

Land and Labour at the ‘Borders’ of Kolkata: Refugee Lives in-between Town and Country

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I. Introduction

My field-work in the settlements of *Namasudra*¹ refugees; at the edge of the city of Kolkata, had begun in late 2011, at a protest site in front of *Jantar Mantar* in New Delhi. A group of 20 dalit refugee activists and a support team from ‘*Joint Action Committee for Bengali Refugees*’ led by Sukriti Ranjan Biswas had arrived at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on 28th November, to start an indefinite hunger strike demanding repealment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2003. This amendment has made it difficult for post-1971 migrants from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) to gain citizenship in India by adding a clause defining an *illegal immigrant* and by disenfranchising family members born on Indian soil after migration².

Over the next week I witnessed their unsuccessful negotiations with several Congress leaders, including V. Narayanasamy and K. C Singh Baba. Through the first three days leaders from the Communist parties, Bharatiya Janata Party, Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind and Lok Janshakti party came to visit the tent periodically. There were no concrete outcomes from the strike. After several insipid promises from MPs to bring up the issue in the parliament, the activists decided to wrap up the agitation. The hunger strike came to a rather dissatisfactory end in the evening of the fourth day when Baba visited the protester’s tent and requested the leaders to discontinue the strike. Several of the activists were rather disheartened by their near invisibility in the theater of so many protests. They

¹ The historian Shekhar Bandyopadhyay has written extensively on the formation of the Namasudra community and the evolution of their religious thought and activities as a foundation for caste politics in colonial Bengal. He has argued that the Namasudra community was able to build a ‘protest religion’ to bind together and a community of various sub castes of the peasantry and create effective mobilization against upper-caste landlords. See Bandyopādhyāya, Śekhara. *Caste, protest and identity in colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*. Routledge, 1997.

² See Roy, Anupama. *Mapping citizenship in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.

were distraught over not being able to garner any media attention in a year when mass agitations were sweeping through the country.

I found this invisibility telling, given the fact that this population had held very successful campaigns and agitations in the border districts in West Bengal and the urban periphery of Kolkata. They were also a significant element in the social and political coalition that had toppled the CPI(M) led Left Front government in 2011 elections in the state³. Their precarious position in the national polity, an inevitable outcome of a politics based on the refugee identity, seemed to blunt the possibility of a national conversation. This invisibility did not stem from a simple lack of information. On the contrary, the 'Bangladeshi immigration question' in eastern India has been staple fare for BJP's national campaign for years.⁴ Within six weeks of the Babri mosque demolition Advani began speaking on the East Indian immigration issue. He continued pushing the issue vehemently in the follow up to the 2003 Act⁵ and extremely important policy moves like the National Citizen's Registry and the biometric Unique Identification system evolved out of the legal and political debate concerning the apparent porosity of the East Indian borderland.

Though there were activists from several states and representatives from committees and organizations across several districts of West Bengal, the district of North 24 Parganas was significantly over-represented in the activist group. Three of the 22 hunger strikers hailed from the same village, *Netajipally*, a 'refugee village' as several activists categorized it. The campaign for the hunger strike and protest in Delhi had in fact begun from the very same village, on the 6th of November 2011, with a rally, street corner meetings and speeches in the village market. The campaign had then covered several border districts of West Bengal to mobilize support before going for the protest in Delhi.

³ Sinharay, Praskanva. "A New Politics of Caste." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 34 (2012): 26-27.

⁴ See Biswas, Soutik, Farzan Ahmed, 'Migrant Tinder-box', *India Today*, May 15th, 1993
<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bjp-hopes-to-reap-political-dividends-by-communalising-bangladeshi-immigrant-issue/1/302212.html> (accessed on 07.01.2017),

⁵ See 'Illegal immigrants to be deported', *The Tribune*, February 17th, 2003
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030217/main3.htm> (accessed on 07.01.2017)

The travel back to the periphery from the nation state's civic square was not a triumphant one⁶

