Urban Planning, Settlement Practices, and the Question of Labour in Contemporary Kolkata

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**1. Introduction: The Story of Calcutta/Kolkata:**

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

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

As my site of study, I have chosen Kolkata (formerly, and in some quarters even today, known as Calcutta), one of the most important cities in eastern India in terms of concentration of commercial interests and cultural aspirations. Calcutta was the capital of British India until 1911 and became one of the most sought-after locations for migration from different parts of the country during the Raj. Even after the Independence, it continued to attract people from other states – especially those in the eastern part of the country like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – and seemed to offer hospitality to members of all communities, religions, and language groups. This cosmopolitan image of Calcutta was damaged a little when a demand was raised to change the name of the city from the allegedly colonial sounding ‘Calcutta’ to the more authentically Bengali intonated ‘Kolkata.’ Subsequently, in 2001, the task was performed with a strong suggestion of cultural chauvinism mixed with xenophobic impatience.

That the migrants in the city often fall prey to xenophobic rage of the locals is common knowledge; it is a well-researched area where the attacks on the lower rung of the migrant workers in urban and semi-urban settings by the cadres of militant political and cultural organizations are documented and studied in detail.[[1]](#footnote-2) However, not much has been written on the connection between these parochial sentiments and the protocols of urban planning and spatial reconfiguration of the city in the last two decades following ‘liberalization’ of the Indian economy. As we shall see, this connection has a historical foundation predating the latest urban renewal programmes like JNNURM.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The scholarship on the relationship between migration and the modes of urbanization in post-liberalization India does not take stock of this historical foundation. Most of these studies focus on the macro-level analysis of census data, commenting on the trends in migration – whether the rate of migration from rural to urban centres is increasing or not – and speculating on the possible reasons thereof.[[3]](#footnote-4) Also there are writings on the exclusionary nature of urbanization in India and how official policies and programmes exude an urgency to ‘modernize’ the cities at the cost of massive dislocation and dispossession.[[4]](#footnote-5) Although these studies command our attention due to the valuable insights they offer on the linkages between migration decisions and governmental policies, the very structure of reasoning which informs both these decisions and policies – the way of thinking which sutures the issues of urban planning, migration practices, and violence resulting from exclusionary mechanisms – remains unattended.

**2. A Historical Overture:**

One may encounter flashes of this way of thinking in some of the past studies on urbanization. In the early 1960s, the famous anthropologist and Gandhian thinker Nirmal Kumar Bose conducted a study of the distribution of the city space in Calcutta among different communities.[[5]](#footnote-6) Apart from preparing intricate land-use maps of the city on the basis of Assessment Records of Calcutta Corporation from 1911 to 1961, the objective of the study was to understand how the urban landscape was shared by the inhabitants of the city, divided into a range of language groups and occupations. The city population was spread over a number of municipal wards and Bose’s intention was to map the concentration of certain communities – religious, ethnic, and otherwise – in few particular wards. His study clearly shows that even as early as in the 1910s and `20s, the city space of Calcutta was distributed in particular zones where specific groups of people lived and earned their livelihood.

Even though Bose’s survey of the ‘social space’ of Calcutta in the 1960s did not address the question of migration directly, his insistence on the need to study habitation practices of the ‘non-Bengali’ communities in the city gives out a sense of curiosity to grasp the mindset of the ‘outsiders.’ First of all, he divided the city population into two large mutually exclusive groups – Bengali Hindus and Non-Bengalis (including the Muslims and other religious and ethnic communities). Then he observed presence of at least four types of Hindu Bengalis in the city – (1) commercial or artisan castes; (2) upper castes; (3) scheduled castes; and (4) refugees from East Pakistan with a distinctively separate ‘social identity.’[[6]](#footnote-7) The non-Bengalis included everyone else – the language groups like the Oriya speakers who were mostly involved in plumbing, gas, and electrical works, or the Hindi speaking labourers who hailed from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and concentrated in the industrial area of the city. Often they had to change their location after incidents of violence. The Hindi speaking Kalwars who dealt in scrap iron and machine parts used to trade in Ward 53 – a predominantly Muslim locality, as reported in the study – but had to leave the area after the riots in 1946-47 and settled in Wards 7, 10, 13, etc. Although their tongue was not exactly Hindi, the Marwari community of Calcutta considered themselves one of the Hindi speaking groups. Bose took special care to describe the Rajasthanis or Marwaris in Calcutta, as they seemed to be particularly influential in the areas of trading and commerce. They were one of the very few non-Bengali communities which showed a consistent tendency of expanding beyond their original location in central Calcutta and continued to buy up properties in the neighbouring wards. Bose insinuated that the prosperity of the Marwaris came with the decline of the Bengali commercial castes like the Subarnabaniks during agitations against the British government – another classic example of how the locals literally lost ground to the outsiders in accumulation of resources and occupancy of the city space.[[7]](#footnote-8) ‘Yet,’ Bose lamented, ‘this did not lead the Rajasthanis to treat the city of Calcutta as their own home.’[[8]](#footnote-9) The outsiders remain outsiders till the end, and that perhaps gives the locals an excuse to bear grudges against them and to act on those grudges whenever possible.

