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

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Chapter Two

Negotiating informal spaces and grey selves: protracted displacement of *namasudra* partition refugees

In this chapter I discuss the experience of a group of dalit East Bengali refugees migrating from East Bengal to West Bengal in the early 1950s. I take an endemic approach to the partition of India as a process that has continued in its various ramifications till today. The partition has been particularly prolonged for dalit migrants. The displaced dalits studied here migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal in the early 1950s and were initially recognised as 'displaced persons' by the West Bengal government with certain entitlements. I trace how forces of displacement have been operationalised vis-à-vis the dalits through a process of deliberate state initiated informalisation. The *informal state* seeks to slowly erode the dalit groups' legally recognised status as 'displaced persons' and render them unsettled. A section of the refugees has fought such mechanisms and acquired rehabilitation. At the same time, a considerable number of them have not fared well and live through serial displacement. While this study identifies the dalit refugees to be active agents negotiating myriad forms of dispossession, a point of emphasis remains that they are unequally placed vis-à-vis the insidious mechanisms of post-colonial governmentality. The continually displaced inhabitants of spaces of 'permanent-temporariness' carry on struggles that are discreet, low-key and non-heroic in nature. I further highlight that the sense of belonging of such dwellers of peripheral grey-spaces often strikes a discordant note.

This chapter highlights the role of class and caste of the refugees and associated social and cultural capital in their negotiations of the mechanisms of dislocations. A large number of middle-class East Bengali refugees in West Bengal with considerable social and cultural capital have managed to benefit from the officially recognised status of 'displaced persons', utilised their familiarity with the bureaucratic state apparatus and acquired resettlement (Ray 2002; Sen 2014). They have resisted mechanisms of deliberate informalisation through which displacement is prolonged. I try to highlight that displacement is prolonged with lower class and caste groups who lack the resources required to manoeuvre the state bureaucracy and the political machinery. In doing so my chapter advances the important role of caste in mediating mechanisms of dislocation and relocation. I further attempt to show that, unlike their middle-class brethren, the sense of belonging of such dalit groups often strikes a discordant note.

While insights from my case study identify the *namasudra* refugees to be active agents, improvising ever changing tactics to negotiate or circumvent dispossession, this is not a celebratory account of

'insurgency from below'. Sanyal's analysis of middle-class refugee colonies in the suburbs of Calcutta (2008) has situated the experience of these groups within the framework of Holstonian 'insurgency from below' (Holston 2008), whereby peripheries are *settled* by refugee 'insurgent citizens'. This study of dalit refugees does not affirm notions of pioneering citizenship coming from the peripheries. My analysis builds on two relevant researches of middle-class East Bengali refugees in Calcutta (Ray 2002; Sen 2014) that debunk notions of insurgency and highlight the importance of the social and cultural capital of these groups. The accounts of Sen (2014) and Ray (2002) nonetheless suggest a linear process of integration of the middle-class refugee inhabited suburbs. I delineate the flip side of the process, whereby peripheral spaces inhabited by lower class and caste refugees do not go through linear progression from segregation to integration, but remain *perpetually unsettled* in shifting configurations of expansion and contraction.

The chapter begins with a brief background of the *namasudras* in colonial Bengal. I look at how they were affected by the partition, migrated to West Bengal and found shelter in government camps. The next section focuses on a specific government camp area in North 24 Parganas inhabited by a group of *namasudra* refugees. Here I examine their camp space, the patterns of reminiscences about their displacement around 1947 and how that have mediated their subsequent experiences. The next two sections explore how the refugees deal with persistent attempts of dislocation and segregation unleashed by post-colonial governance, by focusing on their negotiation with the state machinery in its double depiction: first as a formal entity with specific sets of 'plans' for refugee rehabilitation and second, almost in parallel, as an informal entity in collusion with the market forces of property which work to unsettle and erase the plans and engender further displacement. In the final section I assess how stigmatised grey-spaces like the camps retain an element of heterogeneity and ambiguity where dissonance can surface and alternate sense of belongings are generated.

2.1 *Namasudras* in colonial Bengal and after: a brief background

The *namasudras* were the second largest Hindu caste in colonial Bengal and the largest among the Hindu agriculturists in eastern Bengal. They were concentrated in the low-lying swamp areas in certain districts of eastern Bengal, like Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna. In the later part of the nineteenth century, they participated in land reclamation process which was underway in these eastern marshy tracts and emerged as a settled peasant community. But land ownership in the region remained concentrated in the hands of the high caste Hindus and Sayyid Muslim gentry, who provided the capital input for the reclamation and therefore appropriated the

major share of the surplus. The *namasudras* thus emerged as a somewhat settled but marginal peasant community. But due to the objective physical condition of the region, they were not living in abject poverty. The process of reclamation eased pressure on land and these became fertile rice fields. From the 1930s they were severely affected by indebtedness caused by the depression, and there were cases of land alienation. But their condition was still better compared to their counterparts in western Bengal (Bose 1986).

Earlier the *namasudras* were referred to as *chandalas*. The word *chandala* was used as a derogatory generic term to refer to all lower caste people in Bengal. While strict untouchability was not practiced towards them, they were under various social restrictions. Water touched by them was unacceptable to the higher caste Hindus. They were deprived of the services of the village barbers and washermen. They could not enter Hindu temples and various other social disability attached to them. Gradually from the late nineteenth century, with the expansion of settled cultivation in these areas, the upwardly mobile sections of these groups began to mobilise and take exception to various caste discriminations. Sections of them opposed the name *chandala* and started using the term *namasudra*, which attached a new sense of self respect for the community. The expression was for the first time included in the census of India, 1891 indicating a wider popular acceptance of the new name and its official legitimation.

While the *namasudras* faced intense social stigma, they found appeal in strands of the Bhakti movement, Vaishnavism and various deviant sects that repudiated the Hindu caste system. Eventually a sect known as the Matua emerged among the *namasudras* of Faridpur district in the 1870s. The sect was started by a man called Harichand Thakur, born in a *chandala* family in a village in Faridpur. The sect grew in popularity and became the rallying point for the untouchable and the lower caste people in the region, the *namasudras* constituting a majority of them. The initial mobilisation of the *namasudras* took place around this sect (S. Bandyopadhyay 2011, 5-29, 54). More is discussed about the renewed importance of the Matua movement in the political mobilisation of the dalit refugees in post independence West Bengal in chapter four.

The *namasudras* benefitted from the philanthropic activities of different government agencies and Christian missionaries who supported the spread of education among lower castes in Bengal. Generous patronage was extended to them in the areas of primary and higher education by the colonial administration. Some of the major demands of the *namasudras* were continued patronage in education, reservation in government jobs and reservation of seats in the colonial administrative and legislative bodies. A few measures of success for the *namasudra* movement may be noted here.

They were included in the list of Scheduled Castes (SC) in the Government of India Act 1935, the new official term for the depressed classes. Fifteen per cent of all the vacancies in the district of Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad and the 24 Parganas were to be filled in with the members of the depressed classes as declared in a memorandum in 1936. The Poona Pact of 1932 accepted the principle of reservation of seats for the depressed classes out of the general electorate seats in the provincial legislatures in India. In Bengal, provisions were made to reserve 30 seats for the depressed classes.

The *namasudras* remained aloof from the mainstream nationalist movement conducted by the Indian National Congress (INC), which they viewed as an instrument for serving the interests of the Hindu upper castes. In this they often allied with their Muslim counterparts. The relation between the *namasudras* and Muslims were multifaced. On the one hand for a very long time there was communal tension between these two communities, which often flared into communal riots like the ones that occurred in 1911, 1923-25, 1098, 1943-44 (Das 1993, 62). On the other hand, there were numerous instances of cooperation and alliances between the two communities. Often the *bargadar*[1] of the *namasudras* and the *bargadar* of Muslim communities combined against the Hindu landholding gentry. From the 1940s however there was increasing communalisation of the rural peasantry in Bengal. The *namasudras* slowly steered towards the Congress and the more overtly communal Hindu Mahasabha. In the provincial elections of 1946 in colonial India, these groups overwhelmingly voted in support of the Congress in Bengal. But a straightforward story of their communalisation belies evidence. One only has to note the participation of the *namasudra* peasants in the Tebhaga movement led by the Kishan Sabha in 1946, where class identity superseded that of caste and religion.[2] At the time of transfer of power, a large section of the *namasudras* lent their support to the movement for the partition of the province of Bengal. This support was premised upon the demand that Bengal's eastern districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna where they were largely concentrated should be included within the state of West Bengal to be carved out for the Hindus inside independent India. Only a minority of the *namasudra* leaders like Jogendranath Mandal opposed the partition. But as events proved, these districts became part of East Bengal, the eastern wing of Pakistan.

Communal tensions between the Hindus and the Muslims was on the rise all through the decade of the 1940s. But a large majority of the *namasudras* cultivators remained in East Bengal in the initial years after the partition of 1947. They lacked the resources to migrate and start fresh in a new environment. The migration that took place immediately around the partition of 1947 in Bengal was of the elite and middle-class East Bengali Hindus. As noted previously, this initial phase of migration

started around the Noakhali riots and continued till 1948. Communal riots started in Khulna in December 1949, and spread to Dhaka, Barishal and other areas. This time the riot was mainly between the *namasudras* and the Muslims. It affected the *namasudras* severely. The *namasudras* started migrating to the border districts of West Bengal in large numbers. From this time onwards, their migration continued in different waves between both sides of divided Bengal whenever bilateral relations between India and Pakistan deteriorated and communal tensions flared up.