II. Netajipally: A village at the border of the city

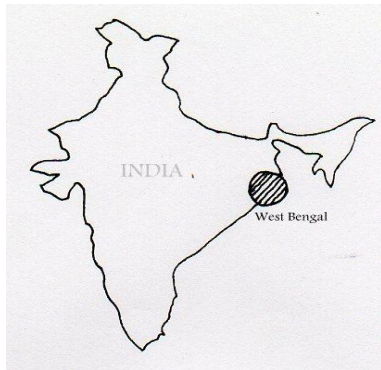


Figure 1

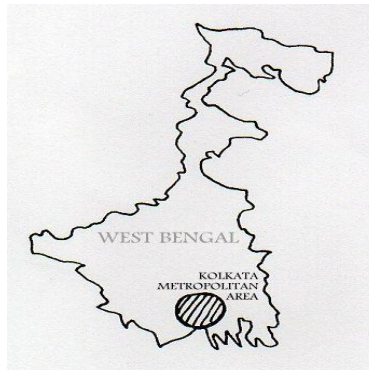


Figure 2

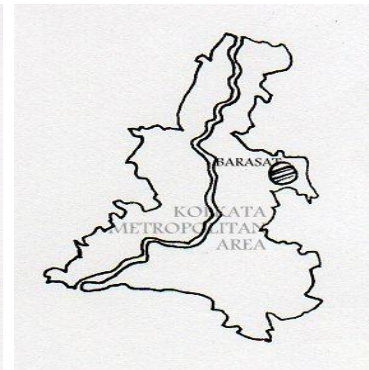


Figure 3

Netajipally is a village at the border of Barasat municipality, located in the north-eastern fringe of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA).⁷ It is an area exhibiting rapid change in land-use of late. The local population is engaged mostly in non-agricultural activities in the construction sector or small scale manufacturing and petty trading. The population belongs mostly to the scheduled caste *Namasudra* community. Land prices have soared within the village as areas across the neighbouring National and State Highways have been brought under municipal administration and have consequently become the destination for real estate development and site for several large educational and

⁶ I am referring to Holston's argument concerning new political demands being articulated in the peripheries and then moving to the civic square. See Holston, James, 'Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries', *City and Society*, Vol 21, issue 2, pp 245-267

⁷ The above figures are hand drawn outline maps showing the location of the area being discussed in this section. None of the maps in the paper are to scale. They are manual reproductions from various plan documents and low resolution photographs taken in the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority Library. They are reproduced here to give a sense of locations, administrative boundaries and direction of growth.

industrial developments. Families from the village inform that the last vestiges of share-cropping, a widely practised seasonal occupation have disappeared from the area around 2006-7. The village is currently under the administration of the Paschim Khilkapur Gram Panchayat⁸ adjacent to the areas brought under the administration of the Barasat Municipality in 1995.⁹

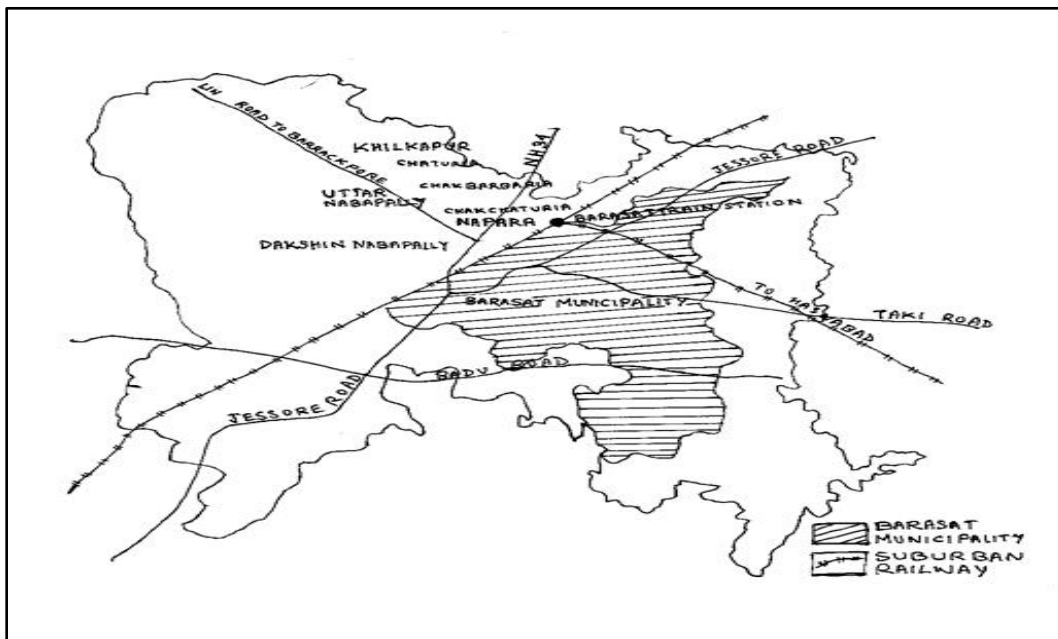


Figure 4: Barasat with its surrounding areas. Source: Landuse Map and Registry, Barasat, 1990, KMDA

Approximate information about this village has to be pieced together from surveys of the revenue units (*mouza*) parts of which makes up the village. These revenue units are *Chak Barbaria*, *Chaturia* and *Chak Chaturia*. The village begins at the northern end of *Napara* and continues till *Khilkapur* along the link road branching away from National Highway 34¹⁰. The name of the village appears in the household surveys done in the panchayat

⁸ *Gram Panchayat* refers to the elected village council institutionalized as the lowest tier of the Indian democratic structure by the 74th amendment of the Constitution.