As we have noted earlier, the Muslims of Calcutta were clubbed with the non-Bengali groups. Although Bose acknowledged the presence of Bengali Muslims in the city, his chief focus remained on those who spoke either Hindustani or Urdu and arrived in the city from Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar before Independence. They settled mostly with people of similar occupations like merchant trading, craftsmanship, or leather-works in various central-Calcutta wards. Some of them concentrated in slums in Wards 32, 33, 34, and 35 after the post-partition riots. The importance of Bose’s brief study of the Muslims in Calcutta was felt by the Anthropological Survey of India and it entrusted M. K. A. Siddiqui with the task to initiate a full-fledged survey of the conditions of Muslims in the city. In 1974, Siddiqui brought out a volume on the socio-cultural status of the minorities which once again made it clear that most of the Muslims in Calcutta concentrated in a few adjoining municipal wards – ‘Ward Nos. 50, 51, 53, 55, 57 and 60 around Park Circus extending up to Tapsia, a newly developing slum area’ – irrespective of their ‘varying regional, linguistic, ethnic and occupational backgrounds.’[[9]](#footnote-10)

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

**3. The Paradoxes of Settlement:**

I intend to start this study in the backdrop of certain earlier works on migration in Calcutta. These works offer some observations which we need to examine closely and compare with our findings. One of these observations tells us that the growth of the core city has been stalled since the last few decades, as the population influx to Calcutta proper has declined over the past fifty years.[[10]](#footnote-11) On the other hand, the size of the non-Bengali population shows a steady growth from 34.06% in 1951 to 40.08% in 1971. The proportion of migrants from other states to the total population has decreased from 25.24% in 1951 to less than 17% in 1971. In 2011 census, the decennial growth rate of the Kolkata district is recorded at -1.88% – an all-time minimum in the history of census in India – with a falling rate of population density from 24718 per square kilometre in 2001 to 24258 per square kilometre in 2011. This is more or less the scene in all over the country where the big cities are failing to draw population from outside, as the employment opportunities in these cities seem frustratingly low due to use of capital intensive technologies in the industrial sector.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Before coming to the question of labour, I shall dwell for a few moments on the settlement practices of the migrants in Kolkata in the last few decades. More categorically, my focus will be on the experiences of settlement of the workers in the informal sectors. Most of them are forced to live in the slums or bustees in different municipal wards. The decision to choose the bustees of Kolkata as a prospective site of migrant settlement is influenced by an interesting orientation in some of the documents of urban planning prepared by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA). In their various reports based on sample surveys of the slums of Kolkata, KMDA has put serious thought to the issues of accommodation of the migrant workforce, their living conditions and social adjustments, and the rural-urban linkages manifested in their frequent visits to their places of origin, in connection with the questions of urban planning and development. A full categorical definition of the ‘migrants’ was provided for the first time in a 1996-97 study of the ‘socio-economic profiles’ of the urban households in Calcutta.[[12]](#footnote-13) But the deliberations on the issues and problems related to migration started to feature in the KMDA (erstwhile CMDA, until the name of the city was changed) reports since the late-1980s.

The first couple of studies by CMDA in 1980 on the small-scale industrial enterprises within the slums did not mention whether the workers in these establishments had come from outside the city.[[13]](#footnote-14) However, it was evident that the bustees did not only offer shelter to the urban poor, they also provided them with job opportunities within the same premise. The plans of urban development like ‘Calcutta 300: Plan for Metropolitan Development’ often touched upon both the issues of migration and bustee improvement, but did not make any necessary connection between the two.[[14]](#footnote-15) It was the 1989-90 study of the ‘socio-economic profile’ of the slum dwellers of Calcutta which identified a considerable number of them as migrants.[[15]](#footnote-16) Based on a medium range sample survey (sample size: 7810 slum dwelling families) conducted in 1989, this study located the moment of ‘origin’ of the Calcutta slums in the nineteen-thirties and `forties when, following intensification of industrial activities in and around the city to support the war efforts of the British government, a huge number of people from the eastern and northern states of India started to flock into the city in search of work. The slums were constructed for cheap accommodation of these migrant workers in the form of ‘huts made up of mud and bamboo.’[[16]](#footnote-17) The hutments were constructed and rented out by a group of middlemen ‘popularly known as thika tenants, on land leased out to them by landlords.’[[17]](#footnote-18)