As this brief recapitulation of the history of the *namasudras* in Bengal traced, they had formed an organised group and mobilised for the removal of caste discrimination in colonial Bengal. But their movement was disrupted due to the dislocations created by the Second World War, the famine and the violence around the partition of Bengal in 1947. From this time onwards, their struggle moved along different channels. A large majority of those who migrated to West Bengal, could not directly address the issue of caste in their struggle for rehabilitation. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's research has shown that there was a displacement of caste politics among the *namasurdras* and this happened because the refugee movement came under the leadership of left political parties in West Bengal via their refugee organ, the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC). Under left leadership, their demands were couched in the language of class. Appeal through the idiom of caste was actively discouraged. This fractured dalit identity politics in West Bengal (S. Bandyopadhyay 2009; S. Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2014). In West Bengal their struggle continued along different trajectories. The organisation of the *namasudra* Matuas, known as the Matua Mahasangha grew from strength to strength in West Bengal. But for a long time, the main concern of the Matua leaders remained the socio-religious upliftment of dalit East Bengali refugees, rather than a political struggle for the dalit refugees. A new idiom of caste has re-entered the politics of dalit migrants in West Bengal from the turn of the millennium around the issue of citizenship, examined in more detail in chapter four. Although the language of caste was removed from organised politics, it still remained a pertinent force in organising the social life of these groups. As the subsequent discussion shows, caste and associated social and cultural capital of the refugees significantly mediated their access to rehabilitation.

If we turn to the condition of the dalit refugees who came to West Bengal, in the initial years, in stark contrast to the refugee rehabilitation policy in Punjab, there was no official policy of resettlement in the eastern region more broadly. The policy of the West Bengal and the central governments was to encourage the refugees to return to East Bengal after communal tensions dissipated on the ground. Over the years there was a slow and gradual acknowledgement that there

was scant possibility of the refugees' return and piecemeal resettlement policies were devised. The officialdom came up with certain exclusive categories and devised graded entitlements according to them. Relief and rehabilitation were initially limited to those coming to West Bengal between October 1946 and March 1958, labelled as 'Old Migrants'. Those coming to West Bengal between January 1964 and March 1971 were officially categorised as 'New Migrants'. Only those 'New Migrants' who agreed to move to government camps located outside West Bengal were entitled to receive rehabilitation assistance. All those who migrated between April 1958 and December 1963 were not recognised as displaced persons and not provided any official assistance at all (Chakrabarti 1999, 234-235). The refugees migrating to West Bengal after 1963 and choosing to stay on in West Bengal were also denied official support.

Many different types of East Bengali refugee settlements cropped up all over West Bengal.[3] They can be primarily divided in two categories: government run settlements and private ones. The government (both the West Bengal and central governments) created different types of shelter for the refugees. Initially two categories of government camps were set up: a) relief camps meant for providing initial relief to the refugees and b) transit camps for providing temporary shelter to the refugees after immediate arrival till they were sent to relief camps. Eventually when it was officially acknowledged that a large majority of the East Bengali migrants indeed will not go back to East Bengal, two other categories of government camps came up: c) work site camps for employing able bodied male refugees in government run projects in lieu of payment, usually with a promise of eventually settling the refugees at the project site, and d) permanent liability camps meant for those sections of the refugees who were considered 'non-rehabilitable' and a 'permanent liability' to the government. The private settlements were of two broad classes: a) the colonies set up on legally purchased land, and b) the colonies created by forcefully squatting on government and private property. Table 3 provides some idea of the different types of settlements created by the displaced persons in the state ("Refugee Rehabilitation Committee's Report," *Government of West Bengal*, 1981, 70).

Table 2.1. Different types of government and private refugee settlements in West Bengal (Source: "Refugee Rehabilitation Committee's Report," *Government of West Bengal*, 1981, 70).

	GS[4]	Squatters colonies	Ex-camp	Muslim House	Barracks	Private land	Home	Rented House	Private colony	Misc.	Total no of families

No of families	50,600 9.61%	1,03252 19.66%	4,667 0.88%	4,765 0.90%	249 0.04%	86,723 16.51%	4,067 0.77%	53,649 10.21%	1,75,836 33.49%	42,214 7.84%	5,25,022

Of all the above mentioned categories, the government run camps were the most inferior in terms of location, facilities and congestion. The most disadvantaged groups of refugees, of the lowest class and caste, who had nowhere else to go, took shelter in the government camps as a last resort. The government rehabilitation policy primarily concerned those who had taken shelter in government camps. It may be noted here that in allocation of space in the government camps, caste and identity did play an important part, despite persistent official denial. At the Sealdah Station, the main railway station in Calcutta, the refugees were asked about their identity, given a registration card and sent by train to a refugee camp. It was at these registration desks that their identity as *namasudra* cultivator was permanently inscribed on their cards. Refugee camps developed their own community demographies. In certain camps like the Cooper's Camp or the Dhubulia camp in Nadia district, the *namasudras* constituted more than 70% of the residents (S. Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2014, 7).

We may briefly turn to the official rehabilitation policy for the refugees in government camps in order to understand the struggle of the camp-refugees. The rehabilitation schemes put in place by the West Bengal government for the camp refugees were fraught with problems. In the initial years after the partition, rehabilitation of the camp refugees was facilitated mostly using government *khas mahal* (government owned) lands and lands that had been requisitioned for military needs during the Second World War. But when migration from East Bengal picked up from the early 1950s, such land under government possession had mostly been exhausted (Bandyopadhyay 1970, 82-83).[5] Subsequent schemes suffered from this problem of scarcity of land.

The camp refugees were categorised as rural agriculturist, rural non-agriculturist, and urban displaced persons. The schemes for rural agriculturists included the Type scheme, the Union Board scheme, the Barujibi scheme and the Horticulture scheme. The rural plans for non-agriculturists included more or less the same schemes. The government schemes for urban refugees mostly consisted of different types of grants and loans. Apart from this, there were also the government sponsored colonies or township created for settling the refugees. Most of the schemes where the government procured land for the refugees in rural or urban schemes were largely unsuccessful. There were large scale desertions from sites of rehabilitation due to unsuitable nature and distant

location of the rehabilitation sites. Alternately where the refugees settled through private initiative at their own preferred locations, with financial assistance for rehabilitation, their resettlement proved successful.[6] Rehabilitation efforts slogged down by the mid-1950s and the state government assumed the position that there was no more land available in West Bengal for rehabilitation and the refugees had to be sent outside to other neighbouring states for the purpose. This government position was of course problematic and was repeatedly challenged by various groups including the refugees themselves.[7]

By 1957 the central government came up with the Dandakaranya scheme located in parts of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh for the rehabilitation of all remaining camp refugees in West Bengal. It was the biggest rehabilitation scheme taken on hand by the authorities so far and involved a financial outlay of Rs 1000 million (Chakrabarti 1999, 177). The Dandakaranya project was located at an arid low lying plateau carved out of Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Bihar and Orissa and Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. It covered a huge swathe of territory of about 30000 square miles. The area had local tribal inhabitants, mostly Gond forest people. It aimed to rehabilitate the remaining government camp refugees, both agriculturists and non-agriculturists still remaining in West Bengal (Chatterji 2007, 136-137). The Dandakaranya scheme evoked the suspicion of the camp refugees from the beginning. They denounced the scheme and demanded rehabilitation inside West Bengal. The camp refugees consisting of the lower caste groups all over West Bengal organised a satyagraha in 1958 against government plans of forceful rehabilitation outside West Bengal. The leading refugee organisations like the UCRC and the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS) took up their demands. A month long state wide civil disobedience movement of the camp refugees was launched in March-April 1958. *Namasudra* refugee leaders like Jogendranath Mandal, Hemanta Biswas and Apurbalal Majumdar assumed leadership positions. Their demands included: 1) no unwilling refugee must be sent to Dandakaranya and deprived of doles on account of his/her unwillingness to go outside West Bengal; 2) as 70% of the camp refugees were peasants, they must be settled in West Bengal on reclaimable waste land (Chakrabarti 1999, 181-191).

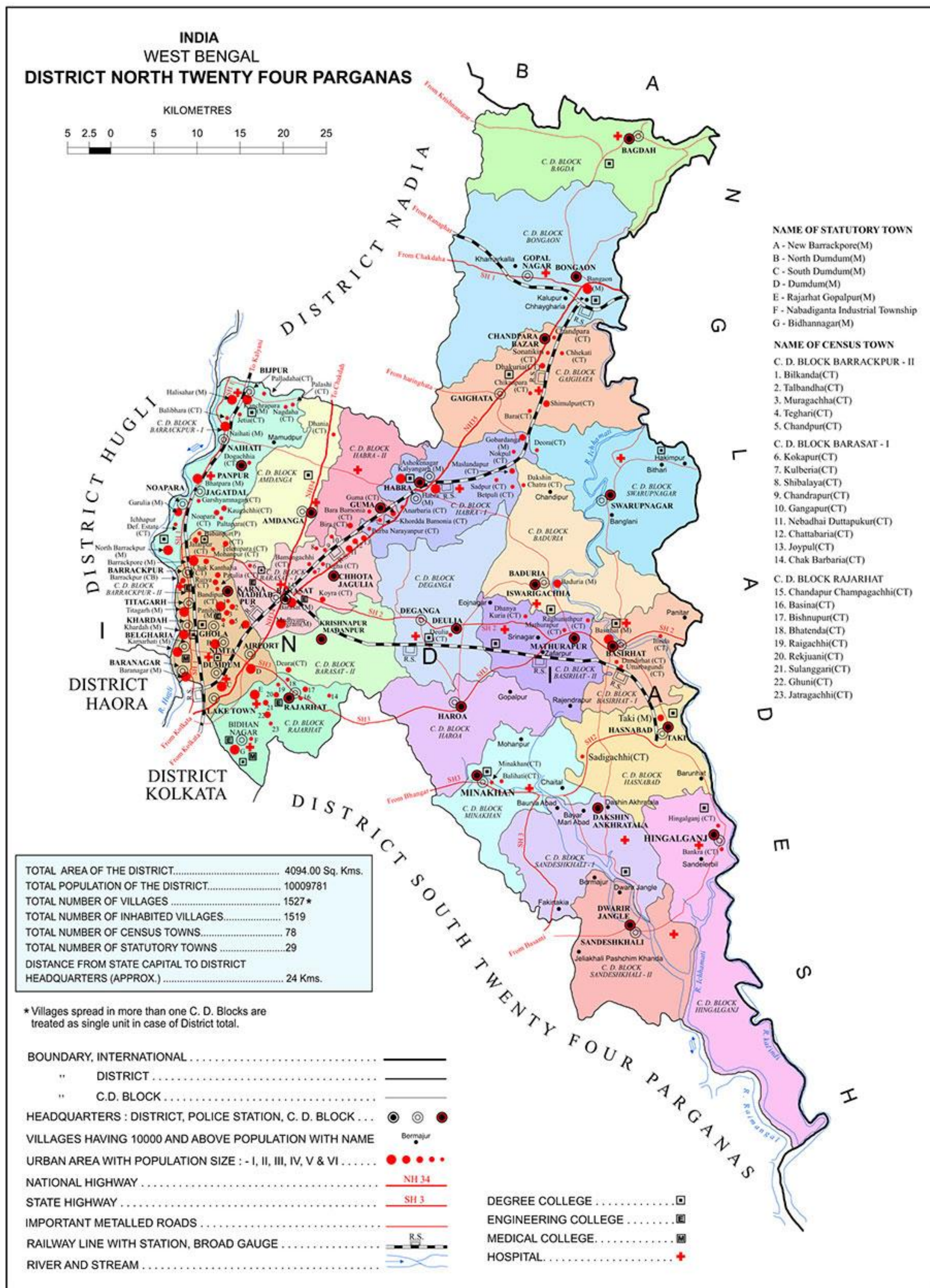
It may be noted that the middle-class East Bengali refugees remained completely aloof from this movement of the dalit camp refugees. While refugee organisations like the UCRC and the SBBS tried to enlist their support, they failed to evoke any enthusiasm from the middle-class squatters. The struggle for rehabilitation of the two class and caste group of refugees remained separate all along. The state government conceded very little. In 1961 the West Bengal government gave the agriculturist families in the camps two months' notice to either move to Dandakaranya or quit the

