In the shadow of displaceability: refugee and migrants in suburban Calcutta
Mukherjee, A.

Chapter Three

Displaceability and mobile bodily politics: the experience of urban 'homeless'

In this chapter I am exploring the struggle for spaces of livelihood of impoverished rural migrants coming to the Calcutta metropolitan agglomeration from the countryside of Bengal and their negotiation of myriad forms of displacements. These groups have faced discursive erasure in migration histories and policy circles in West Bengal, in-spite of a growing numerical presence within the Calcutta metropolitan area from the late 1930s. As this thesis has emphasised, in Bengal a certain history of migration resulting from the partition of 1947 has been privileged over other histories of dislocations in academic literature as well as policy circles. Barring a few exceptions there is a certain lack of interest in contemporary forms of displacements in West Bengal unless it is connected to movement across the international border. This indicates an academic consensus that barring the steady movement of population from the other side of the border, largescale dislocations of population are not a significant occurrence in the region. As I have reiterated, contemporary modalities of dislocations in post-colonial contexts are better understood as *endemic* rather than exceptional or *climactic* experiences. The endemic approach puts low scale and insidiously violent nature of dislocations in the region in clearer relief and highlights their all-pervasiveness. In chapter two I have traced the *endemic* rather than the *climactic* aspects of the partition of 1947, by highlighting the protracted experiences of dislocation of dalit East Bengali refugees. In this chapter I explore how another socially disadvantaged group, the rural landless migrating to the urban agglomeration around Calcutta live through endemic displacements. I study their experience through the notion of displaceability. I trace how displaceability operates with this group, first, through a deliberate politics of (non)enumeration and invisiblisation, and from the 1990s parallelly, through a hypervisibility generated by a developmental gaze that construes them as 'encroachers' and renders them vulnerable to dislocations. I explore the functioning of displaceability and the kind of unequal political exchanges it involves for the peripatetic rural migrants. Finally, I also look into modes of migrant resistance to such processes through a form of mobile and bodily politics.

The movement of the rural landless explored here do not follow the set patterns of long term or circular migration of industrial labour which have periodic rhythms. The groups studied here are not part of Calcutta's industrial labour force. They are of an itinerant sort who feed into the city's informal economy. Their movements are sporadic, in the nature of back and forth, and lack the rhythm of an identifiable pattern. In policy circles such migrations do not figure unless when

recognised as 'distress migration' in extreme famine like conditions. These population flows are seen as 'low quality migration' leading to 'low quality urbanization' (Sekhar Mukherjee 2001). The term 'distress' reveals a tendency to depict the migrants as hapless 'victims'. There is also a tone of emergency attached to the term 'distress' which seeks to construe the nature of these movements as *exceptional* rather than normal. My study moves away from such a portrayal. I have used the frame of "peripatetic/itinerant" to understand how such small movements/displacements work as *a lifelong mode* for a large multitude of the poor rural migrants.[1] The constant shifting of these dwellers highlights the need to look at displacement from the perspective of mobile groups. These floating groups negotiate the systemic violence associated with lifelong 'distress' to the best of their ability and in their myriad everyday movements volition and force interchange meaning. They often resort to small (sometimes long) movements to offset socio-economic vulnerabilities, while harbouring aspirations of a more settled existence. At the same time, their movements are used to build a case against their right to shelter at the urban margins by the metropolitan authorities, as they go against the grains of a bourgeoise society where sedentarism is the norm of the mainstream. The interplay of volition and force, are juxtaposed in a tensed relation within my usage of the term peripatetic. Resorting to the notion of peripatetic, my chapter explores negotiations of displacement from the perspective of *mobility* rather than *settlement* and uprooting of it, where the boundaries of voluntary and forced movement blur and displaceability assumes a more everyday and insidiously violent nature. This marks an important point of departure from the existing literature on displacement. Discussions of displacement often relate to uprooting of *settled* groups, and the experience of displacement is portrayed as a rupture. Peripatetic migrants are left out of the discussions of displacement, as their right to places are ambiguous from a sedentarist perspective.[2] I attempt to emphasise that displacement assumes a more insidious, violent and everyday form for peripatetic groups precisely because they fall short of sedentary standards. Their experiences of displacement are not easily classifiable in the existing binaries within which displacement studies are framed.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the nature of a continued rural-urban movement of these migrants from the late 1930s till the present and a concomitant politics of (non)enumeration. While they have been rendered invisible in policy documents for long periods, I emphasise that these groups have been significantly present in the urban landscape of the city at least from the late 1930s till the present. While they are not counted, they are *seen* through images of illegality and crime in semi-official discourses which render them vulnerable to displacements. In the next section I explore the operationalisation of displaceability, by looking at repeated eviction drives and underscore that

it does not entail a complete exclusion, but an inclusive exclusion. In the final section I suggest that under the condition of displaceability the migrants are coerced into a political participation which reduces them to mere bodily existence. The migrants in turn negotiate dislocations through a bodily politics.

