



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

In the shadow of displaceability: refugee and migrants in suburban Calcutta

Mukherjee, A.

Citation

Mukherjee, A. (2021, November 24). *In the shadow of displaceability: refugee and migrants in suburban Calcutta*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3244030>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3244030>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

In the Shadow of Displaceability: Refugees and Migrants in Suburban Calcutta

Aditi Mukherjee

In the Shadow of Displaceability: Refugees and Migrants in Suburban Calcutta

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
te verdedigen op 24 November 2021

klokke 10:00 uur

door

Aditi Mukherjee geboren te Kolkata, India

in 1986

Promotor

Prof. dr. N. K. Wickramasinghe

Copromotor

Dr. Sanjukta Sunderason (University of Amsterdam)

Promotiecommissie

Dr. Crystal Ennis

Prof. dr. Leo Lucassen

Prof. dr. Samita Sen (University of Cambridge)

Prof. dr. Willem van Schendel (University of Amsterdam)

Contents

List of Tables	i
List of Figures	ii
List of Maps	iv
Abbreviations	v
Glossary of Terms	viii
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
I. Migration, classification and erasure: a background	3
II. Anti-colonial nationalism and origins of ethnic and civic citizenship	6
III. Displaceability, bodily politics and citizenship: a conceptual itinerary	10
IV. Rationale of case studies	17
V. Historical anthropology and the question of method	20
VI. Organisation of the dissertation	24
Chapter 1: Migration, governance and evolving regime of protection in late colonial Bengal and Calcutta	34
1.1 Prioritising war: policies of wartime governance	35
1.2 'Sick destitutes' and 'vagrants': classifying diseased migrants	43
1.3 Schematising the inflow of 'evacuees'	52
1.4 Protests and dissident identities	59
1.5 Conclusion	62
Chapter 2: Negotiating informal spaces and grey selves: protracted displacement of <i>namasudra</i> partition refugees	67
2.1 <i>Namasudras</i> in colonial Bengal and after: a brief background	68
2.2 De-paradigming the 'first' displacement	83
2.3 Negotiating the 'formal' state: plans and erasures	87
2.4 Negotiating 'informal' governance: displacement within a continuum	94
2.5 Grey-spaces and heterogenous selves	98
2.6 Conclusion	103
Chapter 3: Displaceability and mobile bodily politics: the experience of urban 'homeless'	107
3.1 Between invisibility and hypervisibility: migration and a politics of (non)enumeration	109
3.2 <i>Khalpar</i> and <i>foot</i> : a profile	119
3.3 Municipal neoliberalisation and the condition of displaceability	133
3.4 Mobile bodies as a site of politics	148
3.5 Conclusion	156
Chapter 4: From migrants to citizens (and back)? Status, entitlement and belonging of temporary people	161
4.1 From birth to blood: transformations in de jure citizenship	162
4.2 Between the <i>Sharanarathi</i> and <i>Anuprabeshkari</i> : Fixing migrant sense of belonging towards a Hindu Rashtra	173

4.3 Social citizenship: precarious life world of temporary people	192
4.4 Conclusion	204
Conclusion	208
Appendix I	212
Appendix II	216
Bibliography	219
Summary	234
Summary in Dutch	236
Curriculum Vitae	238
Propositions	239

Tables

1.1. Migration to and from Calcutta, 1891-1951	44
1.2. Percentage of death of 'paupers' in relation to total annual death in Calcutta from 1944 to 1960	50
2.1. Different types of government and private refugee settlements in West Bengal	72
2.2. District wise break up of different government ex camp-sites in West Bengal	75
2.3. Different formula for plot allocation at the Bahirdoba camps	92
3.1. Census figures for 'homeless' population and percentage to the Calcutta's total population	113
3.2. Time of arrival of migrants at the Round Canal, Calcutta	130
3.3. Occupational profile of the dwellers by the Round Canal, Calcutta	130
3.4. Percentage of possession of identification documents by the dwellers of the Round Canal	131
4.1. Findings of a sample survey on the monthly average expenditure of informal workers in Calcutta	201

