

Making cities making labour: Understanding Kolkata through the perception of the construction workers

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(This is a draft copy. Not to be Cited)

“As the car speeds up to the Ma flyover, a symbol of modern Kolkata, I observe the scaffoldings on the fancy hotels which can be seen from the flyover. Older hotels renovated, newer hotels built. As the scene changes from the bypass to narrower by lanes of Park Circus, what remains constant are the scaffoldings. Scaffoldings, piled sands, bricks are in fact ubiquitous all over the city. Kolkata indeed seems to be in a constant state of being built.”
(Fieldnotes, 20.05.17)

The city is a place of encounters, of gatherings, of being built and changing forms constantly. This paper intends to understand the city as formed through and forming labour practices of those who build it i.e. the construction workers. How is the city of Kolkata constituted through labour both as bodies and as work (building commodities which make the city)? The paper looks at the construction workers as not only labourers who labour in the city but whose labour therefore makes the city. The category of construction workers is used quite loosely involving the multiple guilds of mason, carpenter, painter, plumber and their contractors. The paper also attempts to understand body on two planes—as the body of the worker and the body of the city made and unmade by them.

Context

Construction workers fall under the unorganised workers in India. As per the NSSO 2009-10, out of 46.5 crore workers in India in total, 43.7 crore are in the unorganised sector. Among those workers employed in non-farm activities in the unorganised sector, construction workers form the largest proportion of 4.4 crores (NSSO, 2009-10; Indian Labour Yearbook, 2015). In the period from 2006-2012 while there has been a fall in the number of construction workers employed in the public sector, there has been a corresponding rise of the same in the private sector (table 1)

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012

Public sector	8.9	8.7	8.5	8.5	8.6	8.5	8.3
Private sector	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.2

Source: Indian Labour Yearbook 2015

The enlargement of the workers coming under the private sector, also brings with it a further shrinkage of state's welfare measures thus worsening their already precarious position.

The Indian Labour Yearbook 2015 reports that the all-India average wage for the construction workers vary across months and according to gender. The male worker gets an average daily wage of Rs. 321.96 whereas a female worker gets paid much less at Rs. 199.68 (Calculations based on Indian Labour Yearbook 2015). The workers under the category of mason are better paid with the males earning an annual all-India average daily wage of Rs. 385.25, the female masons do not seem to work in the months of March-June (Indian Labour Yearbook, 2015). Their average daily wage for the remaining months is Rs. 258 (calculations based on Indian Labour Yearbook, 2015). The carpenters form still another category which is completely restricted to male workers. The all-India average daily wage earned by them is Rs. 348.61 (calculations based on Indian Labour Yearbook 2015). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect at length on the different categories of construction workers with different daily wage rates, it is quite clear that there is a hierarchical division of labour between the various works and the skills associated by them which results into pay differences. Also like in most other types of employment there is a clear wage difference between the male and female workers.

The precarity of the unorganised workers has brought to the fore the need of organising them under labour unions. According to the Indian Labour Yearbook 2015 we however see a decline in the trade union membership of the construction workers from 1225317 to 328562. There is correspondence between the declining membership and the resultant declining number of disputes and workers involved between 2012-2014 (Table 2)

Year	No of Disputes	No of workers involved
2012	5	2711

2013	2	3186
2014	2	129

Source: Indian Labour Yearbook 2015: 98

Kolkata as a metropolitan which is still expanding along its fringes becomes a hub for the construction workers who come here in search of work. Cities are not inanimate objects, a site on which social processes simply unfold. Rather they are the very repository of such social processes influencing and being influenced by them. The city as a space becomes is neither absolute, relative or relational in itself but can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstances (Harvey, 1973: 17). It is this which makes the construction workers an especially interesting group of workers to study in their making of the city and being themselves made urban labour by the city. The construction workers are naturally not a homogenous category. On the basis of their mobility they can be categorised into the daily commuters who travel back and forth from their village for work, those who had migrated many years ago and now live in the city as urban poor and finally (and less commonly) those who stay for the period of a project (usually big buildings, shopping malls etc.) in the site returning to their villages intermittently. These differences are not just contextual but they spell significant variations in the way the workers perceive and engage with the city and relate their labour to the city.

Methodology

The paper is based on interviews with fifteen construction workers, of which ten were men and five women. Along with this I also did an interview with one labour contractor. The different categories of construction workers such as masons, carpenters and painters that the paper engages with illustrates the multiple variations between them. A lot of these differences are manifested in their differential access and understanding of the city. The paper also draws upon participant observation in three labour *haats* of Jadavpur station, Ballygunge station and Goabagan as well as that of a workers' protest held in Esplanade.