3.1 Between invisibility and hypervisibility: migration and a politics of (non)enumeration

In chapter one, I have dwelled on continued rural urban migration during the colonial period, and stressed that the movement of famished rural peasants to the city significantly increased from the late 1930s due to dislocations around the Second World War and forces of decolonisation. As already noted, they have faced discursive erasure in the colonial surveys and reports except for occasional notes taken during times construed as exceptions e.g., famines. Surveys and data on rural-urban movement linked to rural dispossession within Bengal are almost non-existent. I suggest that this non enumeration is deliberate and political. The attempt is to render the migrants invisible. Along with this, from the 1990s, a new developmental gaze has returned to them, generating for their persons and their dwellings a certain hypervisibility through an excess of circulating images as 'encroachers', 'pollutants', 'criminals' and 'infiltrators' as discussed shortly. This delegitimises their claims to the city. Conjoined, these processes foster the condition of displaceability.

Researches on rural poverty based on estimates of the size of rural landholding and presence of agricultural wage labourers (taken to be an indicator of rural poverty) provide a glimpse into the unsettled conditions in rural areas of Bengal and small movements in/out of poverty stricken areas. Existing surveys on rural poverty highlight an increase in the number of rural wage labourers as a class of rural proletariat who had no control over means of production and labour processes and were dependent on wage for survival (van Schendel and Faraizi 1984; Bose 1986) from the time of decolonisation. The last all Bengal rural survey before independence was carried out in 1944 with an aim to investigate the nature of the famine of 1943 and it's after effects. It found that 34% of all rural families had depended either partially or entirely on wage labour. After independence their numbers would rise considerably in both sides of divided Bengal. Two all India Agricultural Labour Enquiries carried out in 1950-51 and 1956-57 found the proportion of agricultural labour households in West Bengal to be 25 ad 24 percent of the total rural population respectively. The Indian National Sample Survey carried out in 1972-73 reported that farm wage labourers constitute 33% of the West Bengal's rural labour force. According to this survey, regional differences within West Bengal had become negligible. In the 1970s, over one third of all rural households in West Bengal were

dependent entirely on wage labour and the figures for the south and western districts of West Bengal was close to 40% (van Schendel and Faraizi, 1984, 40-45). These surveys, though scattered, can be used as the basis for a rough estimate of the existence of a considerable number of rural proletariat in the countryside who had no control over land and other means of production and survived on meagre wage income.

Apart from rise in the number of agricultural labourers, figures of rural landholding also show a similar trend. Zamindari landholding system was abolished all over India immediately after independence. In the partitioned state of West Bengal, the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act promulgated in 1953 introduced zamindari abolition. But its *de facto* effects on the patterns of landholding and redistribution of land remained minimal. The dominant agrarian class of *jotdars*[3] continued to enjoy a predominant position in the Bengal countryside, successfully evading land ceiling legislations at least for the next two decades. The number of rural proletariat continued to grow.

After 1967 some measures of land redistribution were effected with the coming of the United Front rule[4] in the state, for two short terms in 1967 and 1969, and then again when a new left coalition government known as the Left Front came back to power in West Bengal in 1977 for a longer term. A land reform programme was orchestrated by the Left Front, known as the Operation Barga.[5] Whether things changed for better or for worse after the land reforms initiated by the Left Front government is not a direct concern of the present discussion. Those supporting the left regime, in academic as well as in policy circles generally agree to the beneficial effects of land redistribution conducted by the Left Front, resulting in increase in agrarian productivity and reduction of rural poverty. But those taking a contrary position point out that rural development in West Bengal has taken place largely through the exclusion of the rural poor. The primary beneficiaries of Left Front's reforms have been the middle peasants who have also come to dominate the village *panchayats*[6] and channelled development resources in their own favour. It is often pointed out that the middle peasants have benefitted at the cost of the rural landless. Generally while macro studies point to a reduction in both rural and urban poverty, village level micro studies have often shown a counter trend, and existence of persistent poverty (Bhattacharya 1993; Mallick 2008; Roy 2003). The existing surveys indicate that the size of the landholdings redistributed through the Operation Barga remained small. These were often homestead land, or small plots of cultivable land not economically viable. While rural poverty generates lively academic interest, dislocations which result from poverty are not studied in detail. They are not of interest to studies of dislocations.

