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)

Introduction:

The frontiers of urban areas are particularly volatile and dynamic where urbanisation is posited as the primary driver of economic growth and the harbinger of socio-spatial transformation from rural to urban. Contestation and violence against people and their habitats is central to this process whether it is carried out in a planned manner by the state and market or through informal means wherein land is subdivided into layouts and its use is converted from agricultural to non-agricultural with the active collusion of state and non-state actors. Along with the displacement and dispossession of the erstwhile peasants and other groups of people living and working in the urban fringes, peripheral urbanisation processes hasten the erasure of histories of people – their identities, their economy, their social ties, kinship and caste networks, collective associations and institutions, their common property resources, and their built and lived habitats. It leads also to an incredible socio-spatial churning, as groups continue to be simultaneously settled and unsettled, often clashing with one another over control of territories, access to resources and cultures. The resulting territory is therefore characterised by uneven urban development, splintered, fragmented, incomplete geographies of being and becoming urban or resisting urbanisation.

While studies have highlighted the different trajectories of peripheral urbanisation, or examined the drivers of peri-urbanisation (particularly the role of the state and the market), and the impact of socio-spatial transformations on the original inhabitants of these areas, there has been little work on the ways in which different sets of actors struggle to a) reassert, or consolidate their power, authority, collectively mobilise access and claims to the emerging urban periphery through different and perhaps new regimes of territorial governance arrangements and b) assert their agency in reclaiming and remaking one's identity and making sense of the changed reality through varied, incremental, contested strategies of place-making.

The making of New Town Rajarhat, a township of approximately 37 sq. km on the north eastern periphery of Kolkata, initiated by the Left Front Government in the 90's post liberalisation of the economy, and influenced greatly by private developers and the entry of the private sector in the housing sector, has been facilitated through violent erasures, expropriation of agricultural land, dispossessions and displacements that underwrite the production of the periphery as spaces of urban consumption, living and working. As such the brutal processes of socio-spatial transformation is shot through with sharpening inequalities, social, economic and political exclusions, growing antagonisms, and the large scale, deep impoverishment and the systematic attempts to make certain groups socially, politically and spatially "invisible" – such as the dispossessed farmers and fisherfolk who continue to live in the villages sandwiched within the mega urban blocks, and the new low skilled migrants who arrive in groups each season in search of work, particularly in the booming construction sector.

However given the dynamic and emerging nature of the periphery, there is very little understanding of what kind of relationships and mediations emerge between different groups that live and work here. What kind of relationships, strategic yet unstable alliances are forged between these new and old actors – particularly between erstwhile (internally displaced) farmers and the new migrants? How is the relationship between land and labour reconstituted through new circuits of capital accumulation and regimes of governance? How is the shifting terrain of the periphery mediated, structured and

governed? How are inhabitants making sense and attaching meaning to these spaces and in turn being influenced by the dynamic shifts in the landscape? What kind of power structures and locally contingent assemblages have been carved out to influence and control these processes of large scale transformations and the limits of such influence? And finally, what can the study of these relationships, everyday practices, contestation and negotiations reveal about the future of urban peripheries as viable and liveable places?

This paper makes three sets of interconnected arguments:

(i)   Even though speculative urbanism and real estatization are seemingly the key drivers of capital accumulation in the rapidly changing periphery of Rajarhat, facilitated by the State government; land and the social relationships around land – its ownership, tenure status, its quantity, its quality, its location, its revenue classification, its control and governance and management - is at the centre of transformations that are at best incomplete, messy and lead to new second order circuits of rent extraction and expropriations. The furtive pace and calculated informality with which the State and private players have dispossessed farmers, share croppers and other populations living off the land and wetlands in Rajarhat, especially post the nineties, has spurred new and often unintended cycles of settling and unsettling of people and contestations over land.

This, I argue, requires closer attention to be paid to the unevenness of the processes of agrarian transformations and to histories of settlement formation, agrarian dynamics, and politics of land – its ownership, vesting, acquisition and compensation. Thus while the villages (where the erstwhile farmers continue to live) are squeezed behind an emerging concrete metropolis, they cannot be considered as mere relics of the agrarian past. Rather, they are constitutive of the emerging geography of uneven spatial value. They are also the context for the emergent dynamics between migrants and native inhabitants as the villages are increasingly being built up to accommodate the migrant workers. Spatially and socially too, the villages are also at the centre of the ever widening social and economic inequalities - with erstwhile larger land owning groups being able to cash in on the urban development and its spin offs while landless labourers and fisherfolk, and smaller land owners are left to struggle with lack of employment options, unending negotiations with new sets of employers and court cases regarding compensations. An examination of the ways in which land and round these existing village pockets (and outside the notified planning area of the new town) is being harnessed, used, converted also points to the ways in which the urban and particularly the idea of a world class, master planned city is being constantly challenged and reconstituted by the "rural". The theoretical frameworks I draw from are Roy's notion of calculated informality and territorial flexibility in the process of urbanisation, and Gururani's claims that the peripheral urbanisation is necessarily sedimented in agrarian relations surrounding land, caste and kin relationships, the ideas of village life etc.