Making and unmaking Kolkata

The city as opportunity

West Bengal was one of the most urbanised states in india in the early 20th century and much of this urbanisation was centred in Kolkata (Ghosh and Chakma, 2014). With the development of census towns and district-level spatial, the pattern of urbanisation in the state

in now independent of the metropolis and existing urban industrial regions (Samanta, 2012). In spite of inter-district differences current urbanization rate in West Bengal is slightly higher than the national average at 31.87% (Ghosh and Chakma, 2014: 29). In spite of this growing trend of urbanisation Kolkata remains the only metropolis in West Bengal. In the face of lack of work opportunities, agricultural distress and the like, Kolkata therefore becomes a prime employment provider.

The city provides opportunities for work and earning. Pintu, a painter, talks about how work in the city helped him to develop his skills.

“Kolkata was the first place for my employment. I started off as a rookie helping others mix paint etc. The more and more opportunities of work that the city provided allowed me to develop more. The city was like a canvas teaching me to paint. Now I am so skilled that I am called to other cities even to the Gulf for painting jobs.”

Kolkata for him became the training ground where he learnt and developed skills to expand the scope of employment even further. For others the city provided employment in times of distress.

“We had farming land in Bhangor, but when my father died my elder brother and his wife took it all away. My mother and I was left with nothing. One of our neighbours, he was like an uncle then brought me to Kolkata. I was 18 then. I started off as rickshaw puller. But I was not very strong and used to frequently fall sick in this job. One day I asked him to take me as his helper in the work he was doing of plumbing. It was from him that I slowly learnt plumbing work. I owe my survival to him and to this city.”
(Basudeb, plumber).

While a site for opportunities and survival, the city is also a hub of inequality and exploitation. The work available might enable the workers to eke out a living but the question remains where are they located in this city?

Making the margins of the city

“We toil hard, take great risks and through our work we build beautiful houses, monuments. But what becomes of us?”

The construction workers as a part of the unorganised labour force are not only precarious in the returns of their labour but also the conditions under which they work. Harvey (1973: 52)

argues that hidden mechanisms of income redistribution in a complex city system usually increases inequality rather than reducing them. As the city expands new fringes are formed, which the city is often not capable of providing for.

The poverty was evident not only in the cramped and rickety buildings which they lived in but the squalor which was an inevitable result of open drains. The women told me it took them fifteen minutes to walk to the closest shops and access to public transport was at least half an hour away. While many of the inhabitants did different sorts of odd jobs, most of them worked as construction workers, (field-notes)

The above extract of fringe areas around Khidderpore illustrates how these families lived in poverty and lack of access from most of the benefits the city offered including transport. Chris M Kurien in an interview (2015) says that to locate people in the margins of the city physically and mentally, it is often their implements which serve as a marker. The old television or the lack of one, an old mobile phone, the distance from the city centre all of these create a curious liminality between the inside and the outside. The sense of the city as inaccessible however is not just about being spatially located in the fringes. The closing of access is evident in more everyday ways in the interaction of the workers with the city. In a case of tragic paradox Sirajul, a mason, talks about how he and his team of workers had laboured for seven years under a project for building a shopping mall in South Kolkata. In a cruel irony, however, they were later denied entry into the mall itself.

“What to say didi, the people of the city are not nice. They have a different type of mentality. As I told you I always work on big projects like this one here. I also worked in Park Circus for seven years in making a shopping mall. We stayed at the site and did the work. I did not continue till the end as I had to go back to my village for an emergency...I had another work in that area last year. It was very hot and we thought we will go and visit the mall. But the security people did not let us in. They said we cannot go into the mall in dirty clothes. How can one have clean clothes after a whole day of backbreaking labour. These people who share the same plight as us (security guards) sometimes pretend they are genteel people (bara aadmi). Angry I told them, ‘The dirty clothes that you are turning me away for, one day were needed to make this building where you now have jobs.’ In a way they owe their jobs to us.”

Sirajul’s story contains the poignancies of the harsh city where the worker is merely recognised as a labour body but not as an inhabitant. Certain markers are identified through

which their access to the centre is closed off. This become especially ironical when their very labour went in constituting that core. These incidents of exclusions are reminiscent of the classical Marxian argument about the proletariat not having any control over the means of production are also denied access to the fruits of their labour. In this case we see that not only are they not able to access these but they are also spatially closed off from experiencing the finished product.