Figures*

2.1. A glimpse of the Bahirdoba canal.	80
2.2. A footbridge over the Bahirdoba canal.	81
2.3. A glimpse of the Shulumari colony.	82
2.4. A Cash Dole Card.	86
2.5. A letter of the Bahirdoba Kendriya Bastuhara Samity.	92
2.6. Inside camp I.	93
2.7. A new construction is taking place in camp I.	94
2.8. A martyr's bust at camp J.	101
3.1. A page from a survey conducted by the Hawker Sangram Committee at the Ramhata <i>khalpar</i> in 2004.	115
3.2. A glimpse of the Round Canal where a dense spread of dwellings can be seen on the slope of the canal.	122
3.3. Piles of rags can be seen outside the dwellings at the Round Canal.	123
3.4. A CMC notice in a vat at the Round Canal declaring that the work of creating a solid waste compactor station is underway.	124
3.5. A CMC park by the Pali Nala put to various use by the dwellers nearby.	125
3.6. An old temple by the Pali Nala.	126
3.7. A temple by the Pali Nala which now functions as a tea stall.	126
3.8. A place of worship under a tree with an idol of Manasa, a snake goddess by the Round Canal.	127
3.9. Dwellings by the Round Canal. Ladders are placed outside the homes to provide access to the upper storey.	128
3.10. A pavement dwelling on the KC Road.	135
3.11. In the aftermath of a fire at the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal on 14 January 2018. Eleven dwelling houses were burnt down. Cleaning operation is seen to be under way under the supervision of the ward councillor.	138
3.12. A CMC signboard stating that throwing garbage in the Pali Nala is a punishable offence under the Calcutta Municipal Act 1980.	141
3.13. Image of a 'token' given to the families before the evictions were carried out.	142
3.14. A photo of a food kitchen opened at the Pali Nala by volunteer organisations in the immediate aftermath of the evictions in 2001 (Source: Hawker Sangram Committee Archive).	143

3.15. Walls have been built by the south-eastern stretch of the Pali Nala after evictions.	143
3.16. A wall painting by the Pali Nala depicting an idyllic image of the canal side where boats ply and women reap paddy from the fields on the banks of the canal.	144
3.17. An image of the first Annual General Meeting of the Kolkata Nabajagaran Mancha (Source: The Calcutta Samaritans Archive)	150
3.18. An identity card of an erstwhile member of the Calcutta Nabajagaran Mancha.	151
3.19. The converging point of a rally organised by the Association of Rag Pickers (ARP) on 19 December 2017 at Dharmatala.	152
3.20. The rag pickers handing their memorandum to the police sergeant at the Dharmatala area on behalf of the Association of Rag Pickers (ARP) with their demands.	152
4.1. A page of the NIBBUSS Bulletin <i>Bhiteharar Lorai</i> , detailing their <i>dharna</i> in Delhi in support of their demand for unconditional citizenship.	178
4.2. Volunteers wearing NIBBUSS T-shirts at the beginning of a big NIBBUSS meeting in June 2019.	180
4.3. A NIBBUSS meeting held at Palta, West Bengal on 30 June 2019 where the newly elected MPs of the BJP were congratulated and demands for unconditional citizenship for East Bengali refugees reiterated.	182
4.4. A NIBBUSS meeting held in Kolkata on 22 November 2019, with demands of unconditional citizenship in the wake of placing the citizenship amendment bill, 2019 in the Rajya Sabha, where it became a law.	182
4.5. A Matua Mahadharmha Sannelan held at the Bahirdoba camp in December 2019.	186
4.6. Women clad in red saris waiting to welcome their political guests of honour with petals in hand in a NIBBUSS meeting held in Palta on 30 June 2019.	190
4.7. A letter in the letterhead of the Dalit Unity Centre.	193
4.8. An ICDS centre at the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal, run by an NGO, the Tiljala Shed.	199
4.9. A street corner meeting organised by TCS with homeless children to increase awareness against drugs, child labour and child marriage. (Source: The Calcutta Samaritans Archive).	200

*[All images used in this dissertation are taken by the author unless other sources are specified.]