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

Two other points which interestingly came up in the 1989-90 survey of Calcutta slums were: (1) the observation that the slums could be classified (and the city could be zoned) according to the predominance of particular language groups living in these settlements and (2) the issue of rural-urban linkages established through the migrants’ visits to their native lands. According to the study, 55.94% of the total households surveyed were Bengali speaking; 21.9% were Hindi speaking; and 20.8% were Urdu speaking.[[18]](#footnote-19) A table also classified the average size of the households among different language groups, thus making a connection between regional specificities and economic sustenance and rationality (based on the presumption that large family size is detrimental to economic wellbeing).[[19]](#footnote-20) The issue of rural-urban linkages, however, was conceptualized in terms of two ‘explanatory variables’ – the frequency of visits to the places of origin and the remittances sent back to these places.[[20]](#footnote-21) Associated with this conceptualization was the categorization of the migrants into those who stayed back in the city for more than one generation and those who were present generation migrants. In other words, a distinction was made between those who were more prone to share their income with the family behind and those who were keeping the savings to themselves, and hence within the city or the state. While almost 60% of the households, the survey revealed, were present generation migrants, the rest of the 40% families were rooted in the city for more than one generation. ‘It is worth mentioning here,’ the study concluded, “that except for Darapara and Belgachia bustees the predominant language group in the bustees belonging to the...group of having low incidence of transfer of income away from Calcutta is Bengali.”[[21]](#footnote-22) Though mentioned with an indifference of statistical certainty, this comment seems to presage a cultural bias disguised in the garb of economic logic.

One may find in this remark a reverberation of Nirmal Bose’s discontent over the non-Bengali people’s lack of commitment to the interests of Bengal. In that sense, there is continuity between these two observations but, on the other hand, the latter remark is more politically motivated in relation to the future plans of development of Calcutta. In the following decades, this attitude might have played a crucial role in translating the desires of urban zoning and gentrification into the harsh reality of forceful eviction and displacement in the name of aesthetic and ecological concerns. This could not have been achieved without a categorical fixity that must adorn the official documents and inform the policy recommendations. The 1996-97 study of the socio-economic profiles of the households of Calcutta, therefore, attempted to demarcate the migrants from the ‘original residents’ by proffering a fixed ‘historical’ narrative of development of the city. Migrants were defined as ‘persons who came to this metropolitan city from some other place in or after 1947 (the year of independence and partition of Bengal).’[[22]](#footnote-23)

The effectiveness of this historical narrative was thought to be so strong that even accounting discrepancies were ignored as minor confusions in categorization. The percentage of displaced population (mainly refugees from East Pakistan) was held to be only 2% in relation to the total population of the city while the number of displaced households was calculated to be more than 14%. This discrepancy was explained by the peculiar definition of the ‘displaced household’: its status was determined by the fact of its head’s or his or her parents’ displacement. This resulted in a beautiful paradox: ‘a household can be ‘displaced’ but some members of that household could be ‘original residents’.’[[23]](#footnote-24) This paradox shows how the botched histories of development can play around the notion of ‘origin’ depending on its suitability to the purpose at hand.

Meanwhile, in 1981, another interesting shift had taken place in the official discourses of city planning and urban development. It was the year in which the Kolkata Thika Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act was passed. By this act, the West Bengal Government acquired all the bustee lands in the city and prescribed certain regulatory mechanisms to save the dwellers and the thika tenants from the alleged exploitation by the landlords.[[24]](#footnote-25) With increase in the prices of urban land property, the landlords were eager to sell their holdings to builders and realtors, evicting the thika tenants and slum dwellers.[[25]](#footnote-26) By citing the new act regarding urban land ceiling (1976), the government took hold of all these plots scattered in different parts of the city and paid little amounts of money as compensation to the actual owners.[[26]](#footnote-27) The remedy to the troubles created by the landlords was, as put succinctly in the Act, to imagine ‘as if the State had been the landlord in respect of that land.’[[27]](#footnote-28) Since now on, the government would collect land rent from the thika tenants against their right of collecting house rent from the actual dwellers of the bustees. One of the main beneficiaries of the new act was the thika tenant himself whose claim over the tenancy of a particular plot was guaranteed by registration under the act as a ‘permanent’ rentier over generations to come: ‘It was for their sake that the tenancy rights were made heritable and not transferable or terminable by law, thus warranting their permanent source of income.’[[28]](#footnote-29)

This urge to become the most powerful stakeholder in the case of the bustee settlements proves how much importance was given by the state to the questions of existence and improvement of the city slums in connection with urban development. But more importantly, it points to a unique aspect of urbanization – the connection between labour and land (and correspondingly, between wage and rent). It is to be remembered that, historically, most of the slums in Kolkata were built to accommodate the workers who came to live in the city from other districts or states. The changing patterns of land use in the city, therefore, are co-constitutive of the changing modes of production in the urban sector. In the next sections, I shall evoke the question of labour in relation with the shifting modalities of urbanization. Although the scope of the present paper does not allow a detailed study of this relationship, I shall try to outline a conceptual framework which brings together some of the concerns that continue to surface in the contemporary discourses of urban development.