⁹ Interview with Ajit Ray, elected member of West Khilkapur Village Panchayat , 21st December 2013, Netajipally.

¹⁰ The location of the revenue villages (*mouza*) are marked in figure number 4. They are cradled at the junction of national highway 34 and Barasat-Barrackpore link road.

area and the list of ‘Below Poverty Line’ card holders and beneficiaries.¹¹ The Rural Household Survey of 2005 lists 122 families of BPL card holders in the village. The 1999 survey using the revenue units as its base, instead of listing BPL families, listed the number of landless families dependent on agricultural labour and registered significant figures against both *Chak Barbaria* (264 landless families) and *Chaturia* (62 landless families).¹² The number of voters from the village was 3906 in the 2013 voter’s list, with an overwhelming majority of scheduled caste families.¹³ The voters list locates the village within the revenue unit *Chaturia* mouza (revenue village).

The *Nirman Sahayak* or the technical advisor for planning and development attached to the Paschim Khilkapur Gram Panchayat referred to the settlement quite clearly as a ‘colony area’.¹⁴ However, the residents prefer the term ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘village’. They point out that it was founded in 1986 by the first set of migrant families from Khulna who had been displaced from their homes in the former East Pakistan by the ‘Liberation War’ of 1971¹⁵. In 1995 *Chak Chaturia* was partly included within the municipality administered area and the revenue unit of *Chak Barbaria* was marked as a census town in the 2011 census.¹⁶

¹¹ Rural Household Survey 2005 (After 1st Revision), District North 24 Parganas, Block – Barasat I, Paschim Khilkapur Gram Panchayat, pp 16-20

¹² Block Barasat-I, Police Station – Barasat, *Gramin Poribar Somuher Arthonoitik Ebong Peshagato Samikkhalabddho Karyakari Talika*, 01.04.1999

¹³ Voter’s List- 2013, State- (S 25) West Bengal, Legislative Assembly Constituency – Madhyamgram (General), Parliamentary Constituency – Barasat (General), Rural, Paschim Khilkapur, Parts 40, 41, 42, 47 and 48

¹⁴ Interview with Krishna Saha, PaschimKhilkapur Gram panchayat, 14.12.2013, ‘Colony area’ is both a popular and governmental term designating informal settlements. In west Bengal they carry the added meaning of being refugee settlements created in the aftermath of the 1947 ‘Partition’ or the ‘Bangladesh Liberation War’. See Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of The Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of The World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p 54. The suspect nature of colony spaces is an element of everyday discussions concerning these spaces. In the aftermath of a particularly visceral case of sexual violence in Barasat this was expressed in a newspaper article blaming ‘colony culture’ for the lack of women’s safety in the locality. See, *Anatomy of a bloodstained Mofussil*, Times of India, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Anatomy-of-a-bloodstained-mofussil/articleshow/18683139.cms>, (accessed on 14.01.2017). The Barasat police station held the dubious honour of highest number of reported crimes against women in the State of West Bengal with 2800 complaints in 2012.

¹⁵ For a detailed history of the conflict and displacement during the 1971 war see Datta, Antara. *Refugees and borders in South Asia: the great exodus of 1971*. Routledge, 2012.

¹⁶ Barasat I, Village Directory, Census 2011, censusindia.gov.in, (accessed on 6th October, 2013)

The village stands as an example of the spatial and economic changes considered characteristic of periurbanity. Its existence as a neighbourhood unit and a perceived village community is contradicted by its flickering administrative or legal legitimacy as a habitational unit. It is rare to find agricultural land in the village, without the mark of concrete construction even though there is a moratorium on the conversion of agricultural land in the area. What little exists is seamed with low single-brick walls defining plot boundaries of the pieces sold to buyers as residential holdings. It appears to house the population that serves as workforce in the urban ensemble- erstwhile marginal farmers, commuting daily wage labourers, lower level service workers for middleclass residential complexes and migrating construction workers whose families are sometimes split between three metropolitan cities (where sons work as construction worker in Chennai, daughters work as ‘domestic help’ in Hyderabad and remaining members commute to Kolkata as daily wage labourers).¹⁷ Physically it occupies a space at the interstices of big developmental projects, embodying the peculiar transition from the not-urban to the urban.

Since Netajipally has not yet completely passed into the jurisdiction of any institution of urban governance, it operates at the fringes of the planning discourse. The fragmentary documentation and an attentive stroll through the area is enough to suggest its deep material and political relations with the formally recognised urban area. It is an important case to track the relation of state policy to development at the urban fringe as in this village, unlike other places, predatory land acquisition and large scale infrastructural projects backed by the state have not taken place. It is a site where the spatial limits of the city are intertwined with the limits of citizenship¹⁸ due to the significant presence of the Namasudra community that has a long history of marginalisation in the field of both legal and social citizenship coupled with the closeness of the international border with Bangladesh.