The security personnel who become the gatekeepers in this case is also a constituent of the same class of unorganised workforce. The construction worker thus is destined to stay on in the peripheries whether it is the fringes of the city with little access to benefits or by closing off access to those which define the urban metropolis. Sirajul like a majority of the construction workers did not live in Kolkata but came from a village in Murshidabad. But by labouring in and on the city, he had developed a sense of belonging to the city, a sense of being a part of making the city. However such notions of belongingness were not to be encouraged. Incidents such as these established him and others as outsiders. The sense of being outsider did not only come from being migrants but also poor, illiterate, 'dirty' and hence being closed off from the elite markers of the city. The city in this case becomes not just a site of exploitation but in constructing the margins becomes an active exploiter of these people.

The perception of being located on the outside is also often seen among the migrant workers themselves. Khokon, a painter coming from Bhangor notes that the city is not just difficult to live in because of its expenses but it is also risky.

“It is risky to live in the city with family. I know of too many people who have been led astray by the lures of the city. Also in our village everyone knows each other. I am out working the whole day but I know my family is safe as the neighbours are there for any emergency. But in the city no one knows each other. It is not safe to leave your family here unprotected”

Unlike Sirajul, Khokon had never developed a sense of the belonging to the city. Kolkata to him was a contrast from the neighbourly relations in his village. The city to him then was a place of work but not his home. Instead of being relegated to the margins of the city, he chose to remain an outsider to it.

City as market

Kolkata as the prime metropolis of West Bengal becomes a source of employment, a potential market. The commodification of their labour is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the labour *haats* which are daily gatherings of the construction workers in designated places of the city for being hired.

It is 7 in the morning. The rail tracks of the Jadavpur station were teeming with people. Mostly men but also a significant number of women sat in groups, chatting and calling out to the others. They all carry a bag with their tools and their tiffin. Some are busy over the phone. Sandharani explains to me, 'they are the team sardars. Sometimes the contractor contacts by phone and tells us where to go. Other times they come here.' Surely the crowd starts thinning as some teams are chosen by the contractors. The bigger groups (which often consist of different teams of masons, painters and others) are often taken by trucks to the site, while other smaller groups (like the one I was sitting with) will avail public transport to reach their site of work. By 9 there are barely 20-25 people left. These are the ones who will have no work today. Slowly they will take the return train and go back to their villages. (Field-notes)

The labouring bodies are the wares in this market and the customers come to choose them. A contractor usually builds a network with different construction workers. But the process of this (unless through recommendation) seemed to be a primitive form of trial, where the contractor will check the bodily capacity of the male members, their strength, whether they were able-bodied and it was through these that their suitability was considered.

The crossing was crowded with people looking for jobs. The masons are coming, the agents of the *babus* are also coming. The way in which people test the cow's horns, teeth and tail before buying it in a cattle market, these people were being tested in the same way and taken to work. I was standing there and observing the buying and selling of labour and labourers. This was almost like an ancient slave market. The difference was the transaction was not for a lifetime, people were being bought only for a day. This was much less expensive than keeping a slave. (Byapari, 2012: 137, my translation)

Byapari's description of the Baghajatin *haat* in the immediate post-colonial period was truly reminiscent of slave trade where the body of the worker was tested to check his suitability as labour. While the modes through which this operated have over the course of years lost much

of its sharpness, in essence the labour *haats* remained just that—an arena where the labouring bodies were displayed as wares to be chosen or rejected by the customers.

“I have a finger missing on my left hand from an accident I had as a factory worker, so for a very long time I would not get work. The contractor will come, look at my hands and say ‘what work can you do with four fingers!’ and go away. You see he had plenty of people to choose from. So I decided to work as a helper for a few years with Gopalda. As his helper I picked up the skills. Also he helped me to build a reputation. Now I work on my own with my team. Since people know now of my work the missing finger is no longer a problem.” (Kokhon)

As someone who will be hired for painting jobs, the lack of finger was considered to be a crucial setback. The body here seemed to become the prime currency through which the transaction took place. Construction work as bodily labour, the body became the basis on which the skills were scripted. Kokhon had to compensate for the shortcomings of his body by foregrounding the skills acquired through apprenticeship.

The city in this case served as a market for these migrant workers who came to sell their labour here. This is made evident by the fact that those labourers who do not get hired do not venture into the city at all but return from the station back to their village.

The labour *haats* were very crucial for the migrant workers as a site which enabled them to sell their labour. While their access to Kolkata was usually prompted by social networks, the *haats* provided the sites through which they could build contacts, form teams, get jobs and also often make friends.

The tea-shops around the area are vibrant with laughter, teasing and friendly banter. “This is our only relaxation before a hard day of work. Even when I have already been assigned work the previous day and actually don’t need to come here, I still do. It feels good to meet everyone here. Also by coming here I can often get news of any upcoming big work and make sure one of my boys is present for that. (Masood, mason)

The *haat* was a place for work, for camaraderie but also for information. The tea-shops are key sites of such news. The shops were frequented by the workers and the contractors and those working in the shop would often pick up such information to later pass it on. The labour *haats* as such sites were more crucial for these daily commuting workers than others who

were residents of the city as they had other channels and sites from which to pick up such information.

Similarly the character of the labour *haats* were not same everywhere. While in Jadavpur station the workers were only approached by labour contractors who then took them to the site of work, in Goabagan or Sarsuna, individual homeowners also came in search of workers. This probably explains the presence of a much greater number of plumbers and carpenters in these markets than in the Jadavpur *haat*.

“Most times I get work in individual houses for repairs and things. I like those works, it is task based and I get paid on completion of the task without having to wait for the whole day. But if the labour contractor takes you then they give you money after the whole day’s work.” (Ganesh, plumber)

I was curious as to this difference between the *haats* in terms of the people accessing them. A tentative explanation offered by Sagar, a mason, mapped these differences onto the nature of the workers in the areas. While the workers in Jadavpur station were all migrant workers, both the Goabagan and Sarsuna labour *haats* were made of mainly the local workers. This he felt made the other residents more familiar and trusting of them. Being based in the very area there seemed to be a greater accessibility.

The character of the labour *haats* were also different in other senses. The specific locations of the labour *haats* were determinant of or rather determined by the type of labour. All over the city the labour *haats* located in the railway stations were dominated by migrant workers from the nearby districts who commuted daily between their work-site and home. While dominated by male workers, these *haats* also had a fair share of women workers. They were usually in mixed teams of either painters or masons. In contrast the *haats* which were located more ‘in’ the city and dominated by resident workers were conspicuous in the absence of women. The implications of this have been discussed in the next section.

Gendered labour gendering city

Construction work as a form of labour was perceived to be a masculine job. The bulk of the workforce is made of men though there are a significant number of women. Much like many other forms of labour there was a clear gendered division of skill by which the women worked primarily as supplier (*jogare*) carrying materials, mixing cements and the like. The specialised work was done by the men. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect on the

implications of such gendered labour forms but it is evident that this also had spatial implications.

Manju: No didi, we never go and sit there. Who will do the housework then?

Biva: It is also *shameful* to go and sit there like some cheap (bajaari) woman. So we don't go. We use that time to finish the housework and then once *dadas* call us and inform us about the work, we will then go with them.

Sadananda: Yes we also don't allow them to sit in the *haat*. We inform them about the work when we find out. It does not look nice for the women of the family to sit out like that.

I: Do you go to work alone?

Mita: Sometimes we have to go for work alone. But the contractor will pick us up from our home and after completion of our work he will have to drop us back here. That is the condition on which we go for work. (Group discussion, 26.06.17, Behala Sarsuna, emphasis respondent's)

'In this *haat* (Goabagan) the women do not sit with us. If there is work for them we inform them by phone and they go there directly or sometimes with us if it is the same place. It is actually not right for womenfolk to sit out here in the open like us men. That is why these places also have a good name. If you go to Ultadanga station, you will see women there. They come from other places and have no shame. But you will not find such women here in this area. We might be poor but we have our honour.' (Alok, painter, Goabagan).

The idea of commodification of the labouring body is framed in gendered terms. The terms of such gender are also very obviously mediated through migration status as is evident in Alok's remark. The women I spoke with in Sarsuna told me about the times they spend sitting outside their houses on the steps of the club, chatting and laughing. This, they confessed, was their relaxation after a day's work and before getting on with the evening chores. This occupation of public space by the women, their laughter and banter were not looked down upon. Rather as characterised by them these 'evening *adda*' gave the place a familial sense, a sense of belonging.

This area is very safe, very nice. The roads are an extension of our homes. In the evening you will often find the women sitting here and chatting. We are all like family here. (Sadananda, mason)

In characterising the area around the house as familial space, the residents of the place, take away the element of public space from it imbuing it with intermediary characters. The *haat*, on the other hand, was public and the occupation of that space by women was agreed to be shameful. Placed in the market space the commodification of the women's labouring bodies become obvious. This contradicted the urban notions of propriety and be labelled as 'of the market' (*bajari*) and hence cheap. It was the site in which the body was placed which determined its honour or lack of it. The practicality of this arrangement touched upon by Manju in the first extract was never foregrounded in the explanations. Being residents of the area and mostly belonging to families where one or more of the male members were also engaged in construction work, it was also easier for the women to finish off their domestic chores instead of spending two hours in the *haat*. This did not come at a great cost to them as they worked in teams and the male members of the team informed them of the task for the day. In contrast for the women construction workers commuting a distance of hours, such an arrangement was not workable. But the terms of being present as labouring bodies and/or as women were not thought of in this term but rather in the terms of honour and shame. This view was shared by some of the daily commuters too.