**4. The Question of Labour:**

It is commonly assumed that a large amount of rural-to-urban migration takes place due to the shortage of employment opportunities in the rural areas. The flip side of this assumption tells us that a decline in the rate of migration indicates increase in such opportunities in the rural areas or its absence in the cities. All in all, the question of labour – the potential of its absorption in the city space or the challenges that it may face due to the changing nature of the cities – occupies a central position in the associated discourses. Although the primary concern of this paper is not to contradict this centrality, I am curious as to how this centrality is constituted and sustained in these discourses, especially in a time when the cities are becoming less a space of production and more a space of circulation and restrictive elitism in the form of gentrification. The aspect of restriction is particularly important as migration has always been considered by the ‘original’ residents as a sort of infringement in the socio-economic sovereignty of the city space. At one level, the migrants seem to ‘take away’ means of economic sustenance from the locals and, on the other, they are prone to ‘violate’ the established social and cultural norms of urbanity. The current conceptualization of the city space as a ‘gated community’ manifested in various strategies of ‘gentrification’ makes good use of these axes of fear, discomfort, and embarrassment. However, migration to the cities induced by the hope of finding jobs has not stopped, if not increased; even though some cities like Mumbai or Delhi tend to attract more people than others like Kolkata.

It is useful to study the reasons of this discrepancy. There is a steady decline in the rate of migration in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) over the last few decades. In 1971, the rate was an exorbitant 33.35% which came down to 27.84% in 1981. The 1991 census registered the rate at 16.2%, and ten years later, in 2001, the rate diminished to an all-time low of 6.2%. Compared to the national average of 12.7%, or the other metropolises like Mumbai (15.1%) or Delhi (16.4%), one cannot help but notice that Kolkata is quite unpopular among the prospective migrants. Among those who ultimately chose this city as their destination, 57.22% came from the other districts in West Bengal, whereas only 36.15% came from the other states in the country. This situation is quite opposite in the case of Mumbai. According to the 2001 census, a huge 63.11% of the total migrant population in Mumbai came from the other Indian states and only 35.86% came from within Maharashtra. Delhi shows a similar trend where only 3.68% of the total migrant population came from within the state and a staggering 94.13% migrated from the other Indian states.[[29]](#footnote-30) In the case of Kolkata, migration from the other countries (presumably from Bangladesh and Nepal) is a non-negligible fact. 6.63% of the total migrant population in Kolkata came from other countries. This rate is six-times less in Mumbai (1.03%).

There may be many reasons why a person chooses to move to a particular city, the foremost being the distance between the place of origin and that of migration. However, as in the case of Mumbai, this reason is often overturned by other considerations like the probability of finding a job in that city, its cosmopolitan environment, the chances of finding suitable places to settle in, etc. All these considerations add to the pull-factor of migration. The decision to migrate is also influenced by the push-factors where the poverty and other distresses (like political turmoil) in the place of origin force a person to look for relocation. The usual explanations of a declining rate of migration in Kolkata focus on both the push- and the pull-factors. The chief reasons of this decline are described as follows: (1) the reduction in employment opportunities in the city following closing down of many factories and industrial complexes; (2) the growing competitiveness of local residents against the migrant workers; (3) the ‘successful’ implementation of the land reform measures in the state; (4) the improvement in the networks of transport and communication resulting increase in daily commuting to the city rather than settling in it, etc. We may add two more points to this set of explanations: (5) shifts in urban policy geared to transform factory spaces into real estate properties and (6) changes in the conventional forms of labour in the city space. I believe that these two factors are crucial to understand the ‘labour question’ in connection with migration practices in contemporary Kolkata.

I shall begin with the last point. Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal have argued that, with the development of ‘new towns’ around and adjacent to the old cities as more technologized centres of capitalist accumulation, a ‘bypass approach’ has been introduced in the discourses of urbanization in India and, simultaneously, it has given birth to new, ‘immaterial’ forms of labour disconnected with the earlier regimes of urban regeneration.[[30]](#footnote-31) Taking a clue from Hardt and Negri’s definition of immaterial labour as ‘labour that creates immaterial products, such as, knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response’ thriving on the conditions of aestheticized urbanity, Bhattacharya and Sanyal point out that the old metropolitan centres fail to accommodate these new forms of labour as the ‘presence of a large informal economy’ hampers complete ‘gentrification’ of the city space.[[31]](#footnote-32) As a result, the construction and expansion of the new towns have to bypass the old cities and mark out a space of their own. They extend Sanyal’s own theory of ‘post-colonial capitalism’[[32]](#footnote-33) characterized by the distinction between ‘need economy’ and ‘accumulation economy’ to these new towns and show that these two apparently disjointed sectors are connected by an ‘economic logic’ of ‘survival circuit’:

If new towns are built by displacing peasants, rural and peri-urban petty producers as well as old industries whose workers lose jobs and lack the skills for immaterial production in the global circuit, the presence of a survival circuit in the new towns implies that a need economy (a production economy that supplies subsistence material goods as well as low-end services) must emerge for the social reproduction of labourers in the survival circuit.[[33]](#footnote-34)

This argument is interesting for two reasons. One, Bhattacharya and Sanyal seem to forge a structural relationship between need economy and accumulation economy where a mutually dependent circuit of social reproduction is required to sustain the urban machine (the apparatuses and networks of urban expansion). Two, by virtue of this structurality, one may argue that the relationship between need economy and accumulation economy becomes much more complex than what was previously held by Sanyal, i.e., one of constitutive externality.

However, it may also appear from this essay that Bhattacharya and Sanyal want to demonstrate the case of new towns as an exception which ‘bypasses’ the ‘normal’ course of regenerative urbanization and gains an exclusive identity. The new towns are exceptional in absorbing the informal need economy into networks of capitalist expansion through the backdoor of survival logistics, though the development of new towns as a site of immaterial labour is necessary precisely because the old metropolises cannot afford complete gentrification (total expulsion of the informal sector and material labour). Notwithstanding the tautological framework, this logic of exception does not allow the old cities to have a similar structural relationship between accumulation economies and need economies. Moreover, it forecloses the possibility of any such relationship by describing the failure of the old cities to manage the informal economy as a pretext of the development of the new towns.

I think that the strength of this essay lies elsewhere. The exclusivity of the new towns – if any – resides in the novelty of their mechanisms of accumulation. Bhattacharya and Sanyal mention this in passing, but they do not emphasize the exact strategies by which they are able to expand their territories and exploit labour and capital. A more comprehensive approach can be found in another study of the development of the Rajarhat Township in the vicinity of Kolkata where the authors show how the questions of livelihood, resistance, and capitalist accumulation are intricately linked with each other.[[34]](#footnote-35) Even though the official narratives of construction of these townships give the impression of starting from ground-zero, they actually make it happen by effacing the rooted histories of numerous, closely knit life practices and claims. The ‘urban dystopia’ of these new towns is such that they absorb and abate the most virulent instances of resistance in the name of a spatial vacuum strategically manufactured through various coercive mechanisms and consent-building exercises.

**5. Recycling the Urban:**

Now the question is: how far does this practice of effacement get repeated in the old towns? If we go by the spirit of Bhattacharya and Sanyal’s essay, we may arrive at this conclusion that there is a marked distinction between the respective accumulation networks in the old and new towns. I agree with this argument only partially. There are many evidences that a similar network of dystopic accumulation is operative in the old towns like Kolkata, but these networks cannot be actualized to their full potential due to certain practical/political constraints. One of them is of course the geographical limits of the city. Unlike the new towns, the old cities cannot grow horizontally. Also, any attempt at applying coercive means to appropriate urban land within the city is faced with serious civil society activism infused with middleclass nostalgia over the lost glory of its socio-cultural-economic legacy. All these add to the difficulties of absolute effacement of collective histories and memories of dwelling in the city. I think that the strategies of accumulation take a slightly different route in the case of the old cities. Besides continuous attempts at creating spatial vacuums by enforcing eviction over the so-called ‘illegal’ occupants of ‘public space,’ many strategies of negotiating with the city space have come about in the last few decades including that of recycling urban land with a pointed direction towards real estate speculation.

Let us cull out a few examples. In 2005, Nagarik Mancha has brought out a report on the locked-out factories in Kolkata.[[35]](#footnote-36) The report has chronicled a list of cases where factory lands were turned into real estate properties with some encouragement from the government. The list includes STM, formerly a factory complex located in Kankurgachi and owned by a sitting MP from Krishnanagar, now the site of a luxury apartment named ‘Orchid Towers’ and Bangodaya Cotton Mill, owned by the Peerless Group which itself has made a foray into the real estate business and constructed a housing complex named ‘Peerless Abasan’ in the abandoned factory land.[[36]](#footnote-37) Similarly, the Annapurna Glass Factory was locked out and turned into Ekta Heights. Even the Jadavpur TB Hospital was closed down by the government and its land was sold off to the realtors.[[37]](#footnote-38) At first glance, these instances look familiar. Isn’t it the same way how land is acquired by the government or private agencies and auctioned in the market to fetch the best price?

Same, but not quite. In this case, the constructions in the lands of locked-out factories give birth to a new informal economy replete with interspersed networks of contractors, labourers, and middlemen. In a way, this is a moment of formal subsumption where the closed circuits of capital are refurbished to accommodate the massive in-flow of a dispossessed, disgruntled labour force. If in the case of the new towns, the older regimes of ‘subsistence’ production were dislodged and later absorbed in the circuit of capitalist accumulation through survival networks of mutual dependency, here the ‘already’ discarded means of capitalist production are revaluated to suit the demand of the day. In that sense, it resolves the paradox presented (perhaps unintentionally) by Bhattacharya and Sanyal. In the old cities, the recycling of capital (including previous and subsequent investments in land) paves the way for an informal economy whose effacement (in the form of gentrification) is not only impossible but also harmful for the continuing saga of capitalist accumulation.

The link between migration and informality in urban labour market is best explicated in Ranabir Samaddar’s words when he talks about the ‘context where a majority of urban migrant workers are engaged in construction industry, including clearing of lands and the waste disposal and recycling industry, including garbage clearance.’[[38]](#footnote-39) This informality, if we look closely, cannot be gauged without taking up the issues of urban settlement and rent. There are two aspects of the recycling of the urban space that bring together the questions of labour and land: (1) existence and burgeoning of the ‘other’ settlements for the migrant workers; and (2) revaluation of the urban properties as an effect of recycling.

As we have seen in a previous section, the Thika Tenancy Act of 1981 tended to ‘formalize’ the poor-income urban settlement practices. By identifying itself as the universal landlord and initiating a hereditary network of rent extraction (both house and land rents), the government managed to distinguish between ‘legal’ bustees and ‘illegal’ squatter colonies – between permanent structures which could not be moved easily and non-permanent habitations which were always under the threat of eviction. Although the term ‘bustee’ is loosely used in the public discourses, in the official documents it is defined as a settlement registered under the Act. It is also provided with basic civic amenities like water, latrine, and electric by the municipal authority.[[39]](#footnote-40) Conversely, the slums which are not registered under the Act may be declared ‘illegal’ by the government and evicted at whim. Usually, they are not entitled to municipal services.

The distinction between registered bustees and unregistered ones becomes pertinent with the arrival of the new generations of migrants. It is difficult for the present generations to find shelter in the registered bustees. Eventually, they secure a place to stay in the unregistered squatter colonies, most of which are said to be built on the land acquired by the government. Sometimes there are alternative arrangements made by the contractors themselves. For example, most of the construction workers in the city spend their nights at the site of construction, under the fragile roof of the half-finished buildings. But these arrangements are temporary and contingent on securing jobs at the particular site. As some studies reveal, there are many instances of workers remaining ‘shelterless’ for a long period of time, sleeping on the pavements of the city, looking for employment and barely making a living.[[40]](#footnote-41)

On the other hand, in the last few years, the policies of urban development in India have experienced some major shifts. The proper and complete implementation of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) requires repealing of the urban land ceiling acts for improving ‘transparency and efficiency in land acquisition, which would encourage domestic and foreign investment in the real estate sector.’[[41]](#footnote-42) Although West Bengal is the only state which has not yet implemented this recommendation,[[42]](#footnote-43) the state government has already initiated its own drive for an environmentally ‘improved’ Kolkata. In 2000, the Asian Development Bank sanctioned a loan for a project to ‘arrest the environmental degradation and improve the quality of life in the outer boroughs of Kolkata Metropolitan Area.’[[43]](#footnote-44) Titled as the Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project (KEIP), its chief prerogative was to upgrade the sewerage and drainage networks by clearing out the city canals and the adjacent areas. This plan called for eviction of all the slums located in those areas, although a promise of rehabilitating the inhabitants was made by the government.[[44]](#footnote-45)

Subsequently, in 2002, Nonadanga, a place on a side of the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass – a long stretch of road connecting the northern and the southern parts of the city – was selected as the location of rehabilitation. The distribution of the low-income flats among the evicted slum dwellers started in 2006, but the conditions of these flats were questionable. Also the promise of building infrastructure for medical and educational facilities in the area was ignored conveniently.[[45]](#footnote-46)

Incidentally, some other settlements also came up in the area following the initiative of rehabilitation. These settlements were not registered under the Act of 1981, but the government initially did not object to their construction. Two of these bustees were called Shramik Colony [the colony of labourers] and Majdur Palli [the locality of workers] respectively. Some of the inhabitants of these new bustees also hoped to find a place in the apartments for rehabilitation. On March 11, 2012, KMDA has directed the people in Shramik Colony and Majdur Palli to vacate the land within twenty-four hours. On March 30, three bulldozers of KMDA barged into the area and demolished most of the 139 houses in the two settlements.[[46]](#footnote-47)

Apart from putting an end to the myth that Kolkata is more hospitable to its migrants than other metropolises, the case of Nonadanga demonstrates a crucial feature of today’s migration and settlement practices – the introduction of a permanent state of non-permanence. Earlier, the definitions of migration and bustee settlement were juxtaposed against each other by a historicist logic of origin which, at the same time, evoked a sense of permanence for those who had been living in the city since at least before the passing of the Thika Tenancy Act. The incidents of eviction (either by consent in the canal-side bustees or by force in Nonadanga) also broke this illusion and rendered everybody equally vulnerable, whether entitled to rehabilitation or not. Most of the people evicted from Nonadanga, an APDR report tells us, used to live elsewhere in the city.[[47]](#footnote-48) Some of them had to leave their earlier settlements because of increase in rent and other expenditures and some were evicted by the authorities for ‘encroaching’ on government’s properties. There were some families who even got flats under the scheme of rehabilitation but could not stay there because of the small size of the flats.[[48]](#footnote-49) Ultimately, they built their own huts in the nearby bustees. The same report informs that the occupants of these settlements belonged to the lowest tier of the city’s informal economy, working as carriers of goods, rickshaw-pullers, contract labourers, and housemaids.