camps with a grant equal to six months' cash dole. Out of the 35,000 camp families, 10,000 refused to move to Dandakaranya or quit the camps. These families subsequently came to be known as ex-camp site refugees. There were about 74 ex-camp sites with a total population of about 45,000 displaced persons spread over nine districts of West Bengal ("Report on Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan at Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal," *Government of India,* 1969). 24 Parganas have the largest number of ex-camps (see Table 2.2). In this chapter I draw on the experiences of one such ex-camp settlement located in 24 Parganas, the Bahirdoba ex-camp sites.

Table 2.2. District wise break up of different government ex-camp-sites in West Bengal (Source: "Report on Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan at Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal," *Government of India*, 1969, 24).

Name of district	No. of ex-camp sites	No of PL families	No of rehabilitable families	Total
Bankura	4	4	164	168
Birbhum	9	25	573	598
Burdwan	22	33	2488	2521
Hooghly	5	26	596	622
Howrah	2	26	274	300
Midnapur	5	-	408	408
Murshidabad	5	14	684	698
Nadia	1	-	1068	1068
24 Parganas	21	30	2312	2342
Total	74	158	8567	8725

Map 2.1. Location Map of North 24 Parganas (Source: ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-North-24-Parganas-district-within-West-Bengal-state-India_fig1_225618863)



Map 2.2. North 24 Parganas District (Source: North 24 Parganas District, Office of the District Magistrate, http://www.north24parganas.gov.in/sites/default/files/external_image/north_24_pgs_map_0.jpg)

Bahirdoba has been a low-lying and water logged area, located in the district of North 24 Parganas along the north-eastern suburbs of Calcutta. In the early 1950s the area comprised of some villages interspersed by paddy fields and fell under the jurisdiction of two local village panchayats.[8] The area had no transport system and was virtually cut off from the surroundings. But it was physically very close to the city of Calcutta which lay to its immediate south, roughly one to two kilometers away. This advantageous location of the settlement would eventually become crucial and make it a site of diverging claims and contestations. In 1953-54 a group of *namasudra* refugees (1065 refugee families as per government report published in 1971) were brought to the Bahirdoba area. They were housed in eleven work-site camps and laboured in a government canal excavation project. The project aimed to elevate submerged lands from a huge area on the banks of the canal. The recovered land could then be brought under cultivation, and also used for resettling the agriculturist refugees. The refugees were promised rehabilitation at the project site after the canal excavation was completed, with allotment of plots the size of 9.5 *bighas* (8094 square metres)[9] per family ("On Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan Living at Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal, 6th Report," *Government of India*, 1971).

At the time of the initiation of the canal project the pattern of local landholding in the area was mixed. The area did not have big landowners. There were a good number of middle sized landowners, locally known as *gatidars*. The *gatidars* lived in the area, tilled part of the land themselves and also employed sharecroppers for cultivation. There were also a considerable number of peasants who were part owners and part *bargadars* (sharecroppers).[10] The canal project was conceived in a manner, that it passed through land under cultivation, sometimes lands that produced two, or even three crops per year. Some of the work-site camps were also located on paddy land. This sudden encroachment of a large number of refugees generated the hostility of the local people. A news report in *Anandabazar Patrika* reported the discontent among the local inhabitants of Rajarhat over government acquisition notice for taking over a wide area under the Rajarhat police station ("Discontent Over Land Acquisition Notice in Rajarhat," *Anandabazar Patrika,* May 1955). Contemporary news reports noted the fear of the local *bargadars* and anxiety over loosing paddy lands under cultivation, which was often the sole means of their subsistence ("Usurpation of Peasants Paddy Land," *Jugantar,* January 1954). In a letter to the editor of the *Anandabazar Patrika*, Nishikanta Bagui of the neighbourhood, located just next to the camp area, voiced local peasant grievances against the project in clear terms

> Recently acquisition notice has been issued to the peasants of… nearby villages of the Rajarhat police station, for securing land... If this paddy land which is the main base of subsistence for the peasants of

> the area are requisitioned forcefully, these families will be left without anything… this will turn the peasants into *new refugees*... (“Land as Compensation for Acquired Land," *Anandabazar Patrika,* January 1954, emphasis added)

Another dimension was added to the brewing conflict by the activities of the local wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Around this time, the CPI was building its peasant wing known as the Kishan Sabha in the Rajarhat area. It was precisely around the issue of forceful land acquisition by the government for the canal project that the local peasant movement was sought to be consolidated. During a long interview, Kartik, a man in his 70s who is a local leader of the CPI, a member of the party’s Rajarhat peasant wing, and also a member of its cultural wing, the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), reflected on the nature of peasant movement in the area and the grounds for conflict between the refugees and the local peasants

> we saw people from East Bengal were coming here… the government was arranging tents for them… when the refugees started coming, we helped them the best we could… when they moved here, the government had not yet disclosed the plan that the refugees will be employed in the work of canal digging…the land by the canal belonged to… local cultivators… I have seen them at work… I used to sit nearby in winter days, as they went about reaping paddy in the fields…
>
> I: so the government took land from the cultivators for the canal project?
>
> Kartik: yes, mainly cultivators… they owned small lands… the cultivators were in a difficult condition… Pijush, he is an acquaintance of mine… he owned small lands that he himself cultivated… it would not be more than 2-3 *katha*… he cultivated the rest as a share cropper… they could not survive solely from the income of the lands they owned…
>
> …the peasant movement gradually crystallised here around the issue of the canal project… a leaflet was issued… it stated that the work of canal digging must be stopped, because it would take away the lands of the peasants and these were fertile lands…but the government did not pay heed… this created a strong movement… the relation between the refugees and the locals deteriorated… the refugees squatted on their land, and the local people could not remedy the situation, hence there was a bitter relation between the two groups from the beginning… we tried to heal the conflict… but not to much avail… (Kartik, Personal Interview, December 2015).

The work of canal excavation by the agriculturist refugees was complete in 1958. Afterwards the government went back on its promise and denied the refugees the land reclaimed by them. The electoral success of the Indian National Congress (INC) government in West Bengal depended upon support from big landowners. They were in favour of keeping the reclaimed land with private

owners, rather than distributing them to the refugees. The refugees were to be *dispersed* further away to peripheries. Following state wide policies of dispersal, the remaining camp refugees were offered rehabilitation outside West Bengal in places like Dandakaranya. This was strongly opposed. The Bahirboda refugees briefly joined forces with other camp refugees all over West Bengal, in the camp satyagraha of 1958-59. As already noted, this camp satyagraha did not secure them any concrete benefit. The camps were forcefully closed.

Figure 2.1. A glimpse of the Bahirdoba canal.

Figure 2.2. A footbridge over the Bahirdoba canal.

After the official closure of the camps, usurpation of local land for survival embroiled the refugees in a conflict with local peasants. A group of camp refugee families squatted in a village next to the camps by the name Shulumari. They created a squatters' colony there, which is now known as the Shulumari colony. Bolstered by the success of the initial squatting, they planned to wrest control of paddy lands from the local villagers. The refugees wanted to continue their traditional occupation of cultivation in land thus acquired.

Figure 2.3. A glimpse of the Shulumari colony. This area is less urbanised and still within a village panchayat.

The local villagers, on their part, had prior intimation of the plan of the refugees. They stood to lose their sole means of subsistence if their lands were taken away. They organised to oppose the move. The peasant resistance was shaped under the local CPI leaders together with the *jotedars*[11] and *gatidars*, who faced the prospect of losing land. It is interesting to note that the local leader of the Krishak Sabha who provided leadership to this peasant resistance was himself a landowner. He preferred to organise with local peasants and landowners in opposition to the refugees. Both sides prepared for a final showdown. On 26 June, 1960 there was a direct conflict between the refugees and the local peasants for control over land. Gun shots were fired and three refugees died.[12] The police arrived after the exchange of fire, and arrested a large number of people from both conflicting sides. Jogen of Shulumari who also fought on the day of conflict, thus described the incident

> …so there was the *danga* (riot)… the zamindar took the help of the local people and fought with us… they wanted to evict us… but we were already informed.… there were attempts to contact the *namasudras* in places like Madhyamgram, Barrackpore… broadly people from East Bengal… arms were collected from them and brought here at night… people living in Shulumari prepared themselves as best they could with *dhal, sarki* etc… around 10 in the morning we saw a large number of people of

> the villages advancing towards us from all sides… three of our people died… it was after the *danga* was over that a large number of police arrived… (Jogen, Personal Interview, February 2016).

In this refugee remembering, the figure of the local sharecropper is carefully erased. The figure of the *jotedar* (relatively sizeable landowners) and the police are made into the avowed opponent. Ganesh, a local peasant, who was a share cropper in this land, and lost his sole means of subsistence in the conflict, provided a different version of the conflict. He had gone to the area on the day of the conflict. And he was later arrested with many others.

> …not only did the canal pass over cultivable land, they actually settled the refugees on our paddy lands… that is why we protested… about 15 of 16 of us used to cultivate that land… I don't remember all the names… the police were present, but did not take any action… (Ganesh, Personal Interview, December 2015)

This conflict had a disruptive effect. It disrupted the local CPI peasant movement in the area. Many local peasants lost land, and were given a very nominal compensation years later. It changed their subsistence base. Now many of their descendants have turned into day labourers. Cultivation in the land of conflict stopped, and paved the way for its future urbanisation, which was fraught with its own problems. The conflict foreclosed possibilities of horizontal solidarity between the refugees and the local landless.

2.2 De-paradigming the 'first' displacement

As the background so far indicates, the *namasudra* refugees struggled to survive in the face of myriad policies of divide and rule and conflict over scarce resources at the peripheries. Memories of their displacement from East Bengal to India, or their left behind homes do not have a predominant place in the recollection of these refugees except for when it is invoked to stake a new claim in a new environment. This is in stark contrast to middle-class East Bengali refugee remembrances of the event, where the partition is recalled as a monstrously irrational aberration. The tragedy is recollected as one that cruelly and suddenly cut the refugees adrift from their native villages in East Bengal, where their ancestors have lived for generations. In the middle-class memories, the ancestral home is remembered as foundational of their personhood and their present status of refugeehood sets them outside of their foundation.[13]

In dalit recollections, the partition does not figure as a first paradigmatic instance of dislocation. Their remembrances in a way de-paradigm the partition and locate it within continuing forces of violence. One shortcoming of my study is that most of my interlocutors were young schoolchildren at the time of their migration after the partition. Recollection of their days in East Bengal before the partition remains sketchy. As a corrective, I have drawn from two dalit refugee memoirs, written by erstwhile inhabitants of refugee camps in the suburbs of Calcutta. These are the memoirs by Sadanandal Pal, *Eka Kumbha: Ek Udbastu Kumbhakarer Maatimakha Atmakatha* (Pal 2009) and an autobiography by Manoranjan Byapari, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (Byapari 2012). Their writings show that as the most disadvantaged caste and class, their homes in East Bengal were often not as secure. Unlike some of the canonical middle-class East Bengali refugee memories, the partition of 1947 does not appear as a singular and exceptional event.[14] Rather than one single cataclysmic horror, the emphasis is on repeated movements, from East Bengal to West Bengal, back again to their homes in East Bengal and prolonged experiences of dislocation, discrimination and alienation.

During my interaction with the camp dwellers at Bahirdoba, I have found that a strong sense of deception and betrayal at the hands of the post-colonial state pervades their recollection. Many of the Bahirdoba refugees have been moving from place to place in different government camps before they were brought to Bahirdoba.[15] Sunil of camp B reflected

> …they (the West Bengal government) used to give us false hope of rehabilitation… took us to the mountains in Shalbani… after a while they said here there is no place for rehabilitation, you will be taken to Panshkura (a town in Medinipur district of West Bengal)… camps were set up (at Panshkura)... they asked us to dig a canal, they said ‘how will you get rehabilitation unless you dig the canal and build roads?’… the work of canal excavation started… after it was completed they said there will be no place here, you will be moved to Bahirdoba… (Sunil, Personal Interview, February 2016)

In Sunil’s memory, the deception continued long after they were brought to the Bahirdoba camps. During their stay in different camps, they were mostly engaged in the work of soil excavation. They often lacked exact knowledge about the government project they were part of. All they can remember is that they were employed for digging mud as part of government projects in lieu of a payment, and later shifted from the site to a different locale. Their treatment by the state authorities resembled that of a captive labour force. In most cases, they had hardly any interaction with the locals of the surrounding areas.[16]

The government created an infrastructure of sorts in the Bahirdoba camp area, employing contractors for the purpose. They were under the supervision of the government camp officials. Often there were corruption and indifference among the officials. The refugee families were housed in tents. Tents were also used for the camp office and the camp schools. While some tent-dwellings lined the canal banks, most others were created in the interior, on low paddy lands. The tents were small in size, usually the dimension of 7 ½ * 7 ½ * 6 feet, where about four to five people put up. The bigger families were given two tents. The tent houses tended to get unbearably hot during the summer months. The situation was even worse during the rains. The government installed water taps and latrines were far less in number than what was required. Latrines were often located some distance away from the camps. The refugees had to wade through submerged paddy fields to get to the latrines ("Poor Example of Refugee Rehabilitation in Bagjola," *Anandabazar Patrika,* April 1956). Each camp had an office (usually marked by a white tent) and the camp officials included a camp superintendent, a doctor, an overseer and some peons. Each camp also had a primary school housed in tents, with a salaried government teacher. The work of canal digging was carried out under armed police protection. A small number of police also stayed in the camps. For example, a small number of police were stationed at camp no B, and later a police camp was created near the Shulumari colony (which has now been turned into a club) (Sobhanath, Personal Interview, February 2016). Sobhanath of camp B thus responded to my query regarding arrangement for toilets

> … I feel ashamed to say this now… toilets were open, nobody bothered… the tents were placed with some gaps in between, people would sometimes surround small areas in such gaps… women defecated here… when we were kids, we used to defecate by the canal… some people would go to the fields nearby… later the government created some latrines here… This would be probably in 1957-58… (Sobhanath, Personal Interview, February 2016)

Their inhuman living conditions created a sense of shame. The refugees were given cash dole cards by the camp authorities, which entitled them to a cash dole, given at specific intervals. The dole included a small amount of money and some food items like rice, wheat etc. The cash dole card (henceforth CDC) became their most important identity card. The refugees were given clothes two times a year, once during the Independence day celebration on 15 August, and on India's Republic day on 26 January.[17] While there were numerous complaints from the refugees regarding camp amenities, this did not lead to direct confrontation ("Poor Example of Refugee Rehabilitation in Bagjola," *Anandabazar Patrika,* April 1956). The grievances of the camp dwellers were expressed through meetings and memoranda on issues like maladministration at the camps, insufficient amount of dole, lack of amenities etc. Sobhanath reflected on their relation with the camp officials

> we used to call them *babus*… most of us were illiterate… we are from East Bengal, some had been day labourers, some had been cultivators… those who were educated did not come to the camps… (Sobhanath, Personal Interview, February 2016)

Figure 2.4. A Cash Dole Card.

The camps were built on low paddy land. Water did not easily drain out during the monsoon. In recognition of this difficulty, there was a government provision for providing the refugees wooden planks for placing the tents on an elevated platform known as *macha* during the monsoon. But the materials for building *macha* rarely reached the refugee families, if at all ("Poor Example of Refugee Rehabilitation in Bagjola," *Anandabazar Patrika,* April 1956). A small amount of rain could result in heavy flooding in the area. During heavy rain conditions quickly deteriorated. A news report described the plight of the refugees during one such flood in 1956

> Most of the tents are submerged in water. Some have been simply washed away. The refugees with their children and elderly lot have taken shelter in the elevated areas… an appeal has been sent to the government officials for food and other assistance on Wednesday, but no help has arrived till Friday… on Friday afternoon a boat was seen to be conducting rescue operation near the submerged tents, recovering the refugees' meagre household possessions… ("Pitiable Plight of the Refugees in Bahirdoba," *Anandabazar Patrika*, September 1956).

The ex-camp sites began life as government settlements. The practices of camp planning, while included minimal amenities, lacked the basic ingredients of a planned settlement, like regularity in plot size, layout, or provision for communal spaces. After the refugees became squatters, their efforts of building a community of settlers was mediated by this past. Over the years, the identity of a camp refugee became their most important means of claiming rights and entitlements from a reluctant state. The refugee identity is retained and mobilised for staking claims, but their remembrances of this 'first' displacement is scattered and is not mobilised to tell a unified story of trauma and loss. It has become part of the many displacements and forms of everyday violence that were entwined with their lives before 1947 and continued long after.[18] From the 1990s their connection with their erstwhile homes in East Bengal would be re-articulated in a new language.

2.3 Negotiating the 'formal' state: plans and erasures

After the forceful closure of the camps in the early 1960s, the efforts of the refugees were directed towards negotiating continued attempts at displacements and segregation unleashed by the state. The refugees carried on protests through *anashan* (hunger strike) for a while with demands for restoration of camp facilities. Two such *anashans* were organised in the camps in February 1960 and June 1961. The *anashan* of 26 June 1961 however, was met with unusual police brutality where four refugees were killed in gunfire. This stopped the protests. The decade of the 1950s saw a spate of development activities in the suburbs of Calcutta. A few middle-class townships were conceived in the immediate neighbourhood of the Bahirdoba camps. It is telling that the plan for creation of the townships and the administrative decision to deny the refugees local lands at Bahirdoba coincided.[19] The authorities failed to completely *disperse* the refugees, but effectively *erased* them from their area development plans. This period of closure and erasure was marked by destitution and death at the camps. My interlocutors have talked about deaths in the face of slow starvation and hardship. Below are some excerpts

> Sobhanath: …the usual happens when people don't get food… they became beggars… (Sobhanath, Personal Interview, February 2016)
>
> Sunil: …many people died of starvation… my brother could sing, he used to sing and beg, and bring home some rice… (Sunil, Personal Interview, February 2016)
>
> Guruchand: …the dole stopped in 1961… my father was worried about how to maintain the family… my father died of worry and anxiety… (Guruchand, Personal Interview, February 2016)

They were brought within the purview of resettlement plans in the 1970s. As the subsequent discussion shows the plans came with elements of erasure embedded in them, the purpose of which was not necessarily the final *settlement* of refugees at all. A number of recent studies on the East Bengali refugees explain repeated 'dispersal' of the refugees from different official rehabilitation sites or camps or serial displacement as failure of government rehabilitation schemes (Chatterji 2007; Sen 2011; Jalais 2005; Sengupta 2017). In an important work in this vein, Joya Chatterji (2007), has analysed the dispersal of East Bengali refugees from government camps in West Bengal to unsuitable locales in terms of misguided policies of the refugee rehabilitation departments which nonetheless aimed to *settle* the refugees. The experience of the Bahirdoba camp refugees presents a different understanding of protracted displacements. It shows that resettlement plans are often devised with elements of erasure embedded in them. Such schemes do not aim at the final *settlement* of refugees. They are flexible schemes which serve as a pretext for the functioning of the informal state, better understood through the concept of informalisation (Roy 2004, 2009).

A Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal set up in the early 1970s, recommended settling the 'ex-camp site refugees'. Interestingly the Review Committee came up with two alternate recommendations for consideration for the Bahirdoba ex-camp refugees. The first alternative, that the refugees should be rehabilitated in their present site of squatting with some rearrangement and assistance provided for building of houses was eventually accepted. But the Review Committee which examined and reported on the future course of action to be taken for the Bahirdoba ex-camp site provided an alternate plan for the rehabilitation of the refugees at a nearby site. The alternate plan was envisaged and proposed by the Commissioner of Town and Country Planning, Development and Planning Department of the government of West Bengal, in consultation with the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation (CMPO). This plan was strongly recommended by the review committee to the refugee rehabilitation department of the government of West Bengal. The plan deserves close scrutiny, as it reveals planning priorities and the place of the displaced groups, just like any disadvantaged social group in the overall scheme of the development of the metropolitan area. The report by the committee emphasised that the location of the Bahirdoba camp sites was prime due to its vicinity to the planned townships nearby like Salt Lake City and Lake Town. These are two middle-class government planned townships, located on the eastern and western sides of Bahirdoba camps respectively. Bahirdoba, according to this planning vision was to be developed as an integrated suburb of Calcutta with functional links to the nearby middle-class townships. The planning authorities of the state found the present camp area particularly well msuited for the building of a commercial complex. The commercial complex,

the committee noted, would be a useful adjunct to the Salt Lake township and Lake Town.[20] The committee expressed anxiety that the camp sites, if not properly developed, may grow into just another of Calcutta's many water-logged slums and create an unhygienic atmosphere in the vicinity of this growing urban conglomeration. The alternate plan, hence envisaged the shifting of the camp families to a nearby area, in some plots developed as part of Salt Lake. The alternate plan was attractive to the authorities because of two reasons. This relocation would prevent the possibility of the growth of a slum like settlement in the middle of West Bengal government's two prime township projects. Moreover, it could be developed at a lesser cost to the government, than the cost that would be incurred if the camp families were to be rehabilitated in their present occupation sites on prime land by the VIP road, a north-south road connecting Calcutta to its international airport.

It was noted in the report that the Salt Lake municipal authorities have actually developed a portion of the township's area further to the east, which could be utilised for the rehabilitation of the Bahirdoba camp squatters. Here the refugees could be rehabilitated with small homestead plots of two *katha* per family. The settlement would include basic minimum provisions for roads, drains and other sanitary requirements. The new refugee colony was to be developed as a service colony which could help in the ongoing building of Salt Lake town in various ways by supplying labour during its construction period and by providing service workers for its day to day functioning, after it was fully developed. The plan noted that the workers residing in this refugee colony can find employment not only in Salt Lake but also in the Tangra-Topsia area. They could have employment opportunities in the fisheries and agricultural fields in the east. The report however, made it clear that the refugee colony would be spatially separated from the Salt Lake township with a railway line working as the main divider ("On Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan Living at Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal, 6th Report," *Government of India*, 1971, 17-21).

The second plan, in fact was the preferred plan of the Review Committee. It was strongly backed by the Commissioner of the Town and Country planning department. Implied in this planning vision is a severing of connection of the Bahirdoba camps from the broader locality growing around the middle class residential areas. Rather the report hinted at a social and economic linkage of the Bahirdoba camp dwellers with the Tangra Topsia area. Tangra has been the traditional hub of tanneries. It is one of the most underdeveloped areas in east Calcutta and home to the city's many slums. This functional linking of the refugee township with the Tangra Topsia area, and emphasis on their role of a service community to Salt Lake reveal why it was important to remove these groups from a prime and visible location by the VIP road. Their relocation eastward, and a contraction of space for the

entire settlement (the refugees possessed a greater amount of land per plot at their present camp sites) was more in line with planning policies which aimed to push disadvantaged groups towards the marshy eastern parts, traditionally occupied by slum like labouring settlements, to be displaced again in future, as the city expands in that direction, in a cyclical process.[21] Due to the strength of refugee movement in West Bengal, the second plan could not be taken. These refugees could not be summarily shifted to another location against their wishes. The refugees managed to stay on in their present site of squatting. The category of 'camp refugee', for them provided a protective cover in context of the particular history of religious partitioning of the subcontinent. The process of rehabilitating them at their sites of squatting begun.

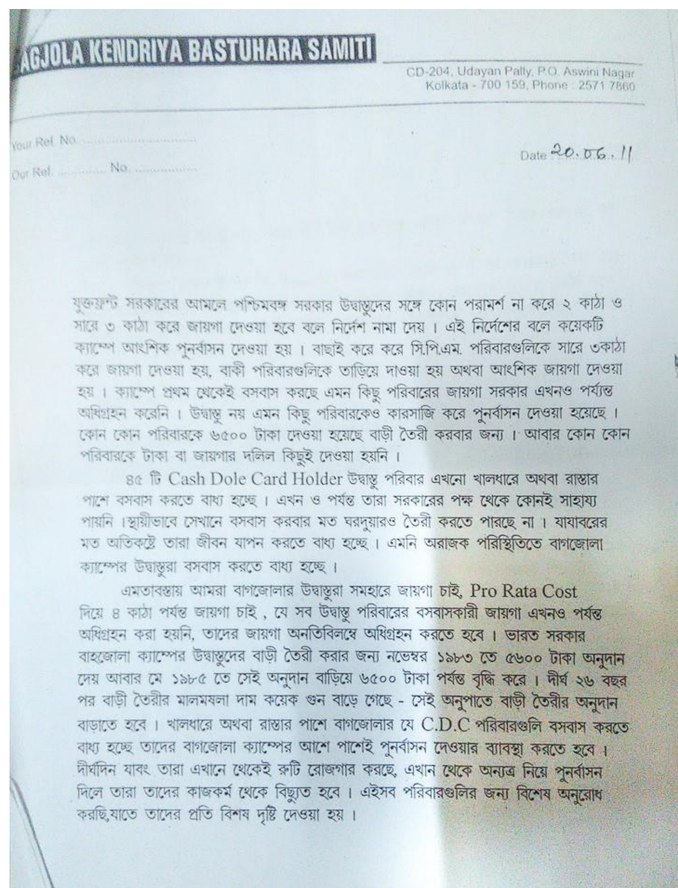
As per the first plan, the committee recommended rehabilitation at their present site of squatting. Regularisation at Bahirdoba involved giving homestead plots of the size of 845 square metres (2.5 *katha*) per refugee household ("On Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan Living at Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal, 6th Report," *Government of India*, 1971). Plots were to be sanctioned only to 'original' CDC holder families. The government policy of regularisation in effect implied two things: i) exclusion and eviction of a large number of families who lacked documents, in exchange for the regularisation of a small number of people and ii) 'freeing up' of a large amount of land (as most of the families occupied plots of a size larger than 845 square metres) which could be used to settle new people *loyal* to the government.

Through the years of official absence, a large number of people had migrated to the camp areas and settled down. The camp families often informally sold land in their occupation to their relatives in East Bengal (later Bangladesh) who continued to trickle in and settle in the area. When regularisation started in the 1980s, many of these families were served eviction notice (Pramatha, Personal Interview, February 2016). The refugees alleged that the authorities were settling their own supporters on the lands made available by evictions. This was seen by the campers as an attempt at land colonisation by the government and hence created a strong reaction. Pramatha reflected during a discussion

> we were a people who had been promised 9.5 *bigha* land... now they came up with arrangements of one *katha*, two *katha* etc... this is very painful for us… people who did not even have *abasthan* (occupation) in this land, but were the favourites of the government... unauthorised persons were brought from outside… and settled on the lands freed by them…
>
> I: were they *edeshis* (local people of West Bengal)?
>
> Pramatha: …they were from East Bengal, but had not lived in the camps… they did not have *abasthan*

> here... we were anxious... we decided that people should not be removed from their present occupation... they have not been able to provide us the promised 9.5 *bigha* land... this is what we have saved with our life and blood, we will not give this up... (Pramatha, Personal Interview, February 2016)

After the government presence from the camps were withdrawn in 1961, all the camps created their own committees. But the committees were often nominated with individual discretion, were faction ridden and lacked any meaningful control over the inhabitants. The committees lacked the resources, and its members the political connections to bring about development in the camp areas. At the time of regularisation, the camp dwellers felt the need to unite and fight against its arbitrariness. Two local committees were created by the refugees, the Bahirdoba Kendriya Bastuhara Samity (BKBS) and the Bahirdoba Kendriya Udbastu Samity (BKUS). A court case was fought in 1986 under the leadership of the two committees against the process of government regularisation. The verdict of the Calcutta High Court went in favour of the refugees. It was recognised that regularisation could not be forcefully carried out by the officialdom without the consent of the camp inhabitants. Apart from the CDC families, the right of *abasthan* (occupation) of a group of people living close to them was recognised. The refugees successfully challenged the twofold government categorisation of the CDC holders and the non-CDC holder families. They came up with a third category, which they called 'without'; that is, people who lacked documents. They bargained for the rights of this group on the basis of their *abasthan* and relatedness to the camp families. Evicting them, it was held, would disrupt long nurtured social relations. The court verdict guaranteed that the so called 'without' families would not be evicted. This was a moment of victory for the camp refugees against top-down metropolitan planning and this arrangement stopped the prospect of immediate evictions.



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Kolkata - 700 159, Phone : 2571 7860

Your Ref. No. ....

Our Ref. .... No. ....

