IN SEARCH OF A PROPER PLACE

DWELLING EXPERIENCES OF EAST-BENGALI MIGRANTS LIVING IN KOLKATA

Annemiek Prins

"To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper."
(De Certeau 1984:103)

De Certeau's definition of walking shows a striking resemblance with migration. For to migrate implies being absent in one's place of origin while searching for new and proper places to stay. Somewhere in this process of leaving, moving, searching and settling migrants run the risk of not only traversing the borders between places but also the border between 'legal' and 'illegal'. For although there is a universal right to leave one's country institutionalized in the treaty of refugees in 1951, there is no universal right to be given asylum (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2001:129). This juridical gap leaves room for individual states to acknowledge, neglect, deport or grant asylum to migrants. It is therefore not surprising that migrant illegality is typically analyzed in relation to the nation-state (see Sassen 2000; De Genova 2002; Ngai 2004; Coutin 2003). De Genova (2002:422) argues that "[i]llegality (much like citizenship) is a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state; as such, it is a preeminently political identity". In this research I seek to go beyond the mere political dimension of migration by focusing, not on the complex relationship that migrants uphold with the state, but on the ways in which they connect and interact with the physical localities where they stay and settle. Hence my emphasis lies not with the juridical undertaking of seeking asylum, but with the everyday undertaking of seeking shelter and with the tension between moving and settling that is inherent to migration. Consequently, I will conceptualize 'migratory status' not as something that is merely constituted by (the absence of) certain documents, such as passports or migration certificates, but as something that gains shape in the ways in which people live and dwell in certain places. I will investigate this particular link between place-making and migratory status by focusing on the dwelling practices of East-Bengali[1] migrants living in the slums of Kolkata.

Ever since Bangladesh partitioned from larger India in 1947[2], Kolkata has attracted a steady influx of migrants from what at the time was called 'East-Pakistan'. This flow of people gained momentum when in 1971 the Liberation War broke out between West and East Pakistan, instigating approximately 10 million people to seek refuge in India (Datta 2004:337). In the years leading up to the independence of Bangladesh, the suburbs of Kolkata came to accommodate a refugee immigration of over three times the original population of the city (Chatterjee 2006) These refugee settlements were commonly referred to as 'colonies' and continue to shape the landscape of Kolkata. Even today 931 refugee colonies are recognized by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development

---

[1] East Bengal refers to contemporary Bangladesh, whereas West Bengal refers to the Indian province West of the Indo-Bangladeshi border. I use the term East-Bengali rather than Bangladeshi migrants, since some of them migrated before the origination of the independent state of Bangladesh.
[2] In 1947 Muhammed Ali Jinnah's 'Two Nation Theory' inspired the separation of the Indian sub-continent into a Muslim and a Hindu part. Whereas West and East Pakistan (contemporary Bangladesh) were characterized by a predominantly Muslim population, India was characterized by a predominantly Hindu population.

Authority and scholars claim that another 998 exist without official sanction (Bose 2006:65). The fact that many of these colonies are the result of illegal occupation of land makes it so that inhabitants are continuously faced with the prospect of displacement. Consequently, the question arises how East-Bengali migrants negotiate a place to stay. Do they live in a permanent state of mobility and volatility or do they manage to utilize communal bonds in securing a stable place? And to what extent do their material living conditions reflect their status as (illegal) migrants? I will further explore these issues by addressing the following research question: "How does the migratory status of East-Bengali immigrants residing in the refugee colonies of Kolkata affect their dwelling practices?" By focusing on the everyday material practices by means of which migrants build their homes and houses, I hope to diversify the contemporary, politicized discourse on migration.

Theoretical Approach

In theorizing illegal migration many contemporary scholars draw on Agamben's notion of 'exceptionality' (see Lentin 2007; Schinkel 2011; De Genova 2002; Pope and Garrett 2013). Agamben uses the term 'state of exception' after Carl Schmitt to make sense of crises situations in which the rule of law is suspended and certain categories of people are reduced to 'bare life' (Lentin 2007). Schinkel (2011:780) follows Agamben's theory in arguing that unbridled migration undermines the sovereignty of contemporary nation-states; an identity crises that nation-states attempt to resolve by labeling certain groups of migrants as 'illegal'; hence placing them outside the domain of law and stripping them of any form of political power. 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 juridical 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 (Das 2011:327). Hence, here we see that claims are granted, not because of a political articulation of rights, but because of an expanding biological presence that becomes impossible to ignore. As such, Das's analysis makes a plea for moving away from a "panoramic view on the State and citizenship" toward "the minutiae of everyday life" (Das 2011:321).

Willen (2007) also pleas for a conception of illegality that takes the rationale of everyday life into account. She (2007:10) argues that "the impact of "illegality" on migrants' everyday, embodied experiences of being-in-the-world" has been understudied as a result of a strong juridical focus. Instead Willen analyzes 'illegality' from a phenomenological perspective, paying attention to the ways in which illegality affects migrants' modes of 'being-in-the-world'[3]. Dwelling in a certain place can be seen as such a mode of being-in-the-world. For "[t]o dwell implies more than to inhabit, to cultivate, or to organize space. It means […] to see one's life as anchored in human history and directed toward a future" (Buttimer 1976:277). Moreover, a focus on dwelling has the potential for bypassing the dichotomy between biological and political life. For although dwelling can be seen as an act of sustaining basic needs, it is also an act by means of which people 'anchor' themselves in

---

[3] The phrase being-in-the-world was first used by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (1963), who has been highly influenced by Heidegger's notion of *dasein.* The term being-in-the-world has been used by philosophers and social scholars that realign themselves with the school of phenomenology and the notion is meant to dissolve the binary categories of mind/body and person/world.

the history of a city; and hence a political act. By means of focusing on the everyday ways in which migrants claim and cultivate their homes, I seek to find a basis for thinking about migratory status without falling into binaries.

Research Population and Location

The distinct case of Kolkata's immigrants pleas for a take on migration that circumvents the common dichotomy between legality and illegality. Throughout the literature it becomes clear that over time East-Bengali migrants have been labeled in a variety of contrasting and overlapping ways (see Chatterji 2007; Datta 2012; Van Schendel 2000; Bose 2006). Their presence within the city has been fraught with ambivalence, as is indicated by the distinctions that are made between 'old migrants' and 'new migrants'[4], between fellow-citizens and infiltrators, between Bengali's and foreigners, between Hindu's and Muslims, and between 'genuine refugees' and 'economic migrants'. Van Schendel (2000) describes how over time the issue of East-Bengali migration has been characterized by a discursive shift from 'homecoming' to 'infiltration'. Whereas first-wave migrants were viewed as Indians 'coming home' after the partition had exiled them to the wrong side of the border, the post-partition migrants were increasingly viewed as infiltrators (Van Schendel 2000:33). This discursive shift led to the illegalization and deportation of East-Bengali migrants, as was signaled by 'Operation Pushback' in 1992. The grounds for identifying migrants as 'illegal' were highly dubious, as it was nearly impossible for the Indian State to distinguish 'infiltrators' from repatriates and residents from non-residents, as the country lacked a reliable Indian citizen register (Van Schendel 2000:42-43). Since it is almost impossible to make a viable distinction between legal and illegal migrants I will rather define my research population based on place of residency. Bose (2006:65) has argued that whereas the first waves of migrants managed to transform the colonies where they lived into respectable middle class neighborhoods, the settlements that originated later remain identifiable as such and resemble structure of a many slum. I want to aim my research at East-Bengali migrants dwelling in these second types of settlements. Since these settlements exist in the twilight zone between legality and illegality they form an excellent point of departure for thwarting what Samaddar (2012:164) has recognized as the "over determination of State, territory and people".

Methodology

<u>Research Topic and Question</u>

In her article on 'dwelling' Buttimer (1976:277) asks herself whether the word refers to a noun or a verb, a building or a craft, a landscape artifact or a process. And indeed, dwelling seems to comprise a tangle of actions, objects and places. In order to make the concept more tangible I will operationalize the practice of dwelling into four dimensions that will be analyzed in this research:

a) A **spatial** dimension, referring to geographical location.
b) A **material** dimension, signaling the physical structure of houses.

---

[4]The category 'old migrants' is used to refer to those who migrated to West-Bengal between 1946 and 1958, in the direct aftermath of partition. The category 'new migrants' refers to those who arrived between 1964 and 1971; these second wave migrants were only eligible for rehabilitation if they were willing to settle outside of West-Bengal.

c) A **structural** dimension that accounts for the socio-political strategies by means of which people negotiate a place to live.

d) An **emotive** dimension, denoting "the cultivation of sensory familiarity and homeliness" (Willen 2007:24).

The following sub-questions are meant to make these four dimensions more concrete and simultaneously function as stepping stones for answering my main research question: "How does the migratory status of East-Bengali immigrants residing in the refugee colonies of Kolkata affect their dwelling practices?"

Sub-questions:
- Where in Kolkata do East-Bengali migrants live?
- What are the material characteristics of their houses?
- What qualifies as a 'good place to live'?
- What obstacles does a status of alleged illegality pose to securing a place to live?
- To what extent is the process of seeking shelter characterized by mobility?
- With whom do East-Bengali migrants negotiate in securing a place to live?
- By means of which everyday practices do East-Bengali migrants cultivate a sense of homeliness and familiarity?

Methods of Data Gathering

I intend to make use of the following methods in carrying out my research:

A. Secondary Sources

In the phase prior to fieldwork I will collect articles from different local online newspapers to get a feel of the ways in which illegality is produced discursively. In addition, I will inform myself about the history of Kolkata and the ways in which East-Bengali migrants have spread over the city by consulting census figures, demographic maps and policy reports.

B. Participatory Methods

'Participatory methods' refers to a set of methodological tools that facilitate interactive discussion and enable "local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions" (Chambers 1994:1437). Participatory methods are particularly appropriate for grasping the non-verbal dimension of the field and revolve around the parameters: space, time and relations (Mikkelsen 2005:63). I will include these different parameters into my research in the following way:

Space: I will make use of participatory mapping, by asking people from different households to draw a simple map on which they point out the different places and houses where they have lived over time.

Time: I will draw up people's 'housing histories', by organizing the different places where they have lived on a timeline. This practice will provide a starting point for discussing reasons for moving and resettling and obstacles faced in the process. Moreover this method will help in gaining an overview of people's migratory histories.

Relations: I will ask my informants to organize the different houses where they have lived hierarchically, as this will provide a springboard for discussing factors that contribute to a desirable living situation.

C. In-depth Interviews

I will further discuss the topics that arise during the rounds of participatory mapping in semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews will revolve around notions of home, community and environment. Since my knowledge of Bengali is not yet sufficient to conduct in-depth interviews I will hire an interpreter to assist me in the field.

D. Participant Observation

In order to get a sense of the lived experience of people's homes, I will pay regular visits to the houses of my informants. Over time I will try to stay a few nights with a migrant family as well. My observations will be aimed at the everyday practices by means of which families try to create a sense of homeliness.

RESEARCH PLANNING

November/December	Refresh my knowledge of Bangla
	Arrange Visa and flight
	Get into contact with relevant Research Institutes
	Use social media and Couchsurfing.com to search for accommodation
Start of January	Arrive in Kolkata
Until the 15th of January	Visit relevant NGO's and Research Centers
	Hire an interpreter/ research assistant
	Pay visits to different settlements of East-Bengali migrants
	Pick one settlement as my field site
Until the 5th of February	Identify and talk with community leaders
	Pay door-to-door visits in the community and collect data using Participatory Methods (random sampling)
	Become a familiar face within the community
	Transcribe conversations
Until the end of February	Select key informants and visit them regularly
	Conduct more in-depth interviews about people's housing histories and migratory histories
	Gain an overview of the actors that play a role in establishing housing facilities and plan interviews with them
	Analyze the data gathered so far and design an interviewguide
	Code and transcribe interviews
March	Conduct structured interviews around notions of home, community and environment
	Stay with a local family for several nights a week
	Code and transcribe interviews
Until mid-April	Analyze and code the data gathered so far and schedule additional interviews to clarify the data
	Formulate preliminary findings
	Leave the field

RESEARCH BUDGET

A. **Travel Expenses - € 900**

   The costs include the retour flight from Schiphol to Kolkata (€ 800) and the price of a Research Visa with 6 months validity (€ 100) I have based my estimation on the current costs of flights leaving in January (www.skyscanner.com) and the prices mentioned at the website of the Indian Embassy in The Hague: (http://www.indianembassy.nl/eoi.php?id=Research)

B. **Research Assistant – € 540**

   I will hire a university student to assist me linguistically when conducting interviews. I have estimated a salary of € 10 per day, based on my experiences with hiring an interpreter during my research in Bangladesh. This translates to a total of (4 days a week X € 10 X 14 weeks) € 540.

C. **Language Course - € 220**

   I have reserved € 200 for taking incidental conversational classes in Bangla, in order to refresh my knowledge of the language.

D. **Living Expenses – € 840**

   The costs include an estimated Rs 500 per day for food (€ 6) and Rs 5,000 rent per month (€ 60). Which makes for (100 days X € 6 = € 600) + (4 months X € 60 = € 240) € 840,- in total. I have based my estimation on the following website: http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/city_result.jsp?country=India&city=Kolkata

   Total Expenditures: € 2,500

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buttimer, Anne
    1976 Grasping the Dynamism of the Lifeworld. Annals of the Association of American
        Geographers 66(2):227-292.

Bose, Pablo
    2006 Dilemmas of Diaspora: Partition, Refugees, and the Politics of "Home". Refuge: Canada's
        Journal on Refugees 23(1):58-68.

Chambers, Robert
    1994 The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. World Development 22(7):953-
        969.

Chatterjee, Partha
    2006 Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World. New York:
        Colombia University Press.

Chatterji, Joya
    2007 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-Dwellers and
        Squatters in West-Bengal. Modern Asian Studies 41(5):995-1032.

Coutin, Susan B.
    2003 Cultural Logics of Belonging and Movement: Transnationalism, Naturalization, and US
        Immigration Politics. American Ethnologist 30(4):508-526.

Das, Veena
    2011 State, Citizenship, and the Urban Poor. Citizenship Studies 15(3-4):319-333.

Datta, Antara
    2012 Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971. Hoboken: Taylor
        and Francis.

Datta, Pranati
    2004 Push-Pull Factors of Undocumented Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal: A
        Perception Study. The Qualitative Report 9(2):335-358.

De Certeau, Michel
    1984 The Practice of Everyday Life. London: University of California Press.

De Genova, Nicholas P.
    2002 Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life. Annual Review of Anthropology
        31:419-447.

Lentin, Ronit
    2007 Illegal in Ireland, Irish Illegals: Diaspora Nation as Racial State. Irish Political Studies
        22(4):433-453.

Mikkelsen, Britha
    2005 [1995] Methods for Development Work and Research. A New Guide for Practitioners. 2nd
        edition London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Ngai, Mae M.
   2004 Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America. Princeton University
       Press.

Pink, Sarah
   2009 Doing Sensory Ethnography. New York: Sage
.
Pope, Paul J. and Terence M. Garrett
   2013 America's Homo Sacer: Examining US Deportation Hearings and the Criminalization of
       Illegal Immigration. Administration & Society 45(2):167-186.

Samaddar, Ranabir
   2012 The Nation Form: Essays on Indian Nationalism. New Delhi: SAGE India.

Sassen, Saskia
   2000 Regulating Immigration in a Global Age: A New Policy Landscape. The Annals of the
       American Academy of Political and Social Science 570(1):65-77.

Schinkel, Willem
   2009 'Illegal Aliens' and the State, or: Bare Bodies vs the Zombie. International Sociology 24(6):
       779-806.

Van Houtum, Henk, and Ton Van Naerssen
   2002 Bordering, Ordering and Othering. Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie
       93(2):125-136.

Van Schendel, Willem
   2000 Repatriates? Infiltrators? Trafficked Humans?. Sarwatch 2(2):30-63.

Willen, Sarah S.
   2007 Toward a Critical Phenomenology of "Illegality": State Power, Criminalization, and
       Abjectivity Among Undocumented Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, Israel. International
       Migration 45(3):8-38.