Accounts of rural migrants who come to the city environment are sketchy at best. They live in various informal dwellings. The city's informal dwellings have achieved different degrees of formality, permanence and visibility in its urban landscape depending on the resource and the history of the movement of the dwellers. Some such hierarchically connected dwelling and livelihood spaces that have emerged are the registered slums, refugee squatters' colonies, informal squats, *khalpar* (dwellings by the banks of sewerage canals) and *foot* (pavement dwellings). In the early twentieth century, informal settlements in Calcutta grew in close connection to the city's suburban industries and housed industrial labour migrants. These settlements came to be known as *bustees* or slums. For a long time, the *bustees* had no legal recognition and remained informal. The only rights recognised were those of the landlords of the slums.[7] Left political mobilisation from the 1940s in the slums through their organisations and associated NGO activism[8] have achieved some success and resulted in the formalisation of a large number of *bustees* in course of the first few decades after independence.[9] Many of the *bustees* have now been registered with the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC), acquired stability of tenure and protection against evictions. Other than the *bustees*, another type of informal settlement created in large numbers after the partition in 1947 were 'refugee colonies' or 'squatters' colonies'. These were created by middle-class East Bengali refugees all over West Bengal including Calcutta. After decades of struggle, sections of the resourceful middle-class East Bengali 'refugee colonies' have also been regularised.[10] Together, these two types of settlements have, metonymically encompassed the city's proletariats and benefitted from 'improvement' carried out by the metropolitan planning bodies like the CMC, the CMDA and the CIT. They divide between them a large number of labouring classes who have secured some form of housing rights and urban citizenship. Much of the existing municipal surveys and planning documents are focused on the two groups, the registered slums and refugee colonies. From the time of the Bengal famine, the very poor among Bengal's rural migrants have also continued to come to the urban area around Calcutta, started living on Calcutta's streets and swelled the ranks of its informal settlements. They have built their makeshift shanties in marginal spaces along Calcutta's suburban railway lines (locally known as *railpar*), the banks of its sewerage canals (locally known as *khalpar*), under footbridges and sidewalks. The dwellings of the poor rural migrants at *khalpar* and *foot* have remained largely informal and unmapped. There have been scant attempts of surveying these areas and their inclusion into government schemes.

If we turn to the enumeration of the footloose rural migrants in the Calcutta metropolitan area, their first documentation took place during the Bengal famine, through a survey carried out by a team of

anthropologists of the Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta in 1943. As already noted in chapter one, they were derogatorily categorised as 'sick destitutes' in the survey. The government policy was to disperse them from the city. The survey showed, that the 'destitutes' were cultivators, farm labourers (40%) and non-agricultural day labourers. They belonged to the lower class and castes (Das 1949, 51-68). The Bengal Destitutes Persons Ordinance gave power to the state to round up 'destitutes' and confine them outside the city, to 'homes' to be re-made into useful citizens. But many eluded confinement and remained. For the next two decades in the post-independence period, no survey on the trends of migration from the poverty stricken areas of rural Bengal, or on Calcutta's 'homeless' population was undertaken. The only officially acknowledged category of floating rural migrants remained 'destitutes' and 'vagrants' (other than the census category of 'homeless'). Records of the CMC during this period show a growing concern with people living and dying on Calcutta's streets. As noted in chapter one, the entire decade of the 1950s saw a steady rise in the number of deaths of 'paupers', that is, unclaimed dead bodies lying on the streets of Calcutta, to be cremated at CMC's expense.

The decennial censuses provide some information on floating rural migrants under the official category of 'homeless'. From 2001 onwards they have been paradoxically categorised as 'houseless households'. In census operation, the enumeration of population takes place through survey of households. In the first phase of operation, that is, in the Houselisting and Housing census phase, the census houses and households are numbered and listed for enumeration. The makeshift dwellings of various types where itinerant rural migrants live, do not match the census definition of a 'house'. They are completely left out of the first phase. Actual enumeration of population takes place in the second phase. In this phase an attempt is made to include within counting the 'homeless' population. Their counting is done in a single night's enumeration by appointing special enumerators for the purpose. Its effectiveness is doubtful. By admission of the officials of the census operation themselves, policemen accompany the enumeration officials on the night of the operation. It often has the effect of scaring away dwellers on the streets and pavements to other areas, thus eluding enumeration ("Census Operations," *Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India,* 2010). Apart from this, large areas simply remain unmapped and not visited by the enumerators. The data collected on these groups are skewed. Census data on 'homeless' population in cities only contain information on the total number of households, the number of members in each household and the total number of 'homeless' population.