(ii)   Given that the urbanisation of the periphery is an incomplete process, met with frequent blockades and resistance, especially because of the territorial flexibility with which the state has operated, the geography is fragmented and splintered making it difficult to place public infrastructures such as water pipelines, bus routes, sewage lines that require contiguous parcels of land for such large scale networks to be built. This instantiates the formation of complex combinations of people, objects, spaces and practices albeit that are provisional, fragmented and contingent upon the local context that fill in the gap for infrastructures and services in the absence of the state and the market. Again migrants

and native village inhabitants are crucial to this process but in distinctly different ways given that they are able to assemble and deploy different and unequal forms of social capital. The focus however is on the contingent and informal nature of these emerging occupations and the precarious conditions of work that challenge the ideas of a trickle-down effect of urbanisation as a major economic driver and employment generator. Here I draw from Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" while noting the deep and complex imbrications and gaps between the accumulation economy and the need economy (Sanyal and Bhattacharjee).

(iii)   In the third and final part of the paper, I attempt to analyse how the violence and fear that is central to the extra-legal mechanisms by which the territories are simultaneously settled and unsettled is actually managed and governed. Here it may seem that the decision making structures have become far more hybrid and centralised with the new parastatals such as HIDCO, NKDA controlling processes of land acquisition, development, sale and transfer, as well as building housing and urban infrastructure in Rajarhat New Town, which is designated for the time being as a statutory area and that consequently, the traditional powers vested with the local village authorities (gram panchayats, panchayat samiti, zilla parishads) are being severely curtailed or bypassed completely. However, I argue, that the process of peripheral urbanisation has led to the formation and consolidation of power in the hands of new informal sovereigns (Hansen and Stepputat) – who act as laws unto themselves- and are critical to the endeavours of governments and police forces to produce legitimacy, and to perform the sovereignty of the state. They are also central to the process of capital accumulation and rent extraction in the fringes by employing the people who have been dispossessed and are unable to enter the new economy that relies mostly on forms of highly skilled immaterial labour.
Here I try to understand the making and sustenance of the "syndicate raj" and the politics of local "big men" who have proliferated the urbanising landscape of Rajarhat and the role played by them in facilitating this process in complex ways. This allows us to engage with the question of agency – particularly how are some people able to influence and exert such immense control over material, labour, cash, and political clout given that the state had tried to curb precisely this by undertaking large scale land acquisition? It is critical to locate this within the current political economic context given that there has been a radical regime change in 2011 with TMC coming to power in the state (ending the long established rule of the Left Front Government), the dissolution of the Bhangor-Rajarhat Area Development Authority in 2011 and the fact that Rajarhat-Gopalpur Municipality (adjoining the Rajarhat New Town) has been merged with Salt Lake Municipality and Mahishbathan II Gram Panchayat to form the new local body – Bidhan Nagar Municipal Corporation in 2015.

Methodology

The paper is based on my PhD dissertation conducted in Rajarhat New Town between 2008 and 2009 and two graduate student research guided by me (in 2013, 2015). Currently Rajarhat New Town is the site of an ongoing research project tracing the life histories of street vendors and the spaces and strategies the use deliberately to gain access to spaces in the newly emerging city. Ethnographic fieldwork has been supplemented with in depth interviews with multiple stakeholders including different groups of inhabitants – erstwhile farmers, leaders of land losers collectives, leaders of resistance movements to land acquisition, new migrants (low skilled and highly skilled white collar workers), officials of various parastatal agencies, vendors, local political leaders and village level locally

elected officials. The research on the operations of syndicates draws mainly from the systematic analysis of newspaper reports. Wherever possible, findings have been triangulated with secondary data culled out from official reports and published articles. The study on the working of syndicates and big men in the area has been limited given that access to some of the key players has been closely guarded.

The socio-spatial production of New Town Rajarhat:

Rajarhat New Town is located to the northeast of the existing city of Kolkata, outside the Kolkata Metropolitan Area boundary. The township is spread over 37 square kilometres of erstwhile village and agricultural lands, ponds and wetlands; with land acquired from 34 mouzas across North and South 24 parganas. The township was initiated in 1993 by the erstwhile Left Front Government of West Bengal and has been projected as West Bengal's first "green, eco-friendly, self-sufficient, and smart city" (WBHIDCO 1999) with the objective of decongesting Kolkata through the creation of a satellite city and to provide housing and planned urban infrastructure across different socio-economic segments of populations.

The township is divided into four action areas and a central business district (CBD) as per the master plan prepared by HIDCO, the planning and development authority for the area. It has been declared a statutory area under the civic administration of New Town Kolkata Development Authority (since ….), a transitory non-elected body to oversee the development and maintenance of services and facilities in the New Town area. The predominant land use category is residential, while the rest is dedicated to Information Technology, public institutions, open spaces, commercial uses and circulation. A number of global and regional IT firms, real estate development companies, higher educational institutes, hotel chains, and several big malls have been built. The bulk of housing in the township is in the form of gated high rise apartment complexes (Sengupta 2013). Given the lack of facilities, especially access to local produce markets and public transport, most apartments are not occupied. A number of these apartments are also purely for speculative investment purposes and given the real estate crash in 2008, there are few new buyers.

The middle and upper middle class housing complexes are inhabited by a mix of people, predominantly Bengalis from Kolkata who own apartments as well as mostly renters of different ethnicities who work in the IT sector and have come from different parts of the country. Over the last decade, new forms of transitory labouring populations have arrived in Rajarhat in search of work. The low skilled seasonal migrant workers from extremely impoverished regions of the state took to construction and waste recycling work and live in precarious conditions while higher skilled migrants are living in the new housing complexes. Some of the lower skilled new migrants working as drivers or house helps have started to live in the erstwhile village pockets within Rajarhat New Town.

Spatially however, Rajarhat appears to be a patchwork of concrete, glass and steel high rises, set amidst fallow lands which have been acquired but not built upon. The metalled roads sometimes end up in a dirt track that leads to village clusters with mud and thatch huts, clumps of banana and coconut trees and occasionally a water body belying the neat categorization of master plans and the dominant narrative of complete urbanisation. Uneven development seems to be the central feature of the spatial production of New town – particularly in the way the lands have been acquired, notified and de-notified, homestead land has been selectively left aside from acquisition, and rehabilitation and resettlement has been offered to a select few – (e.g. such as to a group of 683 Hindu refugee families from Bangladesh who were living on the Bagjola canal banks who have been permanently resettled in Nandannager and Jatragachi villages with documents of land and basic civic amenities by HIDCO).

Officially there are 16 village clusters inside the planned New Town area - these are original homestead lands that were not acquired by the state in order to mitigate the effects of displacement of farmers. Agricultural lands surrounding the homestead lands were acquired by HIDCO. Although initially a buffer strip of land around the village was planned to enable villagers to grow vegetables or allow for their cattle to graze, this was reneged upon as land prices began to soar (Basak 2013). These rural enclaves in the midst of New Town still retain the look of the agro-pastoral village communities that used to thrive before the planned project took shape, though much is changing internally given that they no longer have any ties to agricultural land, or access to the rural commons and there exists a widening social distance (mediated by anger of having been displaced in place) between them and the new inhabitants and the more transitory migrant labourers. These populations are thus made invisible, increasingly pushed behind concrete and gated towers, and even physically contained in space with different sets of development guidelines stunting their growth. In the master plan, some of these villages have even been demarcated as service villages (Roy 2005), with the idea that lower income and low skilled migrants working as domestic helps, drivers, peons, sweepers, cleaners in the new offices will locate in neighbouring villages where rents are cheaper.

This seemingly incoherent and selective inclusion and exclusion of habitats and settlements from the official planned New Town has not only manifested itself through a distinctly irregular and zig zag boundary, but also in the ways different populations groups who had deep attachments to the land and the place, have been subjected to the violent erasure of their settlement histories and identities, fragmentation of collective life and a form of brutal "displacement in place". It has happened through a territorial flexible approach to planning applied by the state and the market (Roy) and a deliberate and calculated informality that has been contextualised to the distinctive histories, identities, social relations of communities inhabiting this place. Elsewhere, I have argued that the unmapping of the region and its rich and productive past has led to the erasure of histories and identities (Kundu 2016). Planning of New Town has been suffused with informality as the state itself has bent, stretched and created exceptions to its rules and regulations in order to facilitate the development of New Town. The oft changing land use categorizations reflect the competing interests of various groups. This social and spatial unevenness that has been deliberatively produced, where claims of some settlements and groups have been given more permanence while others have been uprooted and made transitory/impermanent/precarious, has been further intensified with different grades of compensation packages and promises of resettlement and employment.

