**Sixth Critical Studies Conference**

**23-25 August 2017**

**(Venue: Swabhumi, Kolkata)**

**Refugees, Migrants, Violence and the Transformation of Cities**

Cities world over are attracting increasing numbers of people fleeing villages, small and big towns, other countries and continents to escape conflicts, wars, violence, environmental degradation and natural disasters. Political, economic, social and cultural reasons have combined in this phenomenon of massive and mixed migration. Displacements being protracted immigrants arrive often to stay. Cities are facing the brunt of this development and are imperceptibly or radically being transformed. In this background the Sixth Critical Studies Conference will be an interdisciplinary attempt to map in a comparative framework the restructuring of cities under the impact of refugee and migration flows. It will explore cityscapes in various parts of the world as inbuilt destination spaces of refugee and population movements, such as irregular and subsistence labour as guest workers, trafficked victims, smuggled women and children, immigrant workers in care and entertainment industry, and above all masses of urban refugees and environmental migrants. The conference will thereby seek to understand how with refugees and migrants as inbuilt components of their formation, today’s cities constitute and contest at the same time the parallel scales of the local, national, and the global; how as migrant spaces cities become the battleground of discourses on rights, security, economy, citizenship, populism, and culture; and yet how cities can develop as public spaces and spheres of participation in which varied actors negotiate diversity including race, class and gender. With this broad aim this research conference will bring to light in historical and comparative perspective the urban experiences of restructuration.

In an increasingly interconnected world global migration is growing in volume and complexity. These population shifts are altering the political, economic, social, and cultural trajectories of the cities – the destinations of the population flows. In this situation, some cities are panicky, some calling for new urban policies for settlements, local environments, and security measures; some witnessing revival of violence, riots, xenophobia, racism, and populist politics around immigration; others searching for a roadmap to become “cities of refuge”. The responses are often mixed, indicating contradictory realities, which are global. The Conference proposes to reflect upon: What is the nature of urban transformation under the impact of the refugee and migration flows, and the ethical, political, and economic responses to this impact?

Kolkata as the venue of the conference is an appropriate site for such a discussion. Described as a contact zone in the late eighteenth century, Kolkata had witnessed influx of different population groups who defined and created a city on their own terms. With partition millions from East Pakistan came to the city, which in time became their home. This was a conflict ridden process. More recently the recurrence of violence has to be seen in the context of the construction near Kolkata of a new town growing out of peasant dispossession. The resultant violence and selective inclusion and exclusion of population groups are features of the contemporary history of the city. It will be important to study the process of transformation, steps taken towards enhancing the city’s resilience and coping ability.

The conference proposes to examine the restructuration of the urban experience along related lines and thus looks forward to discussions on the relevant research questions, such as

* How is refugee and migrant participation in public life inscribed or proscribed, facilitated or limited in urban setup and development?
* How are public spaces re-organized? What are their meanings for migrants?
* What spaces, events, and institutions are keys to this understanding? How are the shifting gender-relations reflected and re-inscribed into urban public spaces?
* How are the borders/borderlines with consequent transgressions produced in the city?
* What are the new migrant economies based on particular labour market dynamics and marked by social, racial, and patriarchal attitudes?
* As migrants push the boundaries of governance and administration, what are the ways that effect the political and spatial re-crafting of urban spaces?
* How does urban politics cope with security and surveillance methods and the xenophobic populist turn in politics in the wake of immigrant presence in a city?
* What are the traditional institutions and agencies associated with refugees and migrants in the cities? Who are the new intermediaries in the process with aid agencies influencing them?
* Theoretically, how do we add to the core concepts of urban justice to consolidate and develop the field?

Experts theorizing the city have approached the subject from roughly three angles: (a) the angle of spatial practices; this is the mode dominant among urban planners and geographers; (b) city perceived on the basis of the mental images that it evokes; this is the mode dominant among the cultural studies scholars; (c) the city as a space for both life and production. Even though the third way of looking at the city tries to get over the singular mould of the first two by positing a subject-object view, and gives us a greater range of conceptual tools to study issues of urban justice, the problem of how to account for its segmentation and linkages, in the formation of the city, and therefore the various fault lines (economic groups, caste, race, gender, religion, etc.) along which the city develops as a site of power, contestations, and claim makings remains. Thus the conference proposes to study the links of migration with new urban formation and restructuration.

Here binaries like colonial/free, city/periphery, underclass/capital, manufacturing units/services, citizens/migrants, redesigned/old, cyber-city/inner city, IT-enabled/IT-disabled, green spaces/crowded, or self-governed/administered are significant. Existing literature remains inadequate, because it focuses on a “lived city approach” with emphasis on various subjectivities, without providing insights into these binaries and the fault lines that emerge from the contradictory phenomena of settlement, migration, labour and capital formation.

The most important gap in research on refugees, migrants, and cityscapes seems to originate from the tendency to hold the migrants as an undifferentiated mass. Even if we know the variety in the activities of the refugees and migrants, we have less knowledge of what forms the core of the migrant experience, what keeps on adding to their volume and existence, what lends to their resilience, what the different segments and fault lines are, and thus what would it mean in terms of ensuring social justice in the city. For this we need new theoretical knowledge on concepts like right to the city, city as an intersection of three scales, and most importantly city as a site of new power dynamics involving new practices of settlement, claim making, urban governance, economic modes, and new corporeality.

Possible themes around which panels could be proposed and organized are the following:

**Frontier Urbanism**

**Literature and Cinema**

**Eviction/Dispossession in the new cities**

**Environment in/of the city**

**Migrants in new vocations, precarity of new labour force**

**Gender and the city**

**Communalism, caste and the changing city**

**Violence, direct violence, expulsion**

**State’s role in urban violence**

**Urban governance**

**Transformation of smaller cities**

On the themes and details of the five previous critical studies conferences, visit – <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/dg_critical.asp>

Abstracts may be submitted by 16 April 2017 and complete papers by 30 June 2017. Selected papers will be notified by 30 April 2017. No travel subsidy is available. Accommodation will be provided for three nights to selected participants.

Please submit panel or paper proposals to Anita Sengupta (anita@mcrg.ac.in) or Ritam Sengupta (ritam@mcrg.ac.in)