

Socio-spatial restructuring of Kolkata and the emerging claims and contestations of migrants in the city

Migrants are central to the neoliberal restructuring of cities into spaces of global circuits of capital production and accumulation driven by the state (Samaddar 2016) – it is their labour that contributes to the expansion of mega urban infrastructural networks, the building of new townships, and the restructuring of older, congested city cores into spaces of real estate, finance, information technology and other service oriented urban work that is taking precedence over the more established industrial and manufacturing based urban economies (ILO 2017). Migrants are drawn to cities by economic opportunities and aspirations, the possibility of accessing improved education and health facilities, and to carve a new identity shorn of the narrow and oppressive trappings of caste and other communal identity markers. Increasingly, climate change and civil or religious strife are driving mass migration at an international scale. But their very presence in the city is considered to be unsettling (Samaddar 2016) and even threatening – raising fears of dilution of cultures, destruction of core/majoritarian values, and scarcity of economic resources (Buckler, Swatt, Salinas 2009) that lead to political and social backlash amounting to violence against particular groups of specifically lower skilled migrants working predominantly in the informal urban sector.

While China and Korea have strict policies that prevent rural migrants from settling down and becoming full citizens, historically, city and state governments in India have never actively encouraged migrants from settling and yet, have extended various degrees of negotiated access to the city's resources such as housing at specific conjunctures of political and social mobilisation amongst migrants. However, there seems to be a major break with the past, in that migrants caught in the neoliberal moment of city restructuring, are being explicitly excluded, marginalised and “othered” by other groups in the city – the newly emergent urban middle class, older established migrants, new internally displaced development refugees, and increasingly protectionist and right leaning political parties. Remaining invisible in the host city is no longer a mode of surviving and coping for migrants as they are being systematically identified, made visible, targeted and expelled from the social, public and political life of the city - their long and

protracted struggles for recognition and rights steadily whittled away not by the state, but by groups caught up in the ‘worlding’ process.

Given the broader framework above, the proposed panel of four papers on Kolkata intends to examine the following questions:

- i) To what extent and in what manner are migrants in the city being affected by the social and spatial restructuring of Kolkata?
- ii) In what ways do migrants play a role in the neoliberal project of making the city into a space of rent extraction and commodification of land, housing, amenities?
- iii) What kind of socio-spatial contestations are emerging in the city of Kolkata over the claims of migrants? What are the continuities and discontinuities in the way the state, market and civil society has treated migrants and their claims to the city?
- iv) How do different groups or categories of migrants deal with the changing city, a changed political regime, and the changing attitude towards migrants? What are the challenges and modes by which migrants attempt to secure stronger footholds in Kolkata?

Kolkata has been the site of historical processes of migration and cross border refugee movements into the city. Migrants have found access to affordable housing through the Thika Tenancy Act. Refugees have been accommodated through informal vesting of seized lands (Roy) and by giving them access to informal jobs such as hawking in a bid to consolidate the incoming population into a vote bank. However, as the state seeks to turn the city into a “gentleman’s city” (Roy), there is both the need for informal services and cheap labour as well as an increasing level of uncertainty, fear and risk that permeates into various urban poor groups – including citizens displaced by development induced displacements, or established migrant communities who are made to feel unwelcome and unwanted in a changing economy as well as among newly arriving migrants. Thus, the ability of migrants to interpret the state’s and civil society’s actions, or read the market’s needs for informal work, and create bridges or fill in gaps left by the state – akin to what Simone terms as “people as infrastructure” is left deeply shaken and disrupted. Thus it begs the question as to how migrants are dealing with this new climate of increased risks and new opportunities.

The panel comprising academics will seek to answer some of the questions raised earlier. The three papers in the Panel are as follows:

Paper I:

Post-Industrial Urban Regeneration in a Transitional Metropolis: Implications for the Right to Adequate Housing and Environmental Justice in Urban Core

Prof. Souvanic Roy, IEST, Shibpur and Prof. Tathagata Chatterji, XIMB, Bhubaneswar

The authors draw our attention to the intensification of conflict in informal settlements in Kolkata where Thika Tenancy Act, which enabled migrants to access affordable housing options in the city's core areas, is being substantially diluted under the influence of property developers. Through two case studies of slums in Howrah and Kolkata, they raise important questions about the transformation of rights to housing amongst migrants and the increasing precarity faced by them.

Paper II:

The “invisibles” in New Town Rajarhat: the politics of place-making by new migrants and the internally displaced refugees of urban development

Dr. Ratoola Kundu (TISS, Mumbai)

This paper traces the contestations that arise between internal refugees and new migrants in an emerging urbanising landscape that treats both groups as “invisible”. What are the networks and negotiations that new migrants and internal refugees use to access shelter and livelihood in New Town? What kinds of different skills, resources, and identities are channelled to influence these negotiations? How do we make sense of these spatial practices of migrants and refugees in a space that aspires to becoming urban and world class at the same time?

Paper III:

Negotiating the right to the street – Emerging tensions between new and existing hawkers in Kolkata

Dr. Anushyama Mukherjee, (TISS Mumbai)

This paper seeks to examine the different kinds of negotiation that is taking place between the new and old migrants to the city of Kolkata in terms of using physical space to practice their livelihood. The street is presented as a contested space and the livelihood practice of vending as one that is the site of emergent politics between new and old migrants. She examines four vending zones in the core and peripheral areas of Kolkata and the changing spatial practices and negotiations between the state, the new migrants and old migrants and the middle class associations.