“Why will anyone do such work if there was any other option? To travel and then come and sit here in the market with all these menfolk, who will like that? My husband also abuses me for this calling me ‘shameless’ but what to do he can't earn much after the accident. I have to work to meet the household expenses. So I come with my brother-in-law and others from the village.” (Manju, helper to mason).

Manju has to come to the labour *haat* as a part of her work day but this is something which she is uncomfortable with but has to do in the absence of choice. She too reproduces the notion of shame in occupying the *haat*. In this she also makes a distinction between the notions of propriety between men and women.

Bharati, however, does not agree to this entire notion of stigma about women coming to the labour *haat*.

“I don’t see where this whole idea of shame comes from. What is there to be ashamed of in coming to the *haat*? It is not like we are selling our bodies here for some illicit job but we are here to sell our honest labour. Do people ask the men the same question? Then why is the standard different for us. This is our worksite just as it is of the men.”

Bharati’s indignation strikes at the root of the contradiction. She makes an interesting difference between selling her body by which she meant the sexual body and selling her labour. Through this she makes a difference in the markets available to women drawing an unfavourable contrast between themselves as ‘honest labour’ and sex-workers. To her, unlike the others, the labour *haat* is as much a site of her work as any. In equating the terms of service available to herself and to the male workers she makes a powerful critique of the gendered notion of the public space.

In spite of this, however, it was quite evident that *haats* were indeed masculine spaces. In the beginning of my fieldwork I found it extremely difficult to access these labour *haats*. I was warned by contractors and workers alike about these being dangerous and dirty places.

“How can you go there alone? You don’t understand how dangerous these places are. Also these people coming from outside the city, there is no trusting them. No no, you tell me your questions and I will get the workers here to talk to you.” (Manab, labour contractor).

The presence of women in these *haats* was rendered completely invisible in Manab’s warning. But this warning and the perception was widely shared not just among the people from this profession but others. While it was still conceivable to talk to individual workers in their site of work, it was incomprehensible to face the whole collectivity in the labour *haat*. The labour *haat* was dangerous, dirty, male spaces not easily accessible to the female body. Having been finally able to access the *haats* I was able to identify how through the use of crass language, sexual jokes, smoking bidis, frequent brawls these spaces were constructed as aggressive masculine spaces. Paradoxically however these very workers’ site of work was the private spaces of the individuals’ home where they were allowed entry into the intimate sphere of the bedroom, the kitchen. While I do not mean to suggest that the processes of access in these cases were automatic but it was possible, necessary and even legitimate. While the collectivity of male labour in the *haat* seemed to foreground the male body rather than the labouring body, in the worksite of the home while definitely perceived as the male body, it was the labouring body which took centre-stage.

The idea of access to the city was very gendered.

I: Is there a specific area where you work?

Pintu: No we work all over the city. No part of the city is closed to us. We have even worked outside Kolkata in Chennai, Banaglore. Actually you see our team is small, of three members and all are male. Our mobility hence remains unrestricted. Those groups which have women workers cannot go everywhere. You see you cannot take women everywhere, there is the question of safety. Also then you have to ensure certain arrangements for them.

Alok: In fact often contractors also want to denote specific areas for mixed groups mainly to give the women a sense of safety.

The idea of mobility is very closely connected to concerns of safety especially of the women, in such big cities. The idea that a certain sense of familiarity is required to deploy women workers in certain areas was shared by the women as well, both migrants but more specifically those who lived in the city.

Radaharani: No we never go outside this area. Whatever work we do is limited to this area. If the contractors offer work outside here the *dadas* themselves refuse on our behalf. We have told them that we will not go beyond this area of Sarsuna.

I: So you do not go to work in other areas of Behala also or in other parts of South Kolkata like Gariahat, Jadavpur?

Sabitri: Sometimes, very rarely we go to other areas of Behala to work. When we go to other places in Behala our deal with the contractor is that he will have to bring us home. But never beyond that. It is too far. It takes too long to come back. The distance is a problem.

Sadananda: Also there is the issue of safety. Sometimes they have to go alone. How to trust those they go with.

I: So when there is no work in this area what do you do?

Radharani: What to do *didi*? We do this and that other work, some do some tailoring work, others work in people's houses.

I (to Sadananda): So what about you and the other men? Do you also work only in this area?

S: If there is work in the Behala area we work here otherwise we go to Jadavpur, Baghajatin, this side of Tollygunge. We don't go beyond that as that is not economical. It costs too much money and takes too much time.

The restrictions imposed by the men and the women themselves over the latter's access to parts of the city emerges as essential to their conceptualisation of what the city means to them. The women hardly ventured out into the other parts of the city outside Behala for work or even for other needs. Their city in fact is limited to their areas of mobility and the *dadas* are the gatekeepers of this. The entire urban space beyond the boundaries of Behala remains for them 'outside'. Interestingly the men while having access to much of South Kolkata for their work, also confess to a boundary beyond which they do not work. The terms framing their restrictions however are located in the economic realm of time and money while for the women the issue is that of safety. These gendered notions of access to labouring sites and the city, clearly illustrates that the city is differently accessed and perceived by these men and women.

Bounded city

The idea of the city being divided into certain specific area was, however, not unique among the workers in Sarsuna. Even the daily commuters both men and women saw their workspace as specific sites within the city. Not all of these were related to ideas of safety and security. Various reasons were cited by the workers for this practice.

Most of the people who come to the *haats* in Jadavpur or Ballygunge work around this area of South Kolkata, in Tollygunge, Garia, Bagha Jatin, Jadavpur etc. We don't take work in the North as it is not convenient for us. (Khokon)

This was actually a strategy which was based on questions of logistics. The workers who accessed the city through the stations in the South Kolkata came from the areas of South 24 Parganas. The train became the access point through which such decisions were made as to go to other parts of the city will involve multiple line changing. Similarly commuters from North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Nadia would avail the trains to Ultadanga and Sealdah, finding it more efficient to work in the areas in North Kolkata and Salt Lake. The trains thus became crucial in the way these people accessed their workspace, work and the city itself.

Further the sustained work over a period of time in the same area also builds up reputation and networks.

I don't have to go to the *haat* regularly anymore. I have done so much work in this area (Salt Lake) that now I get called through phone calls. You see by doing good work over a long period of seven years you automatically build up contacts. The contractors know me and if there is a big plumbing work they send for me and my team. I also get calls from individual clients. (Basudeb, plumber).

The sustenance of working in the construction industry including getting consistent employment in new projects was only possible through building up a network of contacts among labour contractors, individual clients and also other groups of workers. This was naturally possible by frequenting the same area over a period of time. The need to claim space in the scramble for job was such that the workers did not flit from one labour *haat* to the other (apart from in the very beginning of their career) but continued going to the same place until the need for physical presence was replaced by phone contacts.

These logistical reasons were, however, often complicated by other characterisations through which certain perspectives that the workers had towards the city could be mapped.

“For the last eighteen years I have been working in this part of the city. Sometimes Ballygunge, sometimes Lake Terrace, in the Gariahat area. Most of my work has developed in this area. I now work only in this area. People know me here and call me for any work they have. I do not need any intermediary anymore. My style of work suits the houses in this locality. You will see every part of the city has definite types of interiors. You can use same type of plumbing, masonry anywhere but not for carpentry. It's not like I won't be able to work anywhere else but I prefer working here. It is suited to my skill. I however don't work in the Park Circus area. The people there want cheap work. I don't do such work. But this part of the city is beautiful, with old and the modern existing side by side. The people too are genteel and kind.”
(Khajirul, carpenter)

Khajirul maps the body of his work to the specific body of the city. Apart from talking about the usual networks that his long career in South Kolkata has given him, he also gives an insight into how the city is styled through such labour. He recognises that architectural specificities of one area are not replicable in another. The city as a work of labour is thus not

homogenous and identical and it is their labour which makes such differences possible. Therefore it was both a practical as well as an aesthetic decision for him to hone his skill. South Kolkata to him is aesthetically pleasing and rewarding to work in. At the same time, in explaining his decision he makes a very important distinction between carpenter's work and that of others in the construction industry by arguing that the unique characteristics of locations within the city are the product of his labour and not that of masons or others whose work he labels as being undifferentiated. Finally in his decision not to work in certain places he constructs a very clear hierarchy. In spite of himself being a Muslim he categorically states he does not work Park Circus which is a Muslim majority area characterising the work here to be cheap which by extension becomes a characterisation of the region. While it is impossible to say this with any certainty but we can hazard a guess at this characterisation. Khajirul's area of work is primarily a Bengali Hindu upper-middle caste, upper-middle class area. It may be possible that his long association with such customers might have led him to imbibe such values from them by which Park Circus becomes an Other to the genteel beauty of Lake Terrace. It might also be possible that distancing himself from his Muslim identity was a tactic he chose to expand his acceptability in this primarily Hindu area of his work.

The decision not to work in certain areas is, in fact, an illustration of the fragmented nature of the city and how certain areas remain marginal, dirty, dangerous and therefore inaccessible even to the workers.

“We work everywhere. But yes, some areas we do not go to. This is not for any work-related reasons but other reasons. For example places like Rajabazaar, even if we get called there we refuse straightaway. People there are dirty, they haggle about payment. I therefore avoid sending workers to such Mohammedan areas. It's not like I am anti-Muslim or anything I have many Muslim workers in my teams. But they areas they stay in! Such squalor. There is also a lot of criminal activities. I am finally responsible for my workers. I don't send them to such areas.” (Manab, labour contractor).

Once again we see the familiar tropes of dirty and dangerous being applied to Muslim dominated areas. While to a labour contractor like Manab the whole city is a market, these areas are closed off. The ghettoization of minorities into definite locations and characterising them as Others is reproduced time and again in the workers' and their contractors' understanding of the labour market.

There is however another set of workers who perceives the city in a completely different way. They are workers who work on project under construction companies. These projects include building shopping malls, office buildings, multi-storeyed apartments. The work usually lasts for years. Most of the project workers I spoke to were recruited from Murshidabad. They work and live in the construction sites for years, going to visit their families in between. Once the project finishes they move onto a new project, in another part of the city. No part of the city is closed to them. These workers are not just migrants to the city but also migrants within the city. Unlike the resident workers and even daily commuters, their worksite is not limited to a particular area of the city.

“I have been working in this project for five years now. Before this I worked on a smaller project in Elgin Road. That was right after I left the mall project in Park Circus.” (Sirajul, mason)

It was not only varied locations through which these workers made sense of the city, they conceived of the projects they worked in and consequently their labour to be actually reconceptualising the city.

“This project (Barnaparichay Mall) will change the face of College Street. Look at this area now, filled with tiny book stalls and shops. So much crowding. Can you imagine such a big area has no AC shops or good restaurants? This mall will be the biggest mall in the city with restaurants and shops. I keep telling these shopkeepers in the area (they have all become my friends by now) ‘wait till this project is finished, you won’t be able to recognise this area.’”(Sirajul)

Another worker in the project Raja too echoes the same sentiment.

“Working under the company, we work on project which make these areas more ‘developed’. All these are modern buildings. We did many projects in Rajarhaat New Town area. All of the work this company does is new structures. We do not do repair work of old buildings.”

Sirjaul and Raja conceive of their work as modernising the city thus making it more developed. The ideas of development are symptomatic with Air-conditioned high rises. The workers through their labour play a role in this remaking of the city, of what they believe is giving it new character, better features. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the class mobility aspirations underlying these perceptions of the city, but it is important to note a

certain paradox in these conceptualisations. Sirajul had faced denial of the fruits of his labour by being disallowed from entering the mall he had himself built. But even this reality does not deprive him of a sense of pride in building the city, modernising it and thus to his conception making it more beautiful.

City as protest

The city was not only a place of labour it also could be the space for protest. The city, as Hobsbawm (1968) notes is also the locus of political activity. It is the site where the poor demonstrate, protest and riot against the power structures which are the representative of the state. As a part of unorganised sector, these workers face many problems in terms of lack of social security benefits, gratuity and even regular wages. Among the unorganised sector, the construction workers remain among the most unionised (Insert figures here). Based on the ethnography of a protest organised by a particular trade union on issues of social security benefit scheme for the construction workers, I will try to provide some insights into how the cities become arenas of protest.

The protest started from Lenin statue in Esplanade and was to end in the Sealdah railway station with a brief meeting. Esplanade is the most common and popular area for any form of protest in Kolkata. Conversation with the tea-stall owners and the taxi drivers in the area too revealed the same.

“You see this area is particularly suited for protests. The wide roads, channels etc. enable the protestors to create a chaos. At the same time because this is such a regular occurrence, the traffic does not get held up as alternate routes of avoiding this channel has come up and these roads are opened by the police in such situations.” (A gentleman in the tea stall)

Hobsbawm (1968: 304) notes that there are three determinants of urban structure required for the protest—the ease with which the poor can be mobilised, the vulnerability of the centres of authority and the ease with which such insurrections may be suppressed. The protests thus are most effective when the protestors can make the best use of the infrastructure.

Esplanade as a site of protest was ideal. Management of space, performance of claim to public space is easily negotiated in this site by the protestors, police and the ordinary citizen. In a protest made up of bulk of protestors, Esplanade provides easy accessibility both by bus and also by its proximity to Sealdah station. At the same time looking at the rally in

Esplanade almost seemed like an orchestrated movement. Everybody knew their role and there seemed to be no confusion or chaos which are held to be elements intrinsic to a protest. Perhaps a component of using the existing state infrastructure for protests also implies in essence its subversion. Esplanade through long years of frequent protest has now been converted to a designated protest spot in which protests are nothing but performances, a way in which the state can perform democracy without having to yield to chaos.