I argue that this approach of "divide and rule" (refugees versus original inhabitants, villages dominated by Muslims versus those where Dalit representation is stronger, villages owing allegiance to the Opposition party and those owing allegiance to Left Front government) had initially led to disabling stronger mobilisation of resistance by the original inhabitants of Rajarhat, keeping them in a constant state of vulnerability with respect to their future, while at the same time securing their allegiance and the ensuring hegemony of the Left Rule. This has been examined by several scholars (Dey et. al, Mitra) who claim that the production of Rajarhat New Town in the nineties and early 2000 is inextricably linked to the ways in which territorial expansion, capital accumulation and labour exploitation go hand in hand and that these were achieved through several coercive as well as consent building exercises. But with the resistance to large scale acquisition growing across the state following Nandigram and Singur, the Left Front Government was summarily defeated by the TMC in 2011, indicating that there were political limits to the coercion and consent building exercises. However, I argue that this has also created 'blockades' to the future development of New Town and its surrounding areas (Roy, Kundu 2017) – particularly to seamless, grid iron, networked infrastructure and to the rule of the law and the

new party regime, with the phenomenal rise of local "big men" controlling different territories through the circulation of labour and capital in the urban periphery of Rajarhat[1].

In the next section I discuss the emerging relationships between these new and old actors, the reconstitution of the relation between land and labour and between older structures of power and new emerging centres of power and influence that simultaneously reinforce and challenge the status quo.

1. The Village in the City:

Prior to 1995, Rajarhat used to be a fertile agricultural area dotted with dense villages with long histories of settlement, ponds, orchards, flower nurseries and substantial waterbodies. Inhabited by farmers and fishermen, two thirds of who were from marginalised socio-economic groups - either the Muslim community or Dalit community, the locality was connected to the city through the exchange of fresh produce, goods and services (Dey, Samaddar and Sen 2013). Landholdings were typically small and there were multiple tenure structures that enabled some to work as share croppers, as tenants, and even as farm labourers. Many inhabitants were engaged in fishing and in the trade and transport of fresh produce and fish. The villages in Rajarhat area had electricity, good primary schools, access to water (though filled with impurities), irrigation facilities and roads. An estimated 130,000 people lost their land and livelihood due to the large-scale urban project (Sengupta 2013).

Earlier, I have discussed how this history of settlement practices and habitats were brutally effaced through a series of deliberate unmapping and re-organisation through new cartographic techniques of zoning. However, it is important to understand that land acquisition was a protracted and politically and spatially contingent process, thus producing in its wake a highly uneven geography of spatial value and a differentiated population with conflicting views of the process. Contrary to what the State and some scholars (Mitra, Chatterjee) have claimed, the formation of an extra-legal political entity called the Land Procurement Committee did not manage to generate moral consensus and political approval for the project – rather these structures were strategically used to fragment peripheral populations, foment discontent and social cleavages and seed the rise of powerful intermediaries who would do the crucial work of mobilizing land for capital accumulation.

This has facilitated new circuits of rent extraction and capital accumulation that mediate the relationship between older village inhabitants and the new migrants. While those farmers who received and reinvested part of the compensation they received for their agricultural land into extension of their housing, there were many farmers who refused to take the compensation arguing that they had been paid unfairly and are still fighting these cases in the court. Those with extended and pucca houses have become land lords, renting out rooms to the new migrants, often distant relatives from the state, asserting new forms of social and economic power in the process. Residual lands along the wetlands and canals are being deliberately occupied by political force in order to settle the new migrants for a steep price, in exchange of the right to stay in those areas and access water and other urban infrastructures, away from the gaze of the state's encroachment department.

Hiru Ganguly (name changed) lives in Thakdari village which lies just outside the New Town area. He has a house with an orchard and with the transformation of the surrounding villages, he too built up

---

[1] Although during the Left Front Regime there were strong men or local toughs who were mobilised to terrorise the villagers into giving up their land, these men were controlled by a highly organised cadre based party. In the present context, TMC is unable to exert full control over the periphery because it lacks a strong party based organisation and is dependent upon the big men to bring in the required numbers in exchange for construction contracts and commissions.

his house to two floors, along with a row of small rooms in the orchard which he lets out. Though a landlord, he has worked as a driver in a logistics company for 25 years. The past two years, he has taken up the job as a private driver to a family living in the gated complex nearby as the hours are more relaxed. His distant cousins have taken up the rooms in the orchard on rent. Hiru has also taken a hefty commission from his cousin's wife who has secured employment as a domestic help in the same family he is employed with. Hiru's wife does not work and his children are studying in English medium schools that have opened in Rajarhat. When asked about his choice to work as a driver, he articulated "*it is not out of a necessity. I am quite comfortable financially because of the steady rent I get. For a long time, I have not practiced agriculture though our family had a lot of land. It was increasingly difficult to find good agricultural labour. The New Town project changed this as my agricultural land was acquired and with the money I built the rooms for renting. I rent out to only known but distant relatives and they also benefit from this association. I choose to drive because I like to be out of the house. I am respectable person in the village and I ensure that I maintain my status*".