There is no doubt that the city cannot survive without these services and, in many ways, they are intrinsically connected to the economies of urban recycling. Complete disposal of this workforce is not a feasible option for either the government or corporate capital. However, the economy of recycling of land and labour often requires unsettling the *status quo* and devising new mechanisms of extraction. The necessity of clearing out the land in Nonadanga is explained in a KMDA document published in early 2012 inviting ‘Expression of Interest’ for disposal of bulk land for ‘comprehensive development’:

KMDA has in its possession a prime parcel of land at Nonadanga, near Ruby General Hospital along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (EMBP).... KMDA has more or less 80 acres of land, including a few water bodies lying in between, at this site. [...] KMDA proposes to dispose off the entire area including water bodies for comprehensive development involving commercial usages as may be permissible under the relevant Land Use and Development Control Plan (LUDCP) and building rules. The commercial usages may include, but not be limited to, residential complexes, star/budget hotels, shopping malls, multiplexes, restaurants, serviced apartments, recreational facilities and institutional uses.[[49]](#footnote-50)

KMDA’s definition of ‘comprehensive development’ takes establishment of real estate hubs and recreational facilities more seriously than providing shelter to the poorest section of the society, but that does not appear shocking anymore, especially after the so-called ‘liberalization’ of the Indian economy. Even the same KMDA document clarifies, ‘With onset of the regime of economic liberalization in the Indian economy since the early 1990s, the need for an expanded volume of trade in diversified areas was strongly felt.’[[50]](#footnote-51) But this ‘diversification’ of trade interests cannot take place without simultaneous re-appropriation of the informal economy as a contributing factor in revaluation of the urban space. One, therefore, cannot help but notice the convenient coincidence of eviction and call for investment.

However, this coincidence should not be understood only in terms of accumulation by dispossession. We must not overlook the fact that Nonadanga emerged as a potential location for real estate investment only after it was chosen as a site of rehabilitation of the slum dwellers from different areas of the city who could fulfil the demand for low-end services once it was ‘developed.’ It is of course difficult to estimate how consciously the government made this connection, but this is more an indicator of a structural relationship between recycling of urban land and informalization of the city workforce than an instance of a conscious political decision. This structural relationship was reinforced once again in the statement by the Minister of Urban Development of West Bengal where he stated in clear terms that the eviction in Nonadanga would continue but the displaced population who had been living there for more than six months would be rehabilitated under the project ‘Basic Services to the Urban Poor’ (BSUP) which is a part of the JNNURM programme itself.[[51]](#footnote-52)

This constant flux between eviction and rehabilitation, dispossession and investment, settlement and unsettling, formalization and informality has become a permanent marker of urbanization in India. In this paper, I have tried to show how this regime of apparently unstable governmentality stabilizes at a moment of conjunction between land and labour, and their potentials of being recycled through an intricate network of various policies and modes of appropriation and revaluation. The narratives of postcolonial capitalism are unfolding in many atypical conditions, unprecedented contexts, and uncharted territories. The task at hand, therefore, is to explore these narratives from the vantage point of a novel theoretical framework and study the issues of urbanization, settlement practices, and labour with more appreciation of the contingencies of political rationalities of our time.