This becomes all the more evident when the news spreads that the rally is moving to Sealdah railway station where it will culminate.

“I don’t understand how/why they will assemble at Sealdah. Esplanade was fine for this purpose. Here there is a system. The Y- channel is perfectly equipped for assemblies. In Sealdah they will create a mess. Sealdah is not equipped for such things. Where is the space? People are always in such a hurry.” (Taxi driver)

The driver’s confusion illustrates how using other sites in the city might often be a more effective way of subverting the use of infrastructure. The choice of the Sealdah station was a smart one especially on a rainy day where most of the workers were availing the train. While the downpour compelled the organisers to wrap up the public meeting prematurely the protest was able to create a sense of confusion, make the commuters take notice of what was happening and allowed the protestors to easily leave when it was over. The use of such alternative sites prevented the co-option of the site of protest which the Y-channel might have done and also created a sense of panic and unease among the police patrolling the protest. Hobsbawm (1968) had argued out the importance of public transport in the protests in modern cities. While this protest did not use public transport system as a means of protest per se, the proximity to the train station and the final culmination in it no doubt increased the accessibility of the protest to the protestors.

The protest was also interesting at another level. Aimed mainly at the workers from the districts, the protestors displayed a badge which said “March to Kolkata”. Thus while the specific site within the city was a decisive element in engagement with the state, the mobilization was done at a more abstract level. For the protestors approaching the city on that day Kolkata itself was to be the site of the protest. The protestors themselves were to make up the bodies in the protest, the mass which ensures visibility to the state.

Changing city

Just as the city is not homogenous, it is also not unchanging. The years have seen changes in the ways of labour-urban interaction. The earlier years of construction work in Kolkata saw a large part of the labour force being supplied from the city itself, by the urban poor. At present the workforce is made up mainly of migrant workers thrown out of work by the agricultural crisis.

At about five in the morning my father would board the train from Ghutiari Sharif to reach Jadavpur station at 6-6:30. From there he had to walk 2-2.5 miles to reach Bagha Jatin crossing. In this crossing hundreds of labour gathered in the hope of work. The pedestrians and shopkeepers of this area loathed this crowd...He would stand at one corner of the crossing like a beggar from Kalighat with his basket and axe in front of him, in the hope that someone might take him for work. In this country availability of work in every sphere is low. In comparison the supply of labour is much higher. Therefore not everybody got work on all days. (Byapari, 2012: 54, translation mine).

I ask Khokon about the labour *haats* mentioned in this extract. He tells me while those *haats* still exist they have shrank in size and it is these *haats* in the stations which have become the major supplier of labour to the city. Therefore in case of Byapari's father, though he was himself a daily commuter, he had to access the *haats* in the city (as there were probably no *haats* in the stations at that time).

Others also talked about the changing balance between the migrant and resident workers was also. The lone figure of the worker is also much in evidence in this extract above. At present, at least in the three *haats* I visited, such lone workers were rare. Workers were hardly recruited as individuals (except for carpenters and plumbers). Most of the workers came in teams and worked in teams.

Sabitri, a helper of the painter, who comes from Canning predicts that there will be further changes in the methods of recruitment.

“Earlier the labour *haats* were the only place from which the contractors and individuals would come and fetch workers but now mobile phones have effected a change in this. Often the contractors just informs our *sardar* and he in turn informs us. In such cases coming to the *haat* is more for assembly like a ritual than any real need. I feel slowly the need to come to *haats* will disappear for the majority as everything will be conducted through phone.”

Manab, the labour contractor, also agrees.

“Apart from in very rare occasions I no longer recruit my workers from the labour *haat*. You are not always sure of their quality of work. I have now my own network of workers and when the company informs me about any work I call the relevant labour *sardars* and ask him to take his team to the worksite. It is a much efficient system.”

Visiting the labour *haats* it seems quite apparent that this new method of recruitment had not completely replaced the system of recruitment from the labour *haat* but it is quite certainly a trend on the rise. The workers, especially those who have to commute daily, find this more effective as they already get to know if work is available or not. This minimises waste of work days for them. In spite of these advantages, this form of recruitment would result into further fragmentation of what is already a very fragmented workforce. Being locationally specific the workers had not built up a sense of community spanning the entire city, their networks largely remained limited to the *haats* and localities they worked in. If the *haats* too disappeared as a place for contact, there will be further fragmentation. Moreover this process will result into a closed network based on prior recommendations, making it difficult for anyone without access to these contacts to get jobs.