

Vulnerable Bodies: Marginal Subjectivities in Post-Colonial Kolkata

Cityscapes are shaped by the needs, desires and lived experiences of its people. Urban infrastructure, its historical trajectories and city governments also in turn mould the lives and labouring practices of the people. Encounters of the city include negotiations between its people, its migrants, its settlements, and the cultures and environments that they give shape to within this evolving urban landscape. This inter-disciplinary panel proposes to look at the cityscapes of Calcutta/Kolkata and explore the varied experiences of marginalities within it. Calcutta/Kolkata is as much a product (and producer) of its margins as it is of its 'core'. The panel argues that the specific experiences of being peripheral *in* the city and *of* it can be understood only by contextualising it within the specificities of Calcutta/Kolkata. By mapping the experiences of different groups over a historical trajectory the panel asks the question of how the city shapes exclusion/inclusion, accessibility/ inaccessibility in physical structures and in cultural production in unique ways. These experiences are not generic across urban spaces but are reproduced in specific ways. At the same time, as Lefebvre (1971: 20) notes that cities are defined within praxis, the praxis of its people who shape the city even as they are shaped by it.

The first paper looks at the nature of governmentality regarding the refugee 'congestion' in 1950s and 1960s' Calcutta and how they were located within the city. Through an examination of the 'refugee problem' in the case of Calcutta, it provides an insight into who was to remain an outsider and who was allowed to be an insider, who would have an access to the city and who was to remain in the railway station before being sent off to some distant province. The next paper also locates the question of access and how that shapes marginalisation in Calcutta. Through the lens of sanitation, the paper looks to provide clues to understand how through controls on access to basic sanitation (like toilets), gendered marginalisation are shaped thus providing an insight into the human sanitary practices around which the city is structured. The third paper follows this trajectory of access to explore how access to public life is/can be constructed by controlling physical access of disabled people. The praxis of the city is built around the able-bodied societies, thus effectively limiting the everyday life of the disabled citizens. The final paper of the panel examines migrant women labour and their experiences of precarity in Kolkata. The implications of their gender and class identity are shaped by their everyday negotiations with the city which also in turn shapes their ideas of belonging, home and migration. By looking at the various aspects of the vulnerable and how they are

located within Kolkata, the panel provides an understanding of the co-production of marginalities by the city and its people.

I: The Congested City: Towards and Understanding of the Crowd in Calcutta in 1950s and 1960s.

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Since 19th century the urban planners have frequently compared the city with a human body. Like the body itself, they argued, the health of the city depended on the flow of air, water, people, and commodities within the city. Similar concerns shaped various urban development schemes of Calcutta in the colonial period. The frequent ‘operations’ of slum “clearance” and footpath “clearance” in Calcutta have been justified by this logic in colonial and post-colonial times.

As Calcutta became increasingly congested with refugees after 1947, repeated concerns were raised about its ‘health’ by the city administrators and a section of the urban elite. ‘To be a good city, as well as a well run city, both its size and its density of population must not exceed a certain limit,’ wrote a chief executive officer of Calcutta Corporation.¹ Calcutta, in his view, was not a ‘good city’ but a city that was fast degenerating into a ‘permanent concentration camp.’² To make the situation worse, many of these new comers [refugees] had never lived in cities before, they did not know the mode and discipline of city life, observed the officer.³ A reporter of *Amritabazar* noted ‘[refugees are] emitting that odour which the famished crowd of ’43 used to spread wherever there was any congregation of theirs.’⁴ Passengers while describing the refugee conglomeration at Sealdah Station sighed, ‘Calcutta has its own Frankenstein – the four and a half million refugees ...are now holding the city at ransom. They are in possession of the railway stations. Desperate and despairing, this is a classless society. Each one has been ground down to bear an identical face – a face from which all distinguishing marks of education, culture or occupation have been effaced.’⁵ Thus, the refugees

¹*Amritabazar*, November 1, 1950.

² Ibid. Eric Hobsbawm, while describing the ‘ideal city for riots and insurrection’ noted, ‘It ought to be densely populated and not too large in area.’ Thus, an insurrectionary city will necessarily be a ‘bad city’ by the logic of the chief executive officer quoted above. Calcutta, in this sense, had always been a ‘bad city’. The refugees made it worse. Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Cities and Insurrections’ <http://www.globalurban.org/Issue1PIMag05/Hobsbawm%20article.htm>.

³ Ibid.

⁴*Amritabazar*, April 21, 1950.

⁵*TheTimes of India*, July 14, 1957.

looked bad and smelt bad. They should not be touched either as the places they occupied were emerging as the 'breeding ground of cholera and small pox'⁶. Thousands of destitute bodies jostling together in the streets, pavements and railway stations were an assault to the bourgeois urban aesthetics. As they marched on the streets, blocked roads and occupied street corners in demand of food and rehabilitation – they further threatened the government and irritated the city elite.

The paper will elaborate the nature of the governmental and the popular anxiety regarding the refugee 'congestion' in Calcutta; which refugee was welcomed and who was perceived as a threat to the health of the city, and the consequent measures taken by the administrators (like the dispersal scheme or the eviction bill of 1951). Thus, it will bring together the early post-colonial debates, discussions and practices of urban planning and management and the discourse of 'refugee problem' in the context of Calcutta.

II: The (Un)Sanitary City

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'Rape schedule' is established as a concept in much of feminist writing, as something structuring and restricting women's lives and movements. At the same time, such a blanket term doesn't take into account the lives of sex workers and that of people living in the streets, whose bodies and livelihoods cannot be contained by such a schedule. Campaigns against gendered violence in cities have sought to physically mark the modern metropolis and institutions within them in terms of experiences of assault and harassment; challenging other, functional layouts of the city.

Keeping the above two in mind, this paper proposes to look at the city through the lens of sanitation. How does access to toilets (in their different forms) movement of women across the city? How does it shape their everyday dietary practices, and sanitary expectation? How do women living on the streets access them, and where? What happens to transwomen, many of whom spend large parts of their days at busy cross-sections of the roads?

⁶ Press Note, January 13, 1951, File No – 9c1-1/51, Bundle No 4, List 119, Political (C.R.), Archives and National Library, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Access to clean and safe sanitation also implies that someone has to clean toilets, at all hours. Sanitation work, in cities, has traditionally been associated with migrant labour, of specific 'untouchable' castes. How does sanitary work determine their movement across city spaces, often during hours that are considered 'unsafe'. These considerations will hopefully germinate in the understanding of a city structured around human sanitary practices, moulding the gendered body to suit (the lack of) access.

III. Labour, Precarity and the City: exploring the making of the urban labour in Calcutta

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The migrant labour for long has formed a significant part of the workforce of the city, Calcutta being no exception. These migrants have shaped the city as much as the city has shaped them and their lived experiences. Against the background of ongoing transformation in the world of work through industrial deceleration, growing casualization and consequent new forms of labour, this paper looks to examine the precarious labour located at the margins of the city and how their specific precarities and resistance to it is shaped by their everyday negotiation with the city. Through in-depth interviews with migrant women workers, the paper explores the making of the urban labour in Calcutta. The lived experiences of the labouring women in Calcutta are shaped by the intersections of their gender, class, caste and other identities, experiences that are further complicated by their migrant origins. But to understand their implications, it is not enough to study them in vacuum. It is the proposition of this paper that the social constructions of the labouring woman in Calcutta is shaped by and can only be contextualised within the everyday negotiations with the city. This will provide an insight into the way the city shapes patterns of precariousness and resistance. The interaction between the labour and the city also illustrate how the notions of home, belonging and migration are often problematic and cannot be situated within binaries.