Date 20.06.11

যুক্তফ্রন্ট সরকারের আমলে পশ্চিমবঙ্গ সরকার উদ্বাস্তুদের সঙ্গে কোন পরামর্শ না করে ২ কাঠা ও সারে ৩ কাঠা করে জায়গা দেওয়া হবে বলে নির্দেশ নামা দেয় । এই নির্দেশের বলে কয়েকটি ক্যাম্পে আংশিক পুনর্বাসন দেওয়া হয় । বাছাই করে করে সি.পি.এম. পরিবারগুলিকে সারে ৩কাঠা করে জায়গা দেওয়া হয়, বাকী পরিবারগুলিকে তাড়িয়ে দাওয়া হয় অথবা আংশিক জায়গা দেওয়া হয় । ক্যাম্পে প্রথম থেকেই বসবাস করছে এমন কিছু পরিবারের জায়গা সরকার এখনও পর্যন্ত অধিগ্রহন করেনি । উদ্বাস্তু নয় এমন কিছু পরিবারকেও কারসাজি করে পুনর্বাসন দেওয়া হয়েছে । কোন কোন পরিবারকে ৬৫০০ টাকা দেওয়া হয়েছে বাড়ী তৈরী করবার জন্য । আবার কোন কোন পরিবারকে টাকা বা জায়গার দলিল কিছুই দেওয়া হয়নি ।

৪৫ টি Cash Dole Card Holder উদ্বাস্তু পরিবার এখনো খালধারে অথবা রাস্তার পাশে বসবাস করতে বাধ্য হচ্ছে । এখন ও পর্যন্ত তারা সরকারের পক্ষ থেকে কোনই সাহায্য পায়নি ।স্থায়ীভাবে সেখানে বসবাস করবার মত ঘরদুয়ারও তৈরী করতে পারছে না । যাযাবরের মত অতিকষ্টে তারা জীবন যাপন করতে বাধ্য হচ্ছে । এমনি অরাজক পরিস্থিতিতে বাগজোলা ক্যাম্পের উদ্বাস্তুরা বসবাস করতে বাধ্য হচ্ছে ।

এমতাবস্তায় আমরা বাগজোলার উদ্বাস্তুরা সমহারে জায়গা চাই, Pro Rata Cost দিয়ে ৪ কাঠা পর্যন্ত জায়গা চাই , যে সব উদ্বাস্তু পরিবারের বসবাসকারী জায়গা এখনও পর্যন্ত অধিগ্রহন করা হয়নি, তাদের জায়গা অনতিবিলম্বে অধিগ্রহন করতে হবে । ভারত সরকার বাহজোলা ক্যাম্পের উদ্বাস্তুদের বাড়ী তৈরী করার জন্য নভেম্বর ১৯৮৩ তে ৫৬০০ টাকা অনুদান দেয় আবার মে ১৯৮৫ তে সেই অনুদান বাড়িয়ে ৬৫০০ টাকা পর্যন্ত বৃদ্ধি করে । দীর্ঘ ২৬ বছর পর বাড়ী তৈরীর মালমষলা দাম কয়েক গুন বাড়ে গেছে - সেই অনুপাতে বাড়ী তৈরীর অনুদান বাড়াতে হবে । খালধারে অথবা রাস্তার পাশে বাগজোলার যে C.D.C পরিবারগুলি বসবাস করতে বাধ্য হচ্ছে তাদের বাগজোলা ক্যাম্পের আশে পাশেই পুনর্বাসন দেওয়ার ব্যাবস্থা করতে হবে । দীর্ঘদিন যাবং তারা এখানে থেকেই রুটি রোজগার করছে, এখান থেকে অন্যত্র নিয়ে পুনর্বাসন দিলে তারা তাদের কাজকর্ম থেকে বিছ্যুত হবে । এইসব পরিবারগুলির জন্য বিশেষ অনুরোধ করছি,যাতে তাদের প্রতি বিশয দৃষ্টি দেওয়া হয় ।

Figure 2.5. A letter of the Bahirdoba Kendriya Bastuhara Samity.

But the process of granting legal titles to their plots is still far from complete. There is a certain ambiguity regarding the exact amount of land individual camp families are officially entitled to keep. This has created frequent grounds for disputes. The Review Committee's report (1971) was challenged and stalled through the court case mentioned above. At present there are no public documents available on the formula to be adopted for plot allocation at the Bahirdoba camps. I tried to gather the new rules through my interaction with the camp families. Below is a chart of the different formulas for plot allotment communicated to me.

Table 2.3. Different formula for plot allocation at the Bahirdoba camps.

Source	Categories acknowledged	Amount of land allocated per plot holder	Remarks
Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, 1971	CDC holders	845 square metres	This was challenged and stalled through a verdict of the Calcutta High Court.

Pramatha (camp no J) and Sobhanath (camp no B) (Also repeated in a letter of the BKBS, dated 20.6.2011)	a) CDC holders b) ‘Without’	a) 676 square metres/ or 1183 square metres (for bigger families) b) 338 square metres or less	Both of them confirmed that this formula was applied only in some instances and had to be abandoned at other camps due to difficulties in ground level implementation.
Guruchand (camp no 9)	a) CDC holders b) Without	As per present occupation of individual plot holders	

The rules mentioned in Table 2.3 are for the eleven camps. For the Shulumari squatters’ colony next to the camps, the amount of land earmarked for individual plot holders is slightly higher, since the Shulumari colony is still within a village panchayat while the camps have now come under municipal jurisdiction. But the exact rules are again unclear. What can be safely presumed is that there is a lot of *ambiguity* and *flexibility* regarding the rules. This legal ambiguity has created loopholes through which informal governance works.

Figure 2.6. Inside camp I.

Figure 2.7. A new construction is taking place in camp I.

The Matua Mahasangha, which is active in the camp area, has been helping the incoming migrants with places of settlement, identity cards, and supporting them in their fight for plot regularisation. A large majority of the people by the canal bank are followers of the Matua *dharma* (religion). Naren who is a member of the Matua Mahasangha Bahirdoba Block committee, reflected during a discussion

> …the people of the 11 camps have more or less settled, and are not directly interested in any struggle any more… but the larger fight of refugees from East Bengal, who are not only in Bengal but scattered all over India has not stopped… refugees still continue to come and their fight is against the Citizenship Act of 2003… (Naren, Personal Interview, February 2016)

More than half of the camp population lack titles to their plots and sit on disputed land.[22] They lack the social and cultural capital needed to negotiate the state bureaucratic apparatus and tilt the ambiguities in their favour. They have not been officially evicted, but they negotiate endemic conditions of displaceability.

2.4 Negotiating 'informal' governance: displacement within a continuum

We may briefly pause to reiterate the process of state initiated informalisation for the dalit East Bengali refugees who were initially recognised as ‘displaced persons’ with some entitlements. Having been brought at the Bahirdoba area with a promise of rehabilitation, they were denied resettlement after the completion of the canal renovation project. They became illegal squatters at the camp site. Afterwards for a decade the camp refugees faced erasure from metropolitan planning. When the state revisited them in the 1970s with a new plan for regularisation, a somewhat similar process of *deliberate* violation of the same plans are at work to render these groups informal. Legal entitlements to their small homestead plots, or their right to shelter is the heart of such violation. It fosters the condition of displaceability.

The informal state actively fosters internal differentiations among the groups in order to manage the purposeful ambiguities of its plans on the ground. A small section of the camp refugees has acquired education, tapped the benefits of caste based reservation through continued struggle and become established in life. This section also provides continued leadership to the ongoing struggle of the camp refugees for regularisation of their plots, for securing identification documents and for their demand of citizenship. A section of the well to do *namasudra* refugees has emerged as a rentier class. They have benefitted from the unequal distribution of political patronage by the informal state. The rentier-refugees co-write the processes of the informal. While these are long term mechanisms, inequalities and dispossession have accelerated from the 1990s with the initiation of neoliberalisation. The area has seen a flurry of building activities and a concomitant rise in land value. From the 1990s, another ubiquitous agent of the private state in third world urban contexts, the ‘land sharks’, have acquired a significant presence. It would be a mistake to see these groups as separate from the state machinery. The machinery of governance operates as a privatised and informal entity through the cooperation of its local representatives.

We may peruse the functioning of this informal modality of governance through its local agents, the rentier-refugees and land dealers. A very small number of refugees have become affluent through political patronage, bought up lands sold by poorer refugees and emerged as benefactors for less privileged groups. These refugees function as rentiers and dealers in land. They wield considerable power in the locality. Two of my interlocutors belong to this group. Rajan (camp G) was initially a member of the INC. After a new political party, the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) came to power in West Bengal in 2011, Rajan has changed affiliation to the AITC. He lives on the top floor of a two-storey house, and gives out the ground floor on rent. Shyam, an inhabitant of the Shulumari

colony, is a long-term member of the CPI(M), and a 'big man' in the area. He owns a house and adjacent lands and rents them out to multiple lessees. These new rentiers hold more land than others, which is legally ambiguous. Both hold leading positions in the local committees of the camps, are literate, and exercise control over 'papers' through the committees. Shyam frankly discussed with me how ambiguous regulations work out on the ground

> …by this time, as per UCRC (United Central Refugee Council, the most important left led state wide refugee organisation in West Bengal) regulations nobody could possess more than 5 *katha* land in urban areas close to Calcutta… AS (initials of a well-known CPI(M) refugee leader) advised… that we should divide the 1 bigha 5 *katha* land among our children in order to reduce the amount of land per plot holder… 10 years passed… by this time the situation had changed… AS advised… since the government policy did not permit granting of titles of water bodies to the refugees…to fill up the marshes… many local ponds were filled up… (Shyam, Personal Interview, February 2016)

As new regulations are formulated, ways are simultaneously devised to get around them, with active support from state ministers. Needless to say, such distribution of favour operates selectively. It is purported to create a strata of local party loyalists who would serve as local agents to ensure electoral success for the political party in power. They exercise control over the poorer refugees. A majority of the refugee families in the area are day labourers with income levels below the poverty line. A considerable number of them have been forced to sell parts or the whole of their initially squatted lands and move away further to the peripheries. Shyam reflected

> … people started selling land in the face of poverty… these were non-judicial
>
> I: how much did they sell for?
>
> Shyam: about Rs 400 per *katha*… many sold land…
>
> I: who were buying up land here?
>
> Shyam: many people are still arriving from Bangladesh… relatives of the camp refugees from Bangladesh continue to migrate… land is sold to them… the majority of those who have purchased land came after 1971, a handful of families have also come from other states in India… from Bihar, Nadia, Murshidabad… from Canning or Sundarbans etc… they come because the area is close to Calcutta and it's easy to find work here… now land is being sold at Rs 8 lakhs per *katha*… (Shyam, Personal Interview, February 2016)