Table 3.1. Census figures for 'homeless' population and percentage to the Calcutta's total

population (Source: Census of Calcutta, 1961-2011)

Year	'Homeless' population/ houseless households	Percentage to Calcutta's total population
1961	18323	0.63%
1971	48802	1.54%
1981	34316	1.14%
2001	67676	1.47%
2011	69798	1.55%

A section of Calcutta's peripatetic migrants came under official survey for the first time in the 1970s when 'pavement dwellers' were enumerated in certain parts of the city, resulting in a promise of their inclusion within government welfare schemes. Three important sample surveys on the floating rural landless in the city were undertaken by the city development authorities between 1975 and 1987. In 1973-74, the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation (CMPO) undertook a sample survey of 10,000 pavement dwellers in the city, which was published as 'Under the Shadow of the Metropolis: They are Citizens Too'. The Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Calcutta conducted a survey of the pavement dwellers in 1976, 'Calcutta 1976: A Socio-Economic Survey of Pavement Dwellers'. Another sample survey of pavement dwellers was conducted by the CMDA in 1986-87. As in the case of the census enumeration, the CMDA surveys were also conducted at night a with set questionnaire (Jagannathan and Halder 1988b, 1175). Interestingly, the people living in the canal side shanties or *khalpar* were outside of all the CMPO and CMDA surveys. All three surveys focused on pavement dwellings. It shows how inadequate the sampling was. From the 1990s this floating population have again fallen out of government enumeration.

The only two existing surveys of the present time conducted at *khalpar* and *foot* are by two Calcutta based non-governmental organisations, the Hawker Sangram Committee (carried out in 2004) and the Calcutta Samaritan (conducted in 2011). The Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC) was formed in 1996 as a federation of hawker associations/unions in Calcutta. It came into being in context of the

Operation Sunshine (1996), a large scale official eviction drive of street hawkers in Calcutta. The HSC fights against eviction of street vendors and is concerned with various demands of the hawkers. The HSC's survey at the Round Canal is a sample survey taken in the immediate aftermath of the eviction at the *khalpar* in 2001-02. The HSC was involved in an anti-eviction movement at the Round Canal and Pali Nala in 2000-01. Their survey aimed at producing a much needed database which could strengthen their movement against evictions in these areas. A small sample of 421 household with roughly a total population of 2000 people was surveyed. It still lacked participation of the community members. At the office of the HSC, I found the papers of the survey tucked inside a plastic bag in an unarranged manner, with some pages missing. In an organisation concerned with the mobilisation of street hawkers, the documents on *khalpar* remain largely unused. The NGO's participation in the anti-eviction movement at *khalpar* has eventually petered out. The other survey with homeless population was conducted by The Calcutta Samaritans (TCS). TCS is a Calcutta based NGO that works with the urban poor on rights based issues. They have variously worked with rickshaw pullers, homeless communities, waste pickers, street vendors, commercial sex workers among others in Calcutta and addressed issues of right to shelter, health, citizenship, empowerment of women, rehabilitation of drug addicts etc. A Rapid Assessment Survey of the 'homeless' was conducted by TCS in 2011 at the behest of the government. This was not a sample survey, but a comprehensive survey of Calcutta's 'homeless' population. The process of the survey included the participation of the community members. Rapid surveys are different from detailed census. They are conducted at night over a short time and are supposed to be followed by a detailed census. The detailed census in this case was not taken. My interaction with residents of *khalpar* and *foot* indicated that the nature of participation in the survey ensured the maintenance of hierarchy of access. My main interlocutor in the area, Anwar, has served as an employee of the TCS during its work with the 'homeless'. While being illiterate himself, Anwar was involved in the surveys. During a discussion he lamented about how the TCS has betrayed them in the end by not handing over to them the 'papers' and the documents.

Figure 3.1. A page from the survey on Ramhata *khalpar* conducted by the Hawker Sangram
Committee in 2004.