Maps

Map 1.1: Location maps of West Bengal and Calcutta	32
Map 1.2: Calcutta Metropolitan Area	33
Map 1.3: Map of nineteenth century Calcutta	36
Map 1.4: Map of Calcutta showing the boundaries of the White town	36
Map 2.1. Location map of North 24 Parganas	76
Map 2.2. North 24 Parganas district	77
Map 3.1. Conjectural map of Calcutta showing east-west canals criss-crossing the city	120
Map 3.2. The sewerage canals of Calcutta	121

Abbreviations

AAGSP	All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
AASU	All Assam Students' Union
ABD	Asian Development Bank
ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad
ACCORD	Association for Community Cooperation & Rural Development
AITC	All India Trinamool Congress
ARP	Air Raid Precaution services
ARP	Association of Rag Pickers
BJP	Bhartiya Janata Party
BKBS	Bahirdoba Kendriya Bastuhara Samity
BKUS	Bahirdoba Kendriya Udbastu Samity
BMC	Bombay Municipal Corporation
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh
BPL	Below Poverty Line
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CDC	Cash Dole Card
CESC	Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation
CIT	Calcutta Improvement Trust
CMC	Calcutta Municipal Corporation
CMDA	Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority
CMPO	Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DFID	Department of International Development, Government of the United Kingdom
GAP	Ganga Action Plan
GS Colonies	Government Sponsored Colonies
HSC	Hawker Sangram Committee
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services

ICS	Indian Civil Service
IMDT	Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act
INA	Indian National Army
INC	Indian National Congress
IPTA	Indian People's Theatre Association
ISI	Indian Statistical Institute
JNNURM	Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission
JPC	Joint Parliamentary Committee
KEIIP	Kolkata Environmental Improvement Investment Program
KNJM	Kolkata Naba Jagaran Mancha
KPP	Krishak Praja Party
LTV	Long Term Visa
MM	Matua Mahasangha
MMIC	Member, Mayor-In-Council
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NIBBUSS	Nikhil Bharat Bangali Udbastu Samanway Samity
NPR	National Population Register
NRC	National Register of Citizens
NRIC	National Register of Indian Citizens
NSSO	National Sample Survey Organisation
PDS	Public Distribution Scheme
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PL Camp	Permanent Liability Camp
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RSS	Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh
RTE	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education
RTI	Right to Information
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme

SASPFUW	Asangathito Sramik Der Jonno Rajya Sarkar er Sahajya Prapta Bhabishya Nidhi Prakaalpa
SB, CP	Special Branch, Calcutta Police
SBBS	Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan
SC	Scheduled Caste
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
SWC	Solid Waste Compactors
TCS	The Calcutta Samaritan
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
VHP	Vishva Hindu Parishad

Glossary

<i>Abasthan</i>	A location.
<i>Anashan</i>	Hunger strike.
<i>Andolan</i>	Agitation or movement.
<i>Annasatra</i>	Food kitchens opened during the Bengal famine.
<i>Anuprabesh</i>	Infiltration.
<i>Anuprabeshkari</i>	Infiltrator.
<i>Babu</i>	Address of respect for Bengali men. The term came into use during colonial period primarily to refer to men of Hindu middle class.
<i>Bargadar</i>	A Bargadar is a person who cultivates the land of the owner in a system of Barga on the condition of delivering a share of the produce of such land to that person.
<i>Bastuhara</i>	The term literally translates into those who have lost their homes or refugee.
<i>Bhadralok</i>	Courteous, polite, gentleman.
<i>Bhasa</i>	Language.
<i>Bhite</i>	Home.
<i>Bigha</i>	Bigha is a unit measurement of land in South Asia. The size of a bigha varies from place to place. In West Bengal, a bigha is usually one third of an acre.
<i>Bustee</i>	Slum.
<i>Chandal</i>	In ancient India the term Chandal was used for persons from the lowest caste who dealt with disposal of corpses. Traditionally they were considered to be untouchables. In Bengal it was used as a pejorative caste name to imply a host of different lower caste people.
<i>Charpai</i>	A traditional woven bed stretched on a wooden frame on four legs, common in India.
<i>Chotolok</i>	Chotolok is one of a pair of opposed terms, used in opposition to <i>bhadralok</i> . It literally means lowly or vulgar people, and in its common usage implies people belonging to lower class and caste.
<i>Danga</i>	Riot.
<i>Desh</i>	Country or homeland.
<i>Dharmashala</i>	A guest housing devoted to religious or charitable purposes, especially a rest house for travellers.
<i>Dibas</i>	Day.
<i>Edeshi</i>	People originating in West Bengal as opposed to East Bengal.