The families with larger land holdings (often belonging to higher castes or influential families with political clout) in these villages have also been able to sell of portions of their land to private developers to construct apartment complexes given that the regulatory regime is weaker in the village pockets and the gram panchayat colludes with private players to approve the building plans. While some villagers have rented out the extra space to new migrants, others have opened up small grocery shops, cable TV shops, mobile repair shops, tea shops, etc., revealing a changing village economy. Many of these products and services sold in the villages are extended to the residents of the adjacent gated communities. In Baligori village, due to its proximity to the newly opened Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital, a number of residents are renting out their rooms to the patients' families. These new livelihood practices, entrepreneurial spirit, moving away from subsistence economy, an emerging sense of private wealth and competition and constant efforts to improve one's property permeate the village atmosphere. Thus investing in rental property has become a strategy for villagers to enter the informal land market in Rajarhat.

However, not all residents are able to seize these new opportunities, leading to a deepening of social and spatial inequalities in the villages. Some village residents have received paltry compensation packages because they had very small landholdings or else spent the money on the marriage of a son or daughter, or buying a motorbike, gold etc. While the new urban economy is dependent upon the labour of non-skilled informal workers and have absorbed the migrant labourers as security guards, maids, drivers, construction labourers but many erstwhile farmers in the villages are sceptical about these kinds of jobs, which they consider undignified and underpaid and thus prefer not to these jobs (Basak 2013).

One villager from Chhapna said "*we have been here since our forefathers came here and made the land habitable. The government took away our lands and gave us meagre compensation. It is true we improved our houses with that money, but where do we go now? What do we do? Where will our cows graze? The big buildings will soon stifle us*"

For some of the villagers, there is no choice however but to engage in menial jobs such as rag picking – these are usually the low caste and the most marginalised sections of the village population who worked as agricultural labourers, share croppers or fishermen in the wetlands and thus have received no compensation. Their huts are visibly in a dilapidated kuccha state and their families impoverished. They have also lost access to the commons which were essential to their daily life for feeding their livestock, or cultivating vegetables, or for their children to play, leaving these families in an extremely vulnerable state. The calculated informality of the state in the settling and resettling of populations in Rajarhat has also produced new social cleavages between erstwhile residents, particularly those that

have lived here for generations and have usufruct rights to land versus refugee populations from Bangladesh who were settled on vested lands in the 70s. As mentioned earlier, a section of the refugees were permanently resettled and rehabilitated in Jatragachi, and given pattas. Thus they fared marginally better than the landless agricultural labourers. This has redrawn the boundaries of interaction between migrants and refugees, with discontent permeating through their interactions, often heightened by existing communal tensions.

The social fabric of these villages, thus far from being insulated, are now sites of emerging conflicts over resources between original residents and new migrants and original residents, further disembodying the experience of place (Kundu 2017).

Ajay Mandal, a resident of Jatragachi opines,

> "*The unity of the village has suffered. Earlier we lived as a community. We did everything as a community. There were rich, middles class as well as poor people in the village. With the transformation, rich have become richer, poor, poorer and in such a fashion that there are cultural alienation between them (…) money is spent in alcohol, in parties where drink is mandatory. Some people are participating in those gatherings. People are buying bikes, even cars with the accumulated money. Cigarette smoking, taking alcohol, all kind of urban culture is penetrating the village. We are on the edge of losing our village identities*" (as quoted in Basak 2013).

Not everyone in the villages shares his sentiments because of the ways in which urbanisation has become a conduit for the commodification of land and the ability to extract rent from it, especially for those villagers who owned land and were able to negotiate deals with private developers. Thus, these villages though thought of as "eye sores", "planning failures", "relics of the past" are actually very much at the centre of the constant processes of settling and unsettling that is remaking the urbanising landscape of New Town though in highly uneven, unequal ways and often by exploiting migrants and the most disadvantaged. As Gururani (2017) has argued, "*they sustain and accommodate the everyday life of an unfolding urbanism. These rural enclaves challenge the standard narrative of urbanization and urge us to consider how in the postcolonial context unlike the post-industrialized world, the urban is constituted materially and symbolically, by what lies outside of it or excluded from it*".

2. People as infrastructure:

Simone has posited that in the extremely marginalised and neglected inner city areas such as that of Johannesburg, there exist an incredible capacity for inhabitants of limited means to co-create spontaneously, very flexible and fleeting social arrangements that enhance the potential for economic and cultural operations. This conjunction – "complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" is what Simone refers to as "people as infrastructure" – at once provisional and mobile, operating without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be lived or used – and yet managing to bring together very different skills, resources, practices that enable them to reproduce life in the city with the only certainty that the outcomes are flexible and radically open ended. He posits this idea of a highly urbanised social infrastructure in contrast to the dominant idea of infrastructure as a physical entity – the provision of which through networks places people, objects and territories in a city in a way that it increase the idea of efficiency (Simone).

In the frontiers of urban Kolkata, which is marked by its distinctive lack of such complete and efficient systems of networked infrastructure (whether it is water pipelines, electricity supply, or roads) and population is scattered, density is low, and there is no distinct urban feel to the place, the concept of people as infrastructure takes on a different meaning. New Town is still in the process of becoming. Several infrastructure projects are incomplete. In the residual villages, the power of the panchayat has

been effectively curtailed with respect to building permissions. This state of administrative limbo has led to a splintering of the geography and has impeded how inhabitants make sense of their surroundings and access basic infrastructure such as transport, water, electricity and garbage collection. In the villages, inhabitants openly challenged their physical exclusion from the New Town by building bridges over the peripheral canals, by realigning the village roads to connect to the grid of streets imposed by the master plan.

Bridges are being built in other ways too. The erstwhile farmers have become bridges for the apartment dwellers by providing services that are absent in the New Town. There is a vibrant network of autorickshaws that ply in New Town area responding to the needs of residents to access markets, schools, offices in the absence of public transport. Apartment dwellers highlighted their dependency on the villagers for a number of their daily requirements. Mr. B. Poddar, a long-time resident of Greenfield Heights says, "…*the Atharotala market continues to exist because we (meaning the residents) protected it from being evicted by HIDCO. They are illegally occupying land and they charge us more for fresh vegetables and fish. But without the market, we would have had to go to Salt Lake which is 5 or 6 km away. In the absence of transport, how do you expect a retiree like me to go that far?*"

Debolina, resident of Akankha, sums up the uneven and complicated nature of this dependence, shot through with class inequality and social tensions, "*The surrounding area of the village is basically dominated by Muslims. We have never heard of any communal issues in this region. They are very helpful in nature in fact all the service providers like drinking water, paper wala, milk provider, flower wala, maids etc. are from their community. Somehow we are dependent on them. As it was their land they keep on reminding us about the matter that we are living on their land*". Thus the dependence is simultaneously built on an economic transaction and an act of social "othering", which distinguishes apartment dwellers from the villagers (Kundu 2017).

From the formation of local informal markets selling fresh produce collected from neighbouring ponds and fields, to informal tea stalls feeding the formal white collar workers to the construction labourer, to the supply of drinking water in housing complexes, the intricate web of autorickshaws that ply through the rural- urban divide, infrastructural gaps are being filled in by the village people (original residents and new migrants) who see an opportunity opening post the phase of being dispossessed of their lands and identities during the course of land acquisitions. In the absence of adequate physical urban infrastructure, people across the rural-urban divide have become part of the interconnecting infrastructure, filling in the gaps, through uneasy, temporary collaborations with unlikely partners born out of need in an unfamiliar territory. Much of these arrangements belie the confines of territoriality and involve potential economic risks as many of these arrangements are considered illegal – particularly hawking, illegal tapping of water and electricity.

Najimuddin, a hawker opposite DLF II in the Unitech area says, "*This shop that we have built here. HIDCO and the police obstructed us. We got around 3000 people out on the street and blocked the main road connecting DLF. The police came and but they ended up cooperating with us*". Eviction threats are all too real and the administration sometimes destroys all the goods while at other times, the police and the administration may reach a certain agreement for the hawkers to operate their foodstalls in these very visible spaces of Rajarhat New Town. For Najimuddin however, the risks associated with hawking brings back memories of being forcefully evicted from his family's agricultural lands in the very same DLFII area. Yet at the same time, it also reveals a spirit of making new connections to survive – not only with the customers, but with the police and the HIDCO administration as well as collectively mobilising through the city wide Hawker Sangram Committee's network – "*People like Shaktiman da tour places extensively for the purpose of serving people.*

So, in this way we could contact him. So, we mobilized with them. Participated in meeting, michil with them. So they took care of us".

Yet, people invest in these risky ventures based on an implicit trust and not always necessarily on traditional identities of belonging to the same religious community, village, kin or caste networks. Yet these are tactics of surviving a harsh environment that has in many ways refused to formally accommodate the erstwhile village populations into the emerging urban economy, expropriating their control over land and the means of production and stripping them of spaces to voice their grievances. The economic ventures people create are fraught with tensions, are extremely fragile and tenuous in nature and are dependent on their ability to flexibly negotiate changing regimes of rule and administration, be attentive to changing demands of customers and to mobilise themselves on more broad based social platforms to alleviate their risks.

3. The "big men" (and women) of Rajarhat and the rise of the Syndicate Raj:

The analysis of the changing social relationship between the different groups in Rajarhat New Town and its surrounding areas is incomplete without an examination of the ways in which it is governed, who are the actors that mediate access to votes as well as infrastructure, open up informal spaces of deliberation and resolve territorial conflicts, and control the complex and dynamic logics of settling and unsettling populations over the periphery? Given the deep socio-economic divides and fragmentation of political authority in the periphery, the pervasive fear and terror that accompanied the accumulation of capital through the expropriation of land, the emergence of a mixed rural and urban population with various competing claims and differentiated subjectivities of citizenship, as well as the presence of a surplus population facing expulsion from the circuits of corporate capital accumulation – it is important to understand how these tensions are being managed in the present day.

Historically, the social production of Rajarhat is premised on unimaginable violence committed against farmers, sharecroppers, CPI(M) party workers, activists, women and others by a combination of politicians – administrators – police – criminal strong men from the late 80's onwards. For instance, Ruis Mandal, a strong man in the Thaakdari, Mahishbathan area, was nominated as an election candidate for CPI(M)from the area. In spite of being a history sheeter, with charges of murder and arson against him, he was made to win the election, thus paving the way for a reign of terror where oppositional voices were swiftly stifled. During his rule, the civil society organisations such as the farmers association and the bhery workers association from the area, who had struggled against the atrocities and exploitation of the landed gentry in the area, were dismantled. Internal opposition to the Party's collusion with powerful private players trying to assemble land chunks of land, was also quashed through violent means – thus making way for a "peaceful" land acquisition process in 1996.

The formation of extra-legal land procurement committees and neighbourhood committees that made it possible to co-opt opposition parties and have them coerce and convince the farmers to give up their land at prices which were priced at far lesser rates than the market and the government rates supplemented the actions of the "strong-men" cum politicians who used their capacity for violence to exude control over territories, dispense their own justice, and make decisions with respect to life and death. Political fortunes and positions in these coveted extra-legal structures of mediation became the vehicles to consolidate power as well as immense personal fortunes.

For example, the MLA of CPI(M), Rabin Mandal held on to his seat for close to two decades, and used his political clout to become the Chairman of a Special Purpose Vehicle called Bhangar Rajarhat Area Development Authority, through which he controlled the power to control private developers access

to urbanisable land. At the time, TMC MLA Tanmay Mandal was also made a member of the LPC and this further dampened chances of popular protest over large scale land acquisition. Tanmay Mandal was later sacked by Party president Mamata Banerjee for his alleged involvement in the Vedic Village land scam in the area which exposed the complicity of the then ruling party, the opposition party, the district administration, private players, the local police and criminals in the use of violence to grab land from farmers. Hansen and Septutat have thus argued that *"The gangster, the underworld, or the informal sovereign who has become "a law onto himself" are, in other words, central to the endeavors of governments and police forces to produce legitimacy, and to perform the sovereignty of the state."* In many ways, we see that the rule of individual 'big men' subsumes the state and the rule of law, highlighting how the distinction between state and market is increasingly blurred.

The nature of governance regime in Rajarhat shifts post 2011 when the TMC won the state elections with a resounding victory over the Left Front Government. Land and anti-land acquisition were the central plans of TMC's bid to overthrow the regime of Left rule. While BRADA was dissolved on charges of appeasing private interests in land, there emerged a political vacuum in New Town area which was being administered by parastatals (HIDCO and NKDA) but had no urban elected local body. Although it appeared as if these Special Purpose Vehicles were empowered to bypass the local elected bodies at the village level, especially regarding land acquisition and land development and planning decisions, this period saw the rise and consolidation of the power (and personal fortunes) of the panchayat leaders from TMC. Jehanara Bibi is one such powerful figure from Patherghata who acts as a formidable leader and a mediator between the multiple stakeholders and their conflicting claims to the periphery. She proudly proclaims, on being asked about her role in the area, *"I stand as the most approachable person in this case. HIDCO approaches me to empty lands and villagers also approach me negotiate with HIDCO. So I am everywhere. Panchayat is a good governance in Rajarhat where matters are resolved within hours and which benefits all."*

Jehanara begum is a strong woman in her own right and has a long association with the area. She was elected to the Patherghata gram panchayat as the Pradhan in 1989 from TMC. She went on to consolidate her political clout by becoming the Rajarhat Panchayat Samity Savapati in 2003. She will be completing two full terms at the Zilla Parishad covering Bishnupur, Chandpur and Patherghata. She confidently responds that she takes decisions on behalf on the Panchayat as well given her long years of experience. While sceptical of the possibility of the formation of an urban local body in Rajarhat New Town, she maintains that she is integral part of the decision making processes in the area – from settling hawkers by negotiating with HIDCO, to deciding what slab of rents they should pay in the newly constructed hawker's market, to convince farmers to give up their lands for development, to listening to the issues faced by migrants and helping them access services. Jehnara Begum however thinks that the current regime of rule is one that is markedly more peaceful that the strong-men dominated CPI(M) era- *"CPM used to send bouncers wearing red turbans and young boys on motorbikes to capture lands, once upon a time. Now, it is negotiated. TMC rule is peaceful"* reflecting a broader party strategy to consolidate its power base and move away from oppositional politics to one that is more grounded in the question of governance.

However, the emphasis that the current rule is shorn of the use of informal sovereigns, or certain non-state actors and their capacity for violence, who act as vote aggregators for the party in power but also have some autonomy within their own territories with respect to rule-making, providing housing and services to 'informal' residents, facilitating real estate/ infrastructure deals or becoming real

estate developers themselves. Their public authority is constituted by making public decisions and providing services as non- state actors but while referencing the state (Lund 2006). Thus instead of individual sovereigns who sustain the rule of the regime, Rajarhat New Town is governed through a complex, ever shifting alliance of Syndicates – both labour based and material supply based. Though seeded during the CPI(m) era in a bid to appease land losers in the area, today the Syndicates act as informal structures that not only provide muscle and money power to elected representatives but they also help to marshal political forces in support of local political leaders and to protect their political and economic turf. It is a complex hydra-headed organisation and in exchange of their ability to collect money, the labor and the materials supply syndicates get privileged access to construction projects, contracts, etc.

With strong infighting and regular territorial clashes erupting regularly between TMC factions in the Rajarhat area, the gradual institutionalisation of syndicates raises the question whether this will ultimately challenge the authority of established leaders and ultimately the rule of TMC, or will their continued presence consolidate TMC's presence in a fractured, volatile, and highly differentiated urban periphery. These multiple sovereigns thus point to the constant blurring between the business of politics and the politics of doing business in a regime of rule onto themselves and evokes close connections to the state to gain legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders.

Conclusions:

The paper attempted to explore the different contours of relationships that are emerging between the different groups of actors in the periphery of Rajarhat – particularly between the erstwhile villagers and the new migrants. Migrants remain largely invisible and immensely vulnerable in Rajarhat New Town – they are kept in a state of permanent impermanence as they are selectively handed documents and ID proofs to consolidate their claims to land, housing, services, jobs etc. They are not allowed to collectivise although they are encouraged to support the local powerbrokers during elections.

The erstwhile villagers on the other hand, have a graduated and differentiated access to the new economy jobs or the option to rent out land. They lack skills or the drive to get involved in some of these new forms of informal labour – but are part of the circuit in other ways – as middle men or intermediaries brokering information, land deals, renting houses, creating connections to local political strong men and parties, getting connections to services, connecting to government agents who will provide an identity or documentation proof to new migrants. "Here having the right information and building fluid, provisional relationships with powerful builders and political actors is key to social mobility" (Kamath and Raj).

The fragile ecosystem of syndicates, local intermediaries, para statals and party functionaries belie any definite forms of institutionalization of governance structures but remain powerfully open ended, a highly contested field, where each actor tries to influence the other or subvert the other, or negotiate the terms of trade-off between political allegiance and economic gains, straddling the urban and rural divide. The accidental death of a tribal migrant construction worker, Murmu from Jharkhand in a TCS building site, became a full-fledged yet highly localised protest with migrants labourers and syndicate members (comprising erstwhile farmers) coming together to protest against the company, through violent mob action, destroying private properties while pressing for a bigger compensation package. The labourers and syndicate members clashed with the police even while the local TMC leader, Hussain Ali, tried to negotiate a more peaceful solution to the issue but clearly failed to reign in the powerful informal sovereigns. On the other hand, the powerful Syndicates are open in their

support for heavyweight party functionaries such as the Mayor of Bidhan Nagar Municipal Corporation, which was manifest in their show of strength in numbers during the filing of his nomination and also in the public display of congratulations upon his victory.

The urbanising landscape is one that is patchy, fragmented and extremely volatile. There are elements of the village that seep into, sustain and change the dynamics of urbanisation. The circulation of capital happens through the calculated informality that creates differentiated spatial values and the control over labouring bodies. It leaves us with interesting questions as to the future of Rajarhat New Town, particularly what will happen if and when the area is municipalised, perhaps leading to new categorisation of legal and illegal settlements, displacements and resettlements and the changing political and economic fortunes of existing and emerging intermediaries.