locality has changed over time. For, both colonies are perceived to have altered drastically after the initial phase of struggle gave way to the stable state of landownership. This change manifested itself, for example, in the outlook of the locality which had been gradually 'developed'. A shop owner observed: "Now it is developed here; there is electricity and there are

roads. Now when an outsider comes here they cannot recognize that this used to be a colony if they don't know the history" Hori Chand Mondol also remarked that it would not be possible for an outsider to recognize this area as a colony, since all the houses are '*paka*' now. Sukhoma Ray, moreover, disclosed that only old people, like he himself, still refer to this locality as a refugee colony. He anticipated that the government would soon change the name. "In a sense", he observed, "the refugee colony ceased to exist after land rights were granted".

The view that refugee identity started to diminish after land rights had been granted was expressed by several of my informants. Mr. Roychowdry, for example, remarked:

"The irony is that when we refugee people got the ownership over the land, our mental state radically changed. And a new course of thinking started to flow among colony people: that their fight is over and that they can survive alone. What is the irony? We have lost our integrity, our unity, our brotherhood".

He explained that when the security of shelter came a more individualistic way of thinking started to originate: "There is nobody to uproot me, so I don't need any association, or help, or friendship for survival". Hence, for Mr. Roychowdry it is the unity that characterized their everyday struggles both with and for the land that lies at the core of his experience of refugee hood. Pradip Kumar Lahiri, also described their community in terms of unity: "The unity was very strong, because everybody was struggling for land rights. Everybody used to gather in the field to play together, do theater together and celebrate Puja together". Gopal Ghosh, who like Mr. Lahiri grew up in Chittaranjan Colony, recalled that there was a strong unity among neighbors and relatives. If one person needed help everyone would come to their assistance. However Mr. Ghosh added that this situation changed gradually after 1989: "Everything changed after people got land rights. They got snobbish and people did not even recognize their own brother anymore. Nobody is helping each other". This perceived change of identity was also mirrored in name changes that occurred within the area. The United Refugee School in C.R. Colony, for example, became simply the 'United School' and Gopal Hira explained how parts of Panchannagram were renamed as well; as was the case for the area VIP Nagar. The writer, moreover, contemplated: "We don't call this a refugee colony anymore. Even in the address it only says 'Panchannagram'".

So bit by bit both localities were stripped of their refugee identity and gradually transformed into regular city neighborhoods. With the difference that C.R. Colony has now established itself as a middle class neighborhood, whereas Panchannagram still exists as a squatter settlement. Also within both communities there are stark differences when it comes to the extent to which people have benefited from urban development. Both localities still have residents that did not yet receive their land deeds and within both localities emerging flats can be seen next to huts of *bera*. In C.R. colony I spoke to a man, Mr. Gopal Bonik, who still resides in a *bera* house. In his opinion the locality is still a refugee colony; he explained that some places are still not very developed and that some people are still waiting for their land deeds. Mr. Bonik still considers himself to be a refugee, considering that he still *lives* like a refugee. "Only when my sons grow up and get proper jobs" he remarked "I will stop calling myself a refugee". So here we see again that the aspect of struggle is elemental to ideas of refugee hood and, furthermore, that refugee identity is heavily invested with notions of place. This also becomes clear from the

discourses of two sisters-in-law. Both ladies migrated from East-Pakistan, but when asked if they considered themselves to be refugees they explained that they had directly purchased their land from local landlords and therefore did not cling to a refugee identity. Their experiences not only point to the immense diversity that exists within the colony community, but also demonstrates once again that people's relation with the land had a profound impact on their journey toward citizenship.

6. CONCLUSION

I started this article with a quote by one of my informants, Mr. Roychowdry, who stated that the refugees established their rights not legally, but practically. In the course of this paper I have tried to demonstrate exactly how true these words are. Often the relationship between refugees and the state is framed as a predominantly judicial one that revolves around legislative notions and conditions that stipulate citizenship. In the particular case of West Bengal much scholarly attention has been paid to ways in which the government dealt with the refugee crisis and its frantic attempts to somehow make this immense crisis legible by constantly revising and narrowing down the notion of 'refugee'. It has been my aim to highlight a very practical dimension of the refugee struggle, by taking refugees' everyday acts of building and taking shelter as a point of departure for analyzing the ways in which they have acquired a (legitimate) place for themselves within the city of Kolkata. I have attempted to show that beneath the seemingly mundane and unimaginative acts of taking shelter, simmers a certain political potential that derives from the subversive act of appropriating space. In the case of Kolkata's refugees these spatial acts of appropriation seamlessly gave into more conventional ways of political action, such as marches and protests. Yet interestingly, even this outright political strive was informed by notions of necessity and practicality. In fact, it was people's everyday struggle for shelter and subsistence that provided refugees with a ground for claiming certain 'rights'. Hence, the everyday hardships that people faced in relation to the inhospitable environment that they came to inhabit cannot be disconnected from the politicized struggle that they fought for land rights (and implicitly for citizenship). In a sense, the land itself became a medium for people's claims to the State, a battleground for conflicting interests and a breeding ground for resilience. It was in and through the city spaces of the colony that people's transition from refugee to citizen gained shape.

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