<i>Foot</i>	Foot is an abbreviation of footpath or pavement.
<i>Ghat</i>	Flight of steps leading into the water of a river or pond.
<i>Ghuspetiya</i>	A Hindi term meaning infiltrator.
<i>Ghyat</i>	Gruel.
<i>Halla</i>	The term <i>halla</i> literally means chaos. It is used by the urban 'homeless' in Calcutta to refer to Calcutta Municipal Corporation's vehicles that come to demolish their shanties, loot their belongings and disperse them.
<i>Hartal</i>	Strike.
<i>Hindutva</i>	The term Hindutva was popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar from the 1920s. Hinduism only meant a religion. The idea of Hindutva differed from Hinduism in this. Hindutva encompassed a historical, ethnic, linguistic, and political community of Hindus residing within the territory of Hindusthan, thus constituting a nation. It looked upon Muslims as a foreign nation of predatory invaders. This idea has come to be used in Hindu right wing political propaganda.
<i>Jabardakhal</i>	Squat.
<i>Jogar</i>	A term which can mean an innovative fix, making existing things work, or to create new things with meagre resources by bending rules. It also means a wide array of informal work as and when available.
<i>Jotedar</i>	A strata of wealthy peasants who owned extensive tracts of land in rural Bengal.
<i>Katha</i>	Katha is a unit measurement of land and a sub unit of bigha. 20 katha is equal to one bigha.
<i>Khalasi</i>	Traditionally khalasi are a group of people employed at ports and dockyards to load/unload cargo from ships. It can also mean people who unload cargo from lorries.
<i>Khalpar</i>	Banks of canals.
<i>Khas mahal land</i>	Government estates.
<i>Langarkhana</i>	Kitchens where free food is prepared and given to the poor.
<i>Macha</i>	A platform built with bamboo strips and similar material over marshes, submerged lands and water bodies, on which houses can be built.
<i>Moholla</i>	Neighbourhood.
<i>Mondo</i>	Gruel.
<i>Mukti joddhas</i>	Literally means freedom fighter. It refers to combatants during the Bangladesh war of independence, who fought against the Pakistani forces.
<i>Mussafirkhana</i>	A rest house for travellers.

<i>Mutiya</i>	Headload carriers.
<i>Namasudra</i>	A dalit caste who were originally cultivators East Bengal in the nineteenth century. After the partition of India in 1947, many of them have migrated to West Bengal. Now their profession has diversified.
<i>Opar Bangla</i>	Literally translates into the other side of divided Bengal, meaning present day Bangladesh.
<i>Para</i>	Neighbourhood.
<i>Patta</i>	A type of land deed issued by the government.
<i>Pitrabhumi</i>	Fatherland.
<i>Pucca</i>	Pucca housing refers to dwellings that are designed to be solid and permanent, built of substantial material such as stone, brick, cement or concrete.
<i>Puja</i>	Worship.
<i>Punyabhumi</i>	The sacred land of the Hindus.
<i>Qawm</i>	Qawm is an Arabic term for nation.
<i>Sajjan</i>	Good or decent people.
<i>Sangram</i>	Struggle.
<i>Shahid</i>	Martyr.
<i>Shanghadhipati</i>	The head of the Sangh which means an association or organisation. The head of the Matua Mahasangha is known as Sanghadhipati.
<i>Sharan</i>	Shelter or refuge.
<i>Sharanarathi</i>	Sharanarathi literally translates into the one who seeks shelter or <i>sharan</i> . In the present day idiom of the politics of citizenship in India, sharanarathi has come to be synonymous with Hindu refugees.
<i>Time kal</i>	Roadside taps installed by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, where water comes at specific times of the day, usually two to three times during morning, afternoon and evening.
<i>Udbastu</i>	Refugee.
<i>Ulu dhwani</i>	Sound of ululation.
<i>Umma</i>	Umma is an Arabic term meaning nation. It refers to the whole Muslim community of believers.