What this account omits is that transactions in land do not take place directly between the owners and the new settlers. Land is 'freed up' and bought by 'big men' in the locality and sold or rented out, and control is exercised over the new migrants.[23] From the 1990s the presence of land mafias has grown in the area. They have become a ubiquitous presence in Calcutta's erstwhile refugee colony and camp areas, and are locally known as promoters. They function with support from the political parties in power. Their roles vary in different colonies and camps depending on the class and caste background and bargaining power of the refugees. In areas like the Bahirdoba camps, they are involved in land grab and their role is violent. They operate with active cooperation from sections of the rentier-refugees. The latter share social relations with the camp inhabitants, which is important in enabling land transactions to take place through 'persuasion.' I will cite an instance of how they have acquired the power to *displace* and also *replace*. The house of one CDC holding refugee family at camp C was forcefully taken over by a builder with help from the police. Having been evicted, the family now lives in a makeshift shanty some distance away from their original plot. Their Cash Dole Cards and the sympathy of their old neighbours have not been sufficient to save them from eviction by the promoter.[24] Not only are they involved in displacement, but they are also engaged in active land colonisation. Thus at camp C, a small number of huts have been erected by a local land dealer on what was previously a playground for the camp. These families now exist in passive tension with the old camp refugees (Shibdas, Personal Interview, January 2017).

In incidents of conflict over land, the police administration ensures the unimpeded functioning of the informal state. As already noted, the poorer refugees lack the social and cultural capital to navigate the bureaucracy and the administrative machinery. They are disadvantaged in situations of conflict and often face false criminalisation. During an unrecorded and candid conversation, a female camp inhabitant narrated to me how many people in the area, including her own husband have unfair police cases against them. This has become a usual situation for many. Numerous court cases against the refugees and land disputes related to the schools, water bodies and common areas of the camps have kept the settlements and their inhabitants unsettled.

In place of horizontal solidarities which could have been forged between the refugees and the local peasants, then, mechanisms of informal governance have engendered vertical alliances on the lines of patron-client relations. The population within the camp area have become heterogenous through reverse land colonisation by the government in collusion with the market forces of property. A number of the old camp refugees have been directly and indirectly displaced. New 'migrants' who completely lack documents and are more dependent on local patrons have taken their place.

Incidents of direct and forceful displacement like the one noted above, are relatively rare. Dislocations work through more insidious means, whereby the refugees are 'persuaded' to leave 'voluntarily'. But informal spaces are also heterogenous and non-integrated grey-spaces. Power balances are far from settled here. They retain sufficient ambiguity where dissonance can surface.

2.5 Grey-spaces and heterogenous selves

Seven decades have passed since the creation of the camps, but intense social stigma continues to attach to the camp spaces. Kartik, a local CPI leader mentioned earlier, who lives just next to the Bahirdoba camps and has worked for refugee resettlement, expressed his disdain of 'camp-culture' in unambiguous terms

> …the refugees work as day labourers… the women serve as domestic helps… what do they know of culture? … I visit these areas sometimes… the way they live is unimaginable… curtains hang from their rooms…
>
> I: would you not call this a failure of government rehabilitation?
>
> Kartik: it was beyond the means of the government to take care of such large numbers… added to that was the corruption of government officials… the main problem is poverty… now every household has a motor cycle… do you know where these motor cyclists go? … to those curtain hung rooms… (Kartik, Personal Interview, December 2015)

The reference here is to prostitution at the camps. Discourses on the camp spaces as breeding grounds for 'low' culture, immorality and criminality ceaselessly work to delegitimise the refugee dwellings. Desire to integrate with the mainstream of state and society, which is the predominant framework for understanding different conceptions of citizenship/subject position, even in new formulations of citizenship from below (Holston 2008), does not capture the whole experience of inhabitants of such 'places of the displaced'. I find Yiftachel's formulation of 'grey-space' relevant for understanding the everyday forms of bargain that unfold at such peripheral spaces. Grey-spaces are positioned 'between the lightness of legality/approval/safety and the darkness of eviction/destruction/death' (Yiftachel 2009, 250). Grey-spaces may be imposed from above, but they are heterogenous and volatile spaces, never amenable to total control.

If the initial years of the refugees' struggle had been marked by aspirations of integration, decades of life under the shadow of violence have engendered a certain lack of affect. Guruchand's observation may be repeated here

> …partitions have taken place, governments have changed, the country has developed, but people from *opar Bangla* (the other side of Bengal) are still shedding tears… (Guruchand, Personal Interview, February 2016)

Any straight forward reading of a desire for integration will be misleading here. Under conditions of prolonged violence, patterns of identification are often channelled away from the state. Grey-spaces of informality may be imposed from 'above', but their very unsettledness allows for a fluidity and ambiguity where dissonance can surface. These spaces of 'permanent temporariness' are intertwined with strategies of identity transformation premised on an autonomous disengagement from the socio-political mainstream. Articulations of grey-space are evasive and abound in contradictions. New affiliations at the ex-camp dwellings reflect some of these tendencies.

Of late two all India organisations have gained a strong presence in the camp areas, the Matua Mahasangha and an all India refugee organisation called the Nikhil Bharat Bangali Udbastu Samanway Samity (NIBBUSS), created in 2005. NIBBUSS was formed in the city of Nagpur in Maharashtra in 2005 in the context of their agitation against of the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003. NIBBUSS has branches in 14 Indian states. Both organisations are concerned with the wellbeing of lower caste and lower class East Bengali refugees in India, and the Bengali speaking dalit communities more broadly. Their avowed organisational agendas are embedded within the mainstream nationalist paradigm of the day. The NBBUSS aims to secure national citizenship for the refugees who continue to migrate from Bangladesh to India. The Matua Mahasangha has significant stakes in electoral politics in West Bengal. The Mahasangha has become an all India organisation and has strong political support among the *namasudra* and the Matua community and dalit East Bengali refugees scattered all over India. More is discussed about their politics around citizenship for dalit East Bengali refugees in chapter four. Here I will discuss some tendencies initiated by these two organisations among dalit migrant groups that retain room for deviance from their main political demands. This trend has become somewhat dormant in the past one year or so in the face of increasingly communally charged politics around migrant citizenship.

Both organisations have cross border linkages, including physical networks of connection and discursive articulations. The Matuas have organisation and followers in India and Bangladesh. Times

of festivity (especially during the annual Matua festival known as Mahabaruni, simultaneously celebrated in Thakurnagar in India and Orakandi in Bangladesh) see small scale cross border movements.[25] The NIBBUSS draws considerable organisational support and followers from the Matuas. The two organisations work in close collaboration. The Bahirdoba branch committees of the NIBBUSS and the Mahasangha are active in the camp area.

Two important secular festivals have been initiated in the area under the joint initiative of the Mahasangha and the NIBBUSS that indicate a new form of socialisation. First is the celebration of Bahirdoba's local Martyr's Day. While days of 'national' significance like India's Independence Day are still observed, the celebration of 26 June, the day when camp refugees died in police firing during their *anashan anodolan* (hunger strike) evokes a lot more enthusiasm. In 2012 *shahid bedis* (martyrs' pillars) were posted with assistance from the NIBBUSS, in the name of the seven *shahids* (martyrs) of the camps. It marked the beginning of the annual observance of the *shahid dibas* (martyr's day) on 26 June. This ceremony has a special relevance in the social life of the camp refugees. This was repeatedly emphasised to me during discussions with my interlocutors. The *shahid bedis* were shown to me with a certain pride. My own participation in Bahirdoba *shahid dibas* on 26 June 2019 revealed its importance to me. On the day, a large group of refugees assembled at the bust of a martyr at camp no J in the morning. Camp no J is home to one of the martyrs. His bust has been posted next to a tea stall. The ceremony begun by paying respect to him, by garlanding and putting flowers. Speeches were delivered remembering the camp refugees' long struggle for rehabilitation. Afterwards the group moved to another location at camp no G where a fight between the camp refugees and the police had taken place in 1961. A martyr's pillar stands on the spot where a few camp refugees were shot to death. They garlanded the martyr's pillar and paid tribute. The small but passionate ceremony included recitations and speeches remembering their sacrifice. The place vibrated with the slogan শহিদের রক্ত, হবে নাকো ব্যর্থ! (the blood of the martyr will not go in vein).

Figure 2.8. A myrter's bust at camp J.

Another secular day now celebrated is the international mother's language day on 21 February. *Bhasa Dibas* is observed to commemorate East Pakistan's Bengali language movement of 1952. There is an attempt to discursively connect the Bengali refugees' struggle scattered all over India with the *Bhasha Andolan* of Bangladesh.[26] In course of the ceremony, the camp refugees remember the *shahids* of the *Bhasha Andolan*, and their own martyrs in their struggle against the state (Mandal 2015). The new ceremonies started at the camp areas, almost half a century after the dwellings were

created, clearly involve a new way of remembering their own past and in the process the articulation of a new collective.