¹⁷ Interview with Adhir Biswas, Netajipally Village, (20.12.2013)

¹⁸ Appadurai, Arjun, and James Holston. "Cities and citizenship." *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1996): 187-204.

III. De-agrarianization and De-peasantization¹⁹: Producing a Marginal Population

How did this population come to inhabit this particular space? In order to answer this question we need a historical outline of the intertwined processes that transformed the agrarian and craft based livelihoods in this region and structured the slow accumulation of the transformed population in the urban periphery. The municipal area of Barasat was filled to the brim with refugees in 1971. Sydney Schanberg had written that the crowd of refugees was so thick that cars could no longer ply on the streets²⁰. From various interviews I learned that for many of the families 1971 was not the first instance of migration. Many of the family members and village acquaintances had migrated to India and periodically gone back to Bangladesh between 1950 and 1964²¹ trying to flee communal and political violence. It is important then to delve into the history of the migration and transformation of this population from the 1950s onwards and trace their path to the urban periphery.

Little less than 50% of the refugee population coming into India gravitated towards Kolkata and the 24 Parganas²². In a 1955 statistical survey conducted by the state government of west Bengal, the surveyors took a close look at the livelihood question for the refugees living outside the government run refugee camps. Though the government had originally planned to get a sense of the encamped refugees, there was a misunderstanding between the then head of the statistical bureau and the minister-in-charge. Following the tabulation of preliminary results of the survey, the head of the bureau had to leave office and an amended tabulation along with comparative figures on aid given to the encamped refugees was finally published in 1956.

¹⁹ I am using these two concepts in order to underline the particular processes and effects of the transformation of this population after their displacement from their erstwhile spatial and occupational belonging. De-peasantization is the process of transforming family and kinship networks while de-agrarianization is the transformation of occupation and forms of subsistence. See Wallerstein, Immanuel. *The World is Out of Joint: World-Historical Interpretations of Continuing Polarizations (E)*. Routledge, 2015, p 79

²⁰ Schanberg, Sydney. "South Asia: The Approach of Tragedy." *The New York Times*, 17 June 1971

²¹ These were the years of the infamous Barisal and Hazrat Bal riots in Eastern India and East Pakistan.

²² State Statistical Bureau, *Rehabilitation of refugees: A statistical survey*, West Bengal Government press, Alipore, 1956, p 2

The fieldwork for the survey was completed between 7th April and 6th July 1955. The original sample allotted for the detailed questionnaire on livelihood changes was 60,093 but at the time of the second phase of the survey, only 27,745 of the identified families could be found at their earlier residence. The disappearance of 32,348 individuals from their recorded addresses within two months of the hiatus between the first and second phase of the survey gives us a good sense of the intense mobility of this population at the time²³. The measurement of unemployment among the refugee population was one of the major highlights of the survey. The document claims that by 1955 the refugee population had surpassed its pre-displacement levels of participation in the work force²⁴ while at the same time showing a significant loss of jobs among the sections of the refugee population which were already part of the workforce in East Pakistan.

24 Parganas, the district under discussion in the previous section, had the second highest concentration of migrants after southern Kolkata but only about a sixth of that population had decided to engage in agriculture²⁵. This was despite the fact that this district received by far the largest portion of erstwhile agriculturist caste communities. Compared to an earlier survey on the refugee population, this one marked an important increase in the pace of growth of the scheduled caste refugee population as a component of total number of migrant families. There was a simultaneous rise in the number of people taking up livelihoods involving, unskilled labor, petty trade, small industry and service²⁶. Probably the most significant feature of this report was to create an index of aspirations for change within the migrant population. The surveyors asked the respondents whether they were happy with their current livelihoods. This allowed them to map the possibilities of individuals shifting in and out of occupational brackets. The scenario in agricultural sector was quite telling. Of the 215.2(000) refugees originally engaged in agricultural activities before Partition 47.8(000) lost their livelihood. There were 36.8 (000) refugees who wanted to attempt agriculture but had neither prior experience nor the resources for it and there were 32.4(000) actual new entrants in the sector. This was the largest single occupational group among the refugees and showed the most instability when compared

²³ Ibid, p 1

²⁴ Ibid, p 5

²⁵ Ibid, p 3

²⁶ Ibid, p 4

to small trade, small industry, service and unskilled work²⁷ all of which registered unprecedented growth in numbers of new entrants. These were clear indications that the (*non-*)*encamped*²⁸ refugees were going through a large scale occupational transition along with a sharp increase in participation in the work force.

While some of this transition was an effect of the loss of land and belonging in the aftermath of the Partition, a significant part of this transition was structured through government vocational training and long camp stay among encamped families²⁹. Early 1950's onwards, the phenomena of both vocational training in forms of workshop based labour like wood working, handling machine tools, basic training in industrial processes became common in the refugee camps.³⁰ In addition women were trained to work on sewing machines and basic tasks for the domestic service industry. There were several instances of refugee camps having 'production centers' attached to them as part of the rehabilitation process. State governments attached entire sections of the refugee population that they received with the infrastructural projects that they had started on at the time.³¹ These attempts by the government made a possibility of change available to this population while also giving it a very controlled chance to participate in the process of production. Given the already existing fluidity of occupation, these training programmes, even in their most minimal efficacy, added to the tendency of deagrarianization. Displacement due to Partition had already severely compromised the life world and land entitlement of the lower caste peasantry, especially following the riots in Barisal which substantially changed the caste profile of the migrating population. This was tangentially observed in the 1955 statistical abstract. The primary signs of this were the relatively smaller size of the lower caste families and the preponderantly young

²⁷ Ibid, p 7

²⁸ I am using a category developed by Lewis Turner while analysing the situation of (Non-)encamped Syrian refugees in the Jordanian labor market. See Turner, Lewis. "Explaining the (non-) encampment of Syrian refugees: security, class and the labour market in Lebanon and Jordan." *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 386-404.

²⁹ Committee of Ministers, *Report of the committee of ministers for the rehabilitation of displaced persons in West Bengal*, 1954, pp 36-39

³⁰ Ministry of Rehabilitation, *Purbo Pakistaner Bastuhara Punorbashoner Paanch Bachor 1952-1956*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1957

³¹ Estimates Committee, *71st Report (3rd Lok Sabha) Ministry of Rehabilitation*, Lok Sabha secretariat, New Delhi, 1965

population, which was indicative of the fact that they had left elderly members of the family behind.

Going back to Netajipally, it is important that we take note of its location. It is located beside the link road connecting Barasat and Barrackpore municipalities which, taken together, have the highest number (146)³² of government sponsored urban refugee colonies. The transformations of livelihood coupled with a significant trend of rural to urban migration of agriculturist refugees, structured the spatial destiny of this population.

IV. Consolidating the urban periphery in Kolkata

Planned extension of the city of Kolkata into its hinterland had started with the *Kalyani* Township (recently renamed *Samriddhi* in April, 2015) in 1950. The township had been planned in 1947 for a ‘middle-class’ population of 60,000 in order to ‘de-congest’ the older neighborhoods of Kolkata³³. The project was taken up for execution alongside a project of ‘Refugee Rehabilitation Township’ in *Fulia* near Ranaghat³⁴. The land for the project had been partially consolidated during the Second World War, when it was requisitioned for military use under the provisions of the ‘Defence of India Act’³⁵. More land was added to the already requisitioned area and a township of 12,606 acres was planned for the urban middle-class. The projected population capacity of the new project was assumed to be 2,50,000 in 1951. The requisitioned parcel of land was bound by a railway line laid by the military for supply cars during the Second World War. The area immediately beyond the railway line was earmarked for brick kilns by the government in order to fulfill the preliminary demand for building material in the future township. By late 1950, a group of 551 East Pakistani refugee families took over this piece of land, developed the land autonomously and began growing paddy, horticultural products and

³² RR&R Department, *Manual of refugee relief and rehabilitation*, Basumati Press, Kolkata 2001

³³ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 1951, Vol 3, Num. 1, p 3

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ WBLA, 1951, Vol 4, p 393

even a minor quantity of jute³⁶. Soon there were confrontations between the refugee families and the brick kiln contractors. There were reports of minor violence and an accidental land slide caused by large scale digging by the contractors which damaged the homes built by the refugee families³⁷. Following this there were reports of eviction of the refugee families alongside government claims that the refugee families had been rehabilitated elsewhere with 1/3rd acre agricultural land per family³⁸.

A rather rigid border was maintained by the state, a border marked by specific forms of infrastructure³⁹. The refugee population was actively dispersed to the urban periphery while being kept away from specific areas. The difference between two townships in the same district and alongside the same sub-urban railway network becomes starkly visible in the story of the foundation of Kalyani Township. This township will go on to become one of the primary centers of growth marked in the Basic Development Plan published in 1966. This document encapsulated much of the transformation already wrought as a narrative of planned ‘future’. The future metropolis, described in the Ford Foundation funded planning document presented the picture of a ‘Bi-polar’ city with two counter-urbanizing magnets to the north and south of the city of Kolkata dispersing the city’s population and de-congesting it⁴⁰.

The government of the time also brought about large scale transformations in land governance with a host of new laws concerning eviction, acquisition and protection of property. Following the example of Delhi’s ‘Government Premises Eviction Act’ of 1950, the West Bengal Government had introduced the ‘Eviction of Persons in Unauthorized occupation of land Bill’ of 1951⁴¹ in order to curb the ‘squatter colony’ movement in Kolkata which would later become one of the primary platforms of

³⁶ WBLA, 1951, Vol 3, Num. 2, p 191-192

³⁷ Ibid, p 193

³⁸ Ibid, 192

³⁹ I am alluding here to the process of spatialization and control over labouring populations highlighted by Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Duke University Press, 2013.

⁴⁰ Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization, *Basic Development Plan 1966-1986*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1966

⁴¹ WBLA, 1951, Vol 3, Num 3, p 123

communist mobilization⁴². The act allowed the government to evict refugees from ‘unlawfully’ occupied land without the need for rehabilitation. Simultaneously the government introduced the ‘Evacuee Property Act of 1951’ with an eminently short deadline for return and registration and the absurd clause that a person will only be given the chance to return and claim lost property if they had crossed the border, thereby effectively cutting off the claims of those that had hidden themselves elsewhere within the country⁴³.

These developments produced and defined the flow of the refugee population and directed it towards certain spaces of rehabilitation while keeping them away from others. Simultaneously, these measures severely marginalized the hold of the minority community on their property holdings. In the early 1960’s one of the pioneering studies of population distribution in the city of Kolkata stated: ‘refugees are now settled in nearly all Bengali residential wards ... It is also significant that ‘many of these wards were formerly inhabited by muslim labourers and artisans’⁴⁴. Through the next several decades, Kolkata went through several reconfigurations of the imagination of the urban periphery. Within decades perspective plans moved to a ‘multinodal strategy’ of developing small towns linked to the metropolis at the centre providing specialized services⁴⁵. Simultaneously the Refugee Rehabilitation department made a major contribution to the planning discourse by identifying and proposing to develop 16 refugee concentrated townships across West Bengal, 11 of which were within the influence area of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area and connected by the suburban railway, national highway and state highways. Two of the largest of these proposed townships

⁴² See Chakrabarti, Prafulla K. *The marginal men: The refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*. Lumière Books, 1990.

⁴³ *WBLA*, 1951, Vol 3, Num 1, pp 257-285

⁴⁴ Nirmal K. Bose, *Calcutta, 1964: A Social Survey*, Calcutta, 1968, Cited in Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Histories and Fictions, 1940s to 1960s*, Thesis submitted to the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010

⁴⁵ Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority, *Development Perspective and Investment Plan 1971-80*, Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority, Calcutta, 1976

Barrackpore and *Barasat* are within the KMA and the site for the inception of this paper⁴⁶.

We can begin to discern two different deployments of force by the state in the history presented in the two preceding sections. The first concerns the population which is slowly coaxed into a specific occupational profile and the second concerns the transformation of space through the planning machinery. These two can be seen as two registers through which state directed transformation of spaces and populations is actualised. Depending upon the contingencies of the political situation the state apparatus may shift between the two. In the current context of powerful, regime toppling mass movements against ‘Special Economic Zones’ and ‘Land Acquisition’ in West Bengal, the second deployment of force, the direct and planned transformation of space has come under severe public scrutiny. The *Singur*, *Nandigram* and *Lalgarh* movements have significantly affected the public discourse⁴⁷ and delegitimized most attempts at large scale, state directed spatial transformation. The first deployment is the strand that this paper will follow farther in terms of its specific social and material detail in the last section of the chapter as we return to Netajipally, the staging ground of the effects of the first form of deployment⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Study Team RR&R Dept., *Report on Improvement of Basic Civic Amenities in 16 Refugee Towns – West Bengal*, Government of West Bengal, 1976

⁴⁷ See Pranab Kanti Basu, ‘Political economy of Land Grab’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 7 2007, pp 1281-1287, Amit Bhaduri, ‘Development or Developmental Terrorism’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 17 2007, pp 552-553, Dayabati Roy, ‘Politics at the Margin: A tale of Two Villages’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 11, 2007, pp 3323-3329 and Maitreesh Ghatak, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee and Anusha Nath, ‘Land Acquisition and compensation: What Really Happened in Singur’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 25, 2013, pp 32-44, Sumit Sarkar, ‘A Question Marked in Red’, *Indian Express*, 9th January 2007, <http://www.indianexpress.com/story/20488.html> (accessed on 5th October 2013). Also see ‘Six Killed in group clashes in Nandigram’, *The Hindu*, 8th January, 2007, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/six-killed-in-group-clashes-at-nandigram/article1779841.ece>, (accessed on 5th October, 2013), ‘Turmoil in LS over Nandigram violence’, *The Times of India*, 30th April, 2007, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-04-30/india/27883919_1_nandigram-marxist-cadres-adhir-chowdhury, (accessed on 5th October 2013) and ‘Death toll in Nandigram violence rises to four’, *The Times of India*, 7th November, 2007, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-11-07/india/27986222_1_police-s-panda-nandigram-police-station-death-toll, (accessed on 5th October, 2013)