1. The most pertinent of these incidents is the one that took place in Mumbai in 2008 when clashes between workers of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena and Samajwadi Party led to physical assault of North Indian migrant workers in the city. The incidents were reported in all the leading national dailies and television media. For a chronology of how the events unfurled, see ‘Chronology: MNS’s Tirade against North Indians’, *Hindustan Times*, February 2, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. JNNURM or the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission is proposed jointly by the Ministry of Urban Development and the Ministry of Urban Employment and Poverty Alleviation at the Centre. It seeks to increase the rate of investment in the urban sector by initiating a range of reforms including creation of assets and development of civic amenities under the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model. For the statement of its objectives and scope, see *Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission: Overview* (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India) [available at http://jnnurm.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/PMSpeechOverviewE.pdf; accessed on March 16, 2014]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, for example, Amitabh Kundu and Shalini Gupta, ‘Migration, Urbanization, and Regional Inequality’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 52 (December 28, 1996), 3391-98; Amitabh Kundu and Niranjan Sarangi, ‘Migration, Employment Status and Poverty: An Analysis across Urban Centres’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (January 27, 2007), 299-306. For a similar study on Bangladesh, see Abdullah Al-Mamun Khan, ‘Rural-Urban Migration and Urbanization in Bangladesh’, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1982), 379-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Amitabh Kundu and Lopamudra Ray Saraswati, ‘Migration and Exclusionary Urbanization in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, Nos. 26 and 27 (June 30, 2012), 219-27; Preeti Mann, ‘Urbanization, Migration, and Exclusion in India’, *Centre for the Advanced Study of India* (2012) [available at http://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/mann; accessed on March 16, 2014]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Ibid*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Ibid*, 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Ibid*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. M. K. A. Siddiqui, *Muslims of Calcutta: A Study of Their Social Organisation* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1974), 25, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Asok Sen and Alak Banerjee, ‘Migrants in the Calcutta Metropolitan District, 1951-71’, *Occasional Paper No. 62, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta* (August, 1983), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See Amitabh Kundu, ‘Urbanisation and Migration: An Analysis of Trends, Patters and Politics in Asia’, *Human Development Research Paper 2009/16, United Nations Development Programme* (April, 2009), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Nandita Chatterjee, Nikhilesh Bhattacharya and Animesh Halder, ‘Socio-Economic Profile of Households in Calcutta Metropolitan Area: 1996-97’ in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume V (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 397-662. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. ‘Socio-Economic Survey and Development of Small Enterprises in Twelve Bustees in Group I, July 1980’ in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume II (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 61-650; ‘Socio-Economic Survey and Development of Small Enterprises in Twelve Bustees in Group III, July 1980’ in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume II (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004), 651-891. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. ‘Excerpts from Report ‘Calcutta 300: Plan for Metropolitan Development’’ in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume IV (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Asok M. Chakrabarti and Animesh Halder, ‘Slum Dwellers of Calcutta, Socio-Economic Profile – 1989-90, March 1991’ in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004,* Volume IV (Kolkata: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, KMDA, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *Ibid*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *Ibid*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. *Ibid*, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *Ibid*, 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. *Ibid*, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Chatterjee, Bhattacharya and Halder, ‘Socio-Economic Profile of Households in Calcutta Metropolitan Area: 1996-97’, 593. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. This act was in correspondence with the West Bengal Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act and Rules, 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Swati Ghosh, ‘Thika Tenancy in Bustess of Calcutta: A Study’, *Occasional Paper No. 6, Centre for Urban Economic Studies, University of Calcutta* (1992), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *Ibid*, 6. Ghosh observes, ‘Compensation payable to [the landlords] was not very high, a maximum of Rs. 10 per square metre or Rs. 668.90 per cottah, according to the location of land’ (*ibid*). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. The [Kolkata] *Thika* Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act, 1981, West Bengal Act XXXVII of 1981, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ghosh, ‘Thika Tenancy in Bustess of Calcutta: A Study’, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Here one should keep in mind the small size of Delhi as a state. But this argument cannot be applied for Maharashtra which is much bigger in size than West Bengal. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal, ‘Bypassing the Squalor: New Town, Immaterial Labour and Exclusion in Post-colonial Urbanisation’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 31 (July 30, 2011), 41-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *Ibid*, 43, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality, and Post-Colonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Bhattacharya and Sanyal, ‘Bypassing the Squalor’, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar and Suhit K. Sen, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Nagarik Mancha, *A Report on Locked-Out Factories, Plight of Workers and Urban Space* (Kolkata, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. *Ibid*, 27, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. *Ibid*, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Ranabir Samaddar, ‘Primitive Accumulation and Some Aspects of Work and Life in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIV, No. 18 (May 2, 2009), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See Nitai Kundu, ‘The Case of Kolkata, India’ (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global\_Report/pdfs/Kolkata.pdf, accessed on August 13, 2014); W. Collin Schenk, ‘Slum Diversity in Kolkata’ (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cujsas/Volume%20I/Issue%20II/W%20Collin%20Schenk%20-%20Slum%20Diversity.pdf, accessed on August 13, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. N. Vijay Jagannthan and Animesh Halder, ‘Income-Housing Linkages: A Case Study of Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 23 (June, 1988), 1175-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. ‘Repeal of Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation Act’ (ULCRA): State Level Reform’ (http://jnnurm.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Mandatory\_Primer\_5-RepealULCRA.pdf; accessed on August 13, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. The World Bank, *Urbanization beyond Municipal Boundaries: Nurturing Metropolitan Economies and Connecting Peri-Urban Areas in India* (2013), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. ‘Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project’ (http://www.environmental-auditing.org/Portals/0/AuditFiles/India\_s\_eng\_Kolkata-Environmental-Improvement-Project.pdf; accessed on August 13, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. APDR, *Nonadanga Basti Uchchheder Tathya Anusandhan Pratibedan* [Fact Finding Report of the Eviction of the Nonadanga Bustee] (Kolkata: 2012), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. *Ibid*, 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. *Ibid*, 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Most of these flats have only 150-200 square feet of floor area (*ibid*, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. KMDA, ‘Invitation of Expression of Interest for Disposal of Bulk Land at Nonadanga for Comprehensive Development’ (http://www.kmdaonline.org/whats\_new/eoi-trnscn\_adv\_nona\_land-12-11\_final.pdf, accessed on August 13, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. *Ibid*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. APDR, *Nonadanga Basti Uchchheder Tathya Anusandhan Pratibedan*, 10. For details on BSUP, see ‘Provision of Basic Services to Urban Poor’ (http://jnnurm.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Mandatory\_Primer\_6-PBSUP.pdf; accessed on August 13, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)