Acknowledgements

I have incurred numerous debts during the seven years of this dissertation project. My warmest and most grateful acknowledgement goes to my two PhD supervisors, Dr Sanjukta Sunderason and Professor Nira Wickramasinghe who have been a huge source of support and inspiration. My academic career and personal life bear marks of their presence in more ways than I can mention. My friends and colleagues in Leiden, Sarthak Bagchi, Deepshikha Boro, Idrees Kanth, Archisman Chowdhory and Eftychia Mylona made me feel at home in Leiden. With them I share some of the best memories of graduate school. A warm thanks goes to Dr Eric De Maaker, Dr Crystal Ennis, Professor Pralay Kanungo, Dr Ward Barenshot and Dr Carolien Stolte for support. My interaction with them have been enriching. I would like to thank the Erasmus Mundus IBIES fellowship programme which financially supported this research.

Thanks to the generous and helpful librarians and archivists at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, the National Library, Calcutta, the Calcutta Police Museum, Calcutta, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, the British Library, London, the libraries of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority and the Calcutta Improvement Trust where I have spent long hours looking at newspapers and documents. I am thankful to Kallol Sarkar of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, Murad Hossain of the Hawker Sangram Committee, Calcutta and the staff of the Calcutta Samaritans for their invaluable help in accomplishing my research. Thanks to Dr Carola Lorea, Anwesha Chowdhory, Dr Anwesha Sengupta, Anunay Kanjilal and Ayan Kundu for their help with field research. I am grateful to Dr Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Professor Paula Banerjee, Dr. Subhasri Ghosh, Dr Binod Mishra, Dr Gargi Chakrabarty and Professor Subimal Sen for their advice and help in locating sources pertinent to this research. A very grateful thanks to Dr Ritojyoti Bandyopadhyay who immensely facilitated my field work and Professor Manas Ray whose advice have enriched this thesis in many ways. A special mention goes to Calynn Dowler and Mathew Webb for their friendship and stimulating discussions over the years.

A very grateful acknowledgement goes to all my professors at the Presidency University, Calcutta and the University of Calcutta. Special thanks to Professor Subhash Ranjan Chakrabarty and Professor Prasanta Ray who have advised me for many years both as an undergraduate and graduate student. It is in the classes of the history departments of the Presidency College and the University of Calcutta that I developed early ideas on the topic of this dissertation. The years spent there have helped me grow as an individual and an academic. I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor

Shantanu Chakrabarty, Professor Kingshuk Chatterjee and my friends at the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, University of Calcutta. Thanks to my friends and colleagues at the Calcutta Research Group, Samareshda, Subhashree, Ratanbabu and Shatabdi with whom I worked during the last two years of this research. I was fortunate to share with them my excitements and frustrations. I am indebted to Professor Bhaskar Chakrabarty, Professor Ranabir Samaddar and Professor Samir Kumar Das for kindness, support and encouragement. Their influence extends well beyond the scope of this thesis.

Thanks goes to my unfailingly supportive friends Suhasini, Moumita and Triparna. The inspiration of this research comes from my father, *baba* who introduced me to the world of reading and encouraged me to speak my mind. My *kaka* (uncle), my *kaki* (aunt), my brother and my mother have been pillars of love and inspiration for as long as I can remember. Their support has been invaluable in every endeavour I have pursued in life. Finally, a most grateful acknowledgement goes to my interlocutors and research participants, many of whom wish to remain un-named. I am humbled and inspired by their kindness, activism and indomitable spirit in the face of the harshest adversities of life. This thesis is dedicated to them.