A local leader of the Bahirdoba camps (who is also a member of the NIBBUSS), Mr Mandal, has elicited this collective imagination in his writings. He is a poet and an activist. In his memoir, *Khandito Desher Sangrami Bangali* (Rebellious Bengalis of a Divided Land)[27] he has recounted important episodes of their struggle for rehabilitation. The memoir also speaks of a wider struggle of the Bengalis. Mandal has used the trope of *sangram* (battle) and construed an image of *sangrami bangali* who continue to fight the malefactions of a prolonged partition. In creating a historical lineage for the *sangrami bangali* Mandal has invoked the Bengal renaissance of the nineteenth century and Bengal's contribution to the anti-colonial nationalist movement on the one hand, and the *Bhasa Andolan* of 1952 and the Bangladesh war of independence of 1971 on the other (Mandal 2015, 7). The Bengalis he is writing for are not confined to religious or national boundaries. All through Mandal's recollection there is an insistence that their struggle has not stopped with decolonisation and national independence, but continues to this day. For him the protracted fight of the Bengalis spans national boundaries. One of his poems on the *Bhasa Dibas* vividly portrays the collective imagination

একুশে মানে রক্তে রাঙানো ঢাকা,
ন বছর পরে শিলচরে ছবি আঁকা

সেথায় ক্ষুব্ধ এগারোটি তাজা প্রাণ

বাংলা ভাষা রক্ষায় দিল নিঃশেষে বলিদান (2015, 47)

[21 February means blood tinged Dhaka
Nine years pass, the stage shifts to Shilchar

Eleven young lives are sacrificed

To safeguard the Bengali language] (translation mine)

Two cities which lie across national borders, Dhaka in Bangladesh and Silchar in India, are discursively connected through the collective fight of a beleaguered Bengali people against the unjust post-colonial nation states of the region. This collective vision draws upon a shared Bengali language and a shared experience of marginalisation of the lower class and caste people. The initiation of new commemorative practices by the two organisations at the camp-sites, and the

imagination of a new collective, provide a new identity script for the refugees, based upon a pan Indian and cross border Bengaliness. The vision of this new subjectivity comes as a challenge to the mainstream normative Hindu Indian national-citizen-subject. It is not to suggest that this imagination has taken deep root among all camp inhabitants and is mobilised in a direct fight against the Indian state. Articulations of grey-spaces are never as clear cut. Indeed, certain counter trends are also present (as discussed in chapter four). Nevertheless, that such imaginations have generated interest and participation is itself significant and implies a move away from state-centric subjectivities.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked into the experience of prolonged dislocation of a group of dalit refugees. The attempt has been to deconstruct the categorical binaries of refugees and migrants and take into account multiple dislocations marginal people experience within a single lifetime. The dalit refugees studied here were displaced amidst communal violence in East Bengal in the early 1950s and initially recognised as 'displaced persons.' A small section of the dalit refugees have benefitted from the status of 'displaced persons', achieved upward mobility through a hard and long drawn struggle. But a significant number of them have gone through a deliberate process of informalisation, which has eroded their legal status as 'displaced persons' and 'ex-camp refugees' through the insidious workings of informal governance. They have become mixed with 'migrants' who continue to pour in and live unsettled lives. I have traced how protracted displacement operates through processes of informalisation and grey-spacing engendered by post-colonial governmentality. In place of direct violence, lower caste groups are unsettled through insidious mechanisms of criminalisation, pauperisation, social segregation, and often 'persuasion' to leave. Such 'places of the displaced' exist at the peripheries, not in different stages of linear progression from segregation to integration, but in a state of perpetual negotiation and overlapping webs of expansion and contraction. Displaced groups live and wage non-heroic battles against ever shifting everyday forms of violence. The chapter emphasises that grey-spaces are actively fostered by the dominant power regime, but they are never amenable to full control. Such fluid spaces generate alternate aspirations and sense of belonging among inhabitants. In these heterogenous and fluid grey-spaces, identity projects shift away from the state. Such aspirations are not clearly articulated, and cannot be understood within frameworks of legal citizenship, or even newer notions of 'citizenship from below', which nonetheless are underscored by a desire to integrate. Grey-spaces generate alternate subjectivities and alternate aspirations of belonging which find ways to look away

from the state and slowly nibble away at the top down vision of mainstream normative national-citizen-subject.

Notes

[1] A *bargadar* is a sharecropper who cultivates the land of the owner on the condition of delivering a share of the produce of such land to the owner.

[2] The Tebhaga movement was a peasant agitation initiated in Bengal by the Kisan Sabha, the peasant wing of the Community Party of India in 1946. All through the colonial period the share-croppers in Bengal used to pay half of their harvest to their landlords. The Tebhaga movement placed the demand that the landlord's share of the produce in share cropping arrangement will be reduced to one third.

[3] For a detailed discussion of different government categorisation of the Hindu East Bengali refugees and statistics of migration, see (Chakrabarti 1999, 234-238).

[4] Government Sponsored colonies.

[5] The government had to resort to the West Bengal Land Development and Planning Act, 1948 in order to requisition land for refugee rehabilitation. While the Act faced challenges in the court of law, it also had to cope with extra-legal opposition which often came via indirect means from powerful landed interests. They often had connection at the level of ministers and MLAs of the state, or even at the centre. The power of a section of the Congress ministry were brought to bear against land acquisition at controlled rates and the rehabilitation department had to abandon acquisition schemes on many occasions. The contemporary commissioner and secretary of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation department of the government of West Bengal, Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, observed in his memoir how land acquisition faced challenges from different quarters. He recounted his experience of acquiring fallow lands in Laskarpur village under the Sonarpur police station in 24 Parganas, where he faced opposition as many as six times, after which he finally had to yield to the landowner (Bandyopadhyay 1970, 187).

[6] For a detailed discussion of the different types of government schemes see (Chakrabarti 1999, 240-250).

[7] The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) presented an Alternate Plan for Rehabilitation inside West Bengal on August 1958. This was a comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation of refugees through the economic regeneration of the whole of West Bengal. The surplus land made available through the scheme were to be used for the settlement not only of the refugees, but also a large section of the landless in the state. The plan was not seriously considered by the government (Chakrabarti 1999, 193).

[8] In the 1950s, the broad area of the camp site contained villages interspersed by paddy fields, water bodies and sewage farms. A large part of the area has urbanised over the years and come under the jurisdiction of a local municipality in 1994, while one part, the Shulumari colony still remains under a village panchayat. From the 1990s the area has seen rapid filling up of water bodies (often illegally) and semi-legal building activities.

[9] 20 *katha* is roughly equal to 1 *bigha* and 2.5 *bigha*s are equal to 1 acre or 4047 square metres.

[10] This rough idea of the local landholding pattern of the area is gained thought a discussion with Kartik, a local leader of the CPI who was also a formative member of the local peasant wing of the CPI in the area from the 1950s (Kartik, Personal Interview, December 2015).

[11] Jotedars owned relatively sizeable portions of land and their land tenure status stood in contrast to those of under-ryots and *bargadars* who were landless or land-poors.

[12] This incident was recalled to me by most of my interlocutors at Bahirdoba.

[13] Dipesh Chakrabarty has traced such middle-class refugee remembrance of the partition, from a group of autobiographical Bengali essays authored by middle-class East Bengali refugees written in the spirit of mourning. His study shows how these recollections are permeated by a strong nostalgia for their left behind villages in East Bengal (Chakrabarty 2000a).

[14] Sen's essay on *namasudra* refugee settlers in Andamans also highlight how dalit memories of the partition differ from middle-class memories of the event (Sen 2011).

[15] Most of my interviewees repeated this experience. Thus, Pramatha of camp no J, was first taken to Salanpur camp, Bardhaman with his family, and from there to Dakshin Sol, Medinipur. Sobhanath of camp no B, as also Pramatha of camp no J had stayed at Ghusuri camp for sometime, after which their families were taken to Baikanthapur of Hooghly where they stayed for about 8-9 months. They were eventually brought to Bahirdoba. Sunil of camp no B and his family were first put in a camp in Shalbani, from where they were moved to Pashkura, and eventually brought to Bahirdoba.

[16] In July 1952, the UCRC submitted a memorandum to the government criticising precisely this attitude of the government. It recommended that: i) the work site camps should be located at the site of rehabilitation, ii) the families should be rehabilitated at the site after the completion of the development work, iii) the refugees should be acquainted with the whole scheme and finally, iv) fare wage rate, and suitable work should be provided to the refugee families (Chakrabarti 1999, 218).

[17] The Republic Day honours the date on which the Constitution of India came into effect on 26 January 1950. It is a national holiday.

[18] Recollections of *namasudra* life in East Bengal which include experiences of caste oppression, social segregation and movements in the face of scarcity and want can be found in the memoir of Manoranjan Byapari (2012).

[19] Two important township projects conceived during this period were the Salt Lake township (south east of the camps) and the Lake Town project (west of the camps). Both the projects excluded the refugees.

[20] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the area saw the setting up of a third upper and middle-class planned township built under a joint public private partnership, the Rajarhat township which entailed many displacements and proved contentious. For a detailed discussion of the discontents around the Rajarhat township project see (I. Dey, Samaddar, and Sen 2013).

[21] Calcutta's western boundary is marked by the river Ganga. For the past few decades the city has expanded primarily towards the south and the east. Such expansion often takes place by displacing people from

these semi rural areas which are then brought within suburban expansion projects. The eastern parts of Calcutta are marsh land and form part of the city's natural drainage system. It is in these areas that the displaced people move to live there for some years, until a new development project arrives to evict them again. The process repeats in cycles and such displacement often takes place without any rehabilitation for the displaced.

[22] Among the inhabitants of the eleven camps, only the refugees of camp no E have received legal titles to their plots. The process of legalisation is incomplete in the rest of the area.

[23] Similar views were shared with me during an interview with Shibdas (Shibdas, Personal Interview, January 2017).

[24] The original owner of the plot, Bishnu is now an old man. He used to work as a day labourer. His son drives an autorickshaw in the locality and his daughter-in-law, Lakshmi is a housewife. He and Lakshmi shared their experiences, of how a local builder came down on them with the police on the basis of a forged court order. They had hired the service of a lawyer to fight a court case against the eviction. But the lawyer took advantage of their lack of literacy and cheated them of money. They lack the financial means to continue the court case any longer. They live in a makeshift shanty (Lakshmi and Bishnu, Group Interview, January 2017).

[25] The majority of my interlocutors at the Bahirdoba camps go to Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas on the occasion of the Mahabaruni. Only one of my interviewees, Rina who lives next to the camps revealed how she travels to Orakandi in Bangladesh without a passport at the time of the Mahabaruni (Rina, Personal Interview, November 2017). It indicates a small trickle of migration during times of festivity.

[26] The NIBBUSS has initiated the celebration of *Bhasa Dibas* on 21 February in the refugee settlements all over India.

[27] Mandal's memoir contains a recollection of his personal experience as a member of the NIBBUSS. While one strand of the NIBBUSS is becoming increasingly anti-Muslim, such communal sentiments are clearly absent from Mandal's recollection. Here their cross-border connections are more clearly imagined and articulated.