It may be noted here that over the years the category of 'pavement dwellers' and the census
category of 'homeless' have seen a steady attenuation of their ambit, excluding more and more
people. The survey by the Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta in 1943 of 'destitutes'
had included all who dwelled in makeshift arrangements in the city, in air raid shelters, by the baffle
walls, in vacant lands and on the pavements. This definition was narrowed down in the two CMDA
surveys to what constituted the 'truly homeless' (CMDA Survey 1987). It now came to mean people
living on the pavements. This excluded the dwellers by the canal banks. Inspite of the many gaps in
the available census figures, barring 1991, they register a steady increase in Calcutta's 'homeless'
population, especially during the last two decades. Simultaneously they have been progressively
erased from government policy and documents from the 1990s.

Some reflections on the nature of these surveys are in order. Enumerating populations and
producing knowledge on them are a function of power. Surveying a population comes with a
promise of their inclusion within welfare schemes. Participation of community members in their own

surveys also empowers them. As Appadurai's study of informal slums in Mumbai show, squatters can organise in self-help groups with help from NGOs and partake in their own surveys. This leads to the production of vital knowledge controlled and shaped by community members, an instrument of 'governmentality from below' (Appadurai 2001). A recent study on Calcutta's street hawkers has highlighted a similar politics of archiving among the hawkers with help of the NGO, Hawker Sangram Committee. Creation of an archive which documents day to day struggle of the street vendors has empowered their struggle against evictions (Bandyopadhyay 2016). All of this produces 'governmentality from below' which has the effect of 'deepening democracy'. The experience of the migrants studied here has been contrary to such instances of empowerment. They lack conventional literacy and are disadvantaged in the politics of knowledge production. They find it difficult to partake in the practices of archiving. They have remained outside the purview of official surveys for decades. They briefly came within official counting from the late 1970s till the 1980s, to be erased again from government records from the 1990s. Only one of all the above mentioned surveys by a non-governmental organisation, TCS has involved some measure of participation by the community members. Official enumeration at least hypothetically comes with possibilities of construing them as a population category to be governed through welfare schemes. For the people at *khalpar* and *foot* no welfare schemes have been generated. The attempt is to render these groups invisible, while still receiving essential services performed by them which feed the city's informal economy and polity.

While they have not been enumerated, over the years the rural migrants and their dwellings at the urban margins have come under a hypervisibility, a vision that sees them as they are not. It seeks to de-contextualise their lived experiences and conflate them with images of 'encroachment', 'pollution', 'crime' and 'infiltration'. As the following discussion elaborates, this process has gained momentum from the 1990s. They are still not counted through official surveys. But they are represented in semi-official and public discourses through the aforementioned incriminating images. These hollowed stereotypes have saturated policy circles and mainstream media discourse, creating a kind of hypervisibility for these groups. This hypervisibility is at the same time an erasure of the history of the creation of these settlements, their integral connection to the economy and polity of the locality and their contribution to the city. These images delegitimise their persons and livelihood spaces. Their liminal position between invisibility and this type of hypervisibility renders them amenable to be governed by displacement without rehabilitation.

There has been a concerted attempt to declare people living at *khalpar* and *foot* (and dwellers of different informal squats more broadly) as 'encroachers' who have no right of permanent shelter in

the city. Various observations by politicians, administrators and judges in the context of different eviction drives at informal shanties, carried out in the Calcutta metropolitan area from the late 1990s underscore the point. It is interesting to note that one of the CMC's donors, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had made rehabilitation in case of eviction a mandatory condition for granting project loans and aids. The remarks by two ministers of the government of West Bengal in the context of an ADB funded suburban drainage project in 2000 which mandated the rehabilitation of evicted families reveal the official mentality

> This condition of the ADB is not at all practical… the rehabilitation of these encroachers is likely to send out a wrong signal to other illegal settlers. (Ashok Bhattacharya, Urban Development Minister, West Bengal)

> …why should we rehabilitate the encroachers? They should not be living on the banks of the drainage canals in the first place. (Ganesh Mondal, Minister of State for Irrigation, West Bengal) ("State Balks at Resettlement Term for Aid," *The Telegraph, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive* 2000)

Similar sentiments were repeated to me in a personal interview with an erstwhile councillor of the CMC, Gautam. Gautam was a councillor in the Ragbazar *khalpar* area at the time when evictions took place at the Round Canal in 2001-02. I raised the question of lack of official rehabilitation plan for the evicted families. Gautam responded

> …it was seen that most people here owned land in the Sundarban area… there were a few of them who did not possess land anywhere… but the majority owned land… they left (after the evictions) (Gautam, