A REPORT

CRG Staff Researchers' Workshop

13 March 2024, Kolkata

Programme Schedule

Session 1
3:00 PM - 3:15 PM - Rituparna Datta, "Calcutta 1947-51"
3:15 PM - 3:30 PM - Comments by Discussant: Arup Sen (CRG)

Session 2
3:30 PM - 3:45 PM - Rajat Kanti Sur, "Health, Work and Security: Migrant Women Workers in Colonial Calcutta (1881-1951)"
3:45 PM - 4:00 PM - Comments by Discussant: Paula Banerjee (Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok and CRG) [Online Session]

Session 3
4:00 PM - 4:15 PM - Debashree Chakraborty, "All that Climate Change does: Maheshabeel and the 2022 Silchar Flood"
4:15 PM - 4:30 PM - Comments by Discussant: Samata Biswas (The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata and CRG)

Session 4
4:30 PM - 4:45 PM - Shatabdi Das, "Ghost Towns of Bengal"
4:45 PM - 5:00 PM - Comments by Discussant: Ranabir Samaddar (CRG)

Session 5
5:00 PM - 5:15 PM - Sucharita Sengupta, "Assessing promises and paradox of the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Secure Migration'"
5:15 PM - 5:30 PM - Comments by Discussant: Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, and CRG)

Discussion

The CRG Staff Researchers' Workshop was held on 13 March 2024 in the CRG Office premises. The five staff researchers Rituparna Datta, Rajat Kanti Sur, Debashree Chakraborty, Shatabdi Das and Sucharita Sengupta, presented their respective research proposals followed by suggestions and remarks by the discussants.

Session 1
Rituparna Datta's presentation on **"Calcutta 1947-51"** was a biographical narrative, a telltale story of the labouring lives in the city of Calcutta in its transition to postcoloniality and decolonised futures taking the notion of labour beyond its hegemonic Marxist framework of labour at the extractive frontier. The city here, thus, becomes more than just narration of the urban geography and leans on deciphering the feelings of living in the city taking recourse through the trajectory of lived experiences of those who built the cities.

Discussant **Arup K. Sen** suggested that the research looks into the new notions of the making of the working class in Calcutta in post-Partition years developing on E.P. Thomson's model of the making of the English working class. The massive flux of the refugee population in the post-Partition years, especially in the urban spaces, the distinction between the migrants, refugees, citizens and others were blurred as they survived as labouring souls. Samata Biswas added the anthropological view in this biographical narrative to take into account the making of Calcutta, its growth and making and unmaking as a premature metropolis. Shyamalendu Majumdar suggested that while reading the cosmopolitanism of the cities, it is important to take into account the nestling of population in segregated spaces in the cities that are talks of the existential hues of living in the city. The labouring spaces, according to Arup K. Sen, hint at the pattern of control over the industrial neighbourhoods apart from the factory space that one can locate following the Gramscian structure of hegemony and interactions of everyday lives of the labouring classes. Housing, for example, in the locational clusters, not only describes both the sympathy and apathy of the employers towards the wellbeing of their employees, but also shows the constant adjustability of these classes, what might be termed using Paul Willis' expression "learning to labour". Following the arguments of the subalternists, it is necessary to see labour beyond its traditional folds, of looking at the interaction with cities as just a resource front, as the process of metamorphosis of the cities is far entrenched than visible.

Session 2

The title of **Rajat Kanti Sur's** proposed paper was **"Health, Work and Security: Migrant Women Workers in Colonial Calcutta (1881-1951)."** Sur argued that the migrant women, especially those who were working in different fields in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta, were not in focused discussion in the public documents, like census reports, municipal surveys and other public resources. Apart from the women labour in the jute mills, the overall situation of the migrant women workers did not come out prominently in previous research arguments of eminent historians and anthropologists. Based on archival documents and literary records, the project, as Rajat Sur discussed, would focus on the health and security of the migrant women workers in colonial Calcutta. Taking the first officially declared complete census as the reference point to begin his argument, he tried to analyse the changing socio-historical scenario of the colonial policymaking for the city's working-class population, especially the migrant women workers.

Discussant **Paula Banerjee** appreciated the hypothesis; however, she mentioned that the plan of working on both health and security of migrant women workers within a limited period of time, may be difficult. She suggested that the research focus on the larger frame of security that incorporates health and social safety, and stated that the shifts in the attitude of colonial administration towards migrant women workers may be thought of as an important aspect of the research. She added that the idea of "security" and how it made the migrant women a vulnerable category could be looked into, along with police records, memoirs and journal articles (particularly, the article by Tanika Sarkar on manual scavengers' strike). Arup K. Sen commented that the idea of security may be problematised and referred to reports on migrant labour (published in 1906 and 1923) and Anna Seiler's work on Titagarh Jute Mill as well as Manikuntala Sen's autobiography.

Session 3
Debashree Chakraborty's research proposal tentatively titled **"All that Climate Change does: Maheshaabeel and the 2022 Silchar Flood"** described how the untimely pre-monsoon showers in 2022, in Assam, led to massive flooding in the state and in the Barak Valley. In the presentation Debashree talked about how the pre-monsoon showers ultimately led to flooding of a backwater reservoir near Silchar in June, creating massive floods in the city of Silchar. The research proposal also focused on the human intervention that led to the flooding and how this intervention was perceived through the polarised lens of religion and politics by the national media, thus, sensationalising the narrative of climate change.

Samata Biswas, the discussant in the session, commented on the lack of overall congruity in the framing of the argument in the proposal. She noted that the research proposal manoeuvred across three coordinates, while it could focus on any one. She also advised that the climate change part be re-thought, because the framing of the argument hinted at the possibility of other perspectives to come up more succinctly in the final paper. The analysis of the multiple narratives associated with the Maheshabeel disaster could perhaps provide more context and theoretical foregrounding to the paper rather than vying around the narrative of climate change alone. Samata Biswas noted that Ranabir Samaddar's concept of "bio-politics from below" could be a theoretical entry point to understand the resistance and solidarity that the Maheshabeel case brought forth. Paula Banerjee's comments too were on similar lines. She suggested that analysing the multiple narratives involved in the case could be a way of looking into the situation. She also noted that it would be important to zero-in one vantage or entry point to initiate the theoretical argument rather than going into multiple aspects.

Session 4
Shatabdi Das began her research proposal presentation on **"Ghost Towns of Bengal"** with the analysis of the decline in industrial production, abandonment of a number of coal mines, and the switch of coal mining method from underground mining to the open cast mining method towards the end of 1990s and the beginning of twenty-first century, when the railway operations, the allied industries of mines and ancillaries of iron and steel units, began playing important economic role in the region with a shift in the economic dependence on service sector. She emphasised the various factors that have contributed to the growth of urban settlements in the Paschim Barddhaman district of West Bengal, and went on to detail out the instances of gradual transformations into ghost towns in the study area. Shatabdi elaborated on the processes that culminated into the fall of industrial performance and re-alignment of the sectors of economy in the region, while also enlisting the causes of urban growth and decline of towns in the study area. The presentation detailed out the accounts of current demographic and social scenarios in some of the industrial townships with case studies.

Discussant **Ranabir Samaddar** specified the possibilities of exploration of the theme that may draw parallels with the cities of the US, namely Detroit, Pittsburgh, and others. He suggested readings on ruins, gold rush and the ghost towns of the US, and the role of migrants in theories of urbanisation and scales of city-making. Literature on dystopia, the rust belt of US, bridges between cities and countryside and the status of railway cantonments in the context of neoliberal economy were also indicated. Arup K. Sen pointed out that the restructuring of urban scape related to the neoliberal journey of India and the plight of informal migrants in deserted towns could be looked into, especially at a time when the country aims at the development of smart cities. It was suggested that the study may connect with cycles of migration, livelihood options, class power and processes operational in making of ghost towns and its dynamics. Paula Banerjee emphasised on the understanding of the working conditions in the gold mining

towns of Africa and the struggles of mine workers. Rajat Roy threw light on the urban renewal fund introduced in 1991 in India and its consequences on workers (especially in the industrial units under the public sector undertakings), who had been worst hit and rendered jobless; this reflected on the way in which policies for implementation of funds for urban renewal in some ways lead the path to ghost towns.

Session 5
Sucharita Sengupta while presenting her research proposal titled **"Assessing promises and paradox of the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Secure Migration'"** underscored that the research ruminates on what the notion of security as assured by the likes of the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration' (GCM) implies for vulnerable groups of population like migrants. 'Security' is a term that is often used, and abused, in delineating the relationship between the state and its subjects. Indexing the notion of security on the conceptual dyad of 'justice' and 'protection', thus, the research intends to investigate international conventions like the one mentioned above, that vow to "securitise" lives of migrants, either corroborating or in discordance of ground realities in the context of South Asia. Sucharita discussed that during the decade of the '90s the concept of security concretely emerged in academia. Traditional security studies did not consider the notion of security as all pervasive- that anything and everything can be a security issue, rather, the concept was largely used to denote military threats and antagonistic states, unlike contemporary notions of security. Against this backdrop, she explained, that the research paper would attempt to examine what the Global Compact entails to ensure "safe, orderly, and secure migration", evincing instances from countries like India, Bangladesh, and evoked 'what happens to questions of justice and humanitarianism in this reference?'

Discussant **Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury** suggested that the research could examine one or two issues, and pointed out that it would be important to refer to the recent publications by critical security study scholars. He added that the research may also attempt to look into the role of regional organisations like SAARC and BIMSTEC, to address the issue in question. Ranabir Samaddar emphasised that the research would be enriched by the aspect of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' in the context of the Global Compact, keeping in mind the larger question of social security, in addition to the citation of Michel Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975)*, wherein the institutional gaze itself became the new mode of punishment. Samata Biswas highlighted the criticisms levelled against the western universalism of the Universal Human Rights Declaration (UDHR) and stated that it would be both an interesting and challenging work to contrast this with the universality proposed by the Global Compact. Arup K. Sen mentioned the discourse of rights that gets defeated in the context of refugees like the Rohingyas; and the framework of 'ethics and care' becomes important to bring up the question 'whether existing rights are enough in addressing precarity?'