⁴⁸ I am drawing this first form of deployment from the second structure of the ‘spatial fix’ that Jessop reads into Harvey’s reading of Imperialism. See Jessop Bob, ‘Spatial fixes, temporal fixes, and spatio-

V. A 'Quiet Transition'

The village of Netajipally is not 'quiet' in the sense of being peaceful. It is the quietude of a constant tension. The politics of transition touches upon it with a great deal of inner violence. Yet, it is a controlled violence. Within its influence, local committees are made and disbanded regularly in order to collectively govern claims to land and livelihood. Amateur historians and archivists – actors from the specific social and political apparatus developed by the Left Front regime⁴⁹ negotiate intricate exchanges at an everyday level among various stakeholders in village politics. This apparatus, even though cut-off from the regime and the kind of state patronage it had earlier enjoyed, remains the primary tool for directing the transformation of peri-urban social relations. The 'quiet transition'⁵⁰ is an outcome of a particular set of local activities that enable the transition to take root. Against the backdrop of the spectacular, violent, visible and successful peasant movements like Nandigram and Singur it is important to notice the banal transitions wrought each day by the deployment of a population produced out of the de-peasantizing apparatus of rehabilitation and the experience of displacement – a population constantly in the grip of social hierarchy and legal threat of disenfranchisement. In the following

temporal fixes', in N. Castree and D. Gregory, eds, *David Harvey: a Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 142-66, 2006.

⁴⁹ In West Bengal the debate on the urban periphery has been closely related to the social and political apparatus necessary to govern the process of 'primitive accumulation'. The political economic debate between Partha Chatterjee and Kalyan Sanyal concerning layers and strategies of capital accumulation develops simultaneously with ideas concerning the particularities of the mediation between State, Party and Society. See Bhattacharya, Dwaipayan. "'Civic Community' and Its Margins: School Teachers in Rural West Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2001): 673-683 and Bhattacharyya, Dwaipayan. "Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party-Society' in Rural West Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009): 59-69. For a detailed study of the 'party machinery' see Dasgupta, Rajarshi. "The CPI (M) Machinery in West Bengal: Two Village Narratives from Kochbihar and Malda." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009): 70-81. The discussions on primitive accumulation and its reversal through governmentality are to be found in Chatterjee, Partha. *Lineages of political society: Studies in postcolonial democracy*. Columbia University Press, 2011 and Sanyal, Kalyan. *Rethinking capitalist development: Primitive accumulation, governmentality and post-colonial capitalism*. Routledge, 2014.

⁵⁰ I am trying to reverse Solomon Benjamin's lens of 'Quiet Politics' in order to characterize state policy driven transitions that are immensely successful while being nearly invisible. See Benjamin, Solomon. "Occupancy urbanism: Radicalizing politics and economy beyond policy and programs." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 3 (2008): 719-729.

narrative the paper will try to sketch the effect of systematic ‘emplacement’⁵¹ of an ‘insecuritized’⁵² population.

I had met Mahananda Biswas (name changed) on my first visit to Netajipally. He was one of the first two members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from the village. He had received his membership in the early 1990’s. Since then he had been an archivist and scribe for most of the village residents. He is not a rare character. He is a common figure of ‘rural communism’ in West Bengal. I had in fact found my ‘Selim master’⁵³. Yet, this was a different context altogether, this was not a member of the peasantry looking for ‘modernity’ and ‘communism’. My respondent had been a ‘deed writer’ (legal scribe) in Khulna Judge Court before becoming embroiled in a property dispute with local strong men of the majority community and fleeing Bangladesh in the early 1980’s. Through his first decade in India he had worked as a construction sector labourer in Odisha. The significance of the difference between Ruud’s ‘Selim Master’ and my respondent was that instead of bringing a ‘modernizing’, improvement oriented consciousness to the village society and space, he had the task of transforming the village into an urban space. His archive was and is an authoritative source for village history. His collection is referred for dispute resolution between political actors, local sporting clubs and land developers. Below is a story cobbled together from petitions, letters and meeting minutes from his collection.

In early July 2010 the playground in front of the Netajipally free primary school was going through a renovation under the supervision and expense of Manoj Mandal and Dinesh Halder. The school playground of around 23 cottah was originally owned by Amina khatoon, who had moved away from the village in the early 1990s. She had come to inherit the plot after the death of her husband Hassan Ali in 1999. In 1995, a group of refugee land developers had formed an informal partnership to take up around 5 bighas of land in Chak Barbaria from Janab Hassan Ali in order to plot and sell the land as homestead to several families of Namasudra refugees. The three main businessmen

⁵¹ Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of other spaces." *diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.

⁵² Lazzarato, Maurizio. "Neoliberalism in action inequality, insecurity and the reconstitution of the social." *Theory, culture & society* 26, no. 6 (2009): 109-133.

⁵³ Ruud, Arild Engelsen. *Poetics of village politics*. Oxford University Press, 2003, pp 75-78

involved in the plotting were Krishnapada Adhikari, Anwar Ali and Gurupada Mondal. Interestingly, Gurupada Mondal is also the father of Manoj Mondal. There was an informal agreement made jointly between Netajipally Vidyalaya (school) committee, Netajipally Unnayan (development) Committee, Netajipally Sporting Club and the three businessmen in 1997, for donation of a portion of land from within that 5 bigha for making a school building for Netajipally free primary school and a playground. The two informal committees and Netaji sporting club were given possession of land, where 17 Kottah was kept for the school building and 23 Kottah⁵⁴ for playground. The ownership and legal deed for the school building land was registered in 2003 but the playground remained unregistered. The village had however, claimed and occupied this land as a 'commons' for holding cultural and sporting events without payment. Its central location, nearness to the village market and size made it an extremely valuable piece of land over the next several years. In August 2010, the village was about to host an important set of sporting events, a lottery and a *kirtan utsav* under the guardianship of Netajipally sporting club.

Manoj Mondal, who had started out as a migrant construction sector labourer in Mumbai in the early 1990's had by then made his fortune as a labour contractor and promoter. Being the president of the Netaji Sporting Club he had decided to invest some of his money to beautify and improve the condition of the playground as gesture goodwill towards the village residents.

Within a week of commencing work, there was a rumor that Manoj Mondal had ordered several trucks full of iron rods, bricks and cement from one of his nearby warehouses and several villagers saw a number of masons from his company along with one of his engineers measure the playground. Soon there were rumours that Gurupada Mondal had given his old agreement papers signed by Hassan Ali to his son Manoj and that he had met Amina Khaton and signed another agreement naming him the owner of that 23 kottah plot of land. There were immediate protests from the Netajipally Vidyalaya (school) Committee and the Netajipally Unnayan (development) Committee. The trouble was that the primary school had not yet received its affiliation. This meant that property

⁵⁴ 1 Kottah is equivalent of 0.017 acre in West Bengal

would have to be held by either a registered cooperative or a single person as a trustee, who would guarantee proper use of land as a ‘commons’ in the future. Manoj Mondal argued that he would register the deed for the land and pass the title to the Netajipally Sporting Club, which was by then a registered club. Over the next 5 days Manoj Mondal’s engineers and masons had built an iron and concrete wall of about five feet height around the entire plot of land with two gates.

A resident of the village, a minor land developer and sub-contractor informed the Unnayan committee that Manoj Mondal was attempting to register the land in his own name. Once again a meeting was convened and the Unnayan committee members argued that since Manoj was the President of Netaji Sporting Club at the time and most of the other office bearers of the club were involved in his business, registering the deed and title to the club was the same thing as the land being taken over by the promoter himself since he could later conveniently transfer the title to himself or to his company as and when he would please.

Next night, in a series of midnight attacks the gates and windows in the homes of the members of the Unnayan committee were broken. Following this, the panchayat members and committee members filed several complaints with the police, the panchayat, the District Magistrate, the court of the sub-divisional executive magistrate and the local land revenue and registry office. The violence continued unabated and several young masked men attempted to break into the house of the Forward Bloc Panchayat member Sujit Rai. Following this, the village community immediately cobbled together a peace committee, where three of the businessmen, who had originally signed the agreement with Hassan Ali were called to speak in favor of the committees. Manoj Mondal’s father Gurupada Mondal also attended the meeting and spoke for continued common use of the piece of land.

In the entire week leading up to 22nd July when the final police complaint was filed Amina Khatoon did not once visit the meetings. She has not visited her own land for over two decades. I was never able to interview her and she remained an absent presence throughout the negotiations with Janab Anwar Ali as her dubious proxy as one of the businessmen to have signed an agreement with her husband on the basis of a 10%

advance on the price of land in 1995. Till my last visit to the village, the land remained disputed with vestiges of a wall around it. By 2014, the work on the Netajipally primary school building was finished, financed by 'Roundtable India'. Rest of the land around it has changed and is changing faster. With the civic transition of the Netajipally the reallocation of its space became necessary and the erasure of the local peasantry became inevitable. Amina Khatoon's absence and the quiet transformation of the neighborhood makes visible the register of *effects* of the Partition and the urbanization process that reproduces it constantly because it is structurally coextensive with the process of nation making. With the tabling of the 2016 Citizenship (Amendment) Act – the first instance of a religion and country specific naturalization application process in India – may be the 'quiet transition' will reach its formal apogee of 'insecure' enfranchisement of the Namasudra refugee and a stabilization of this population's place at the frontier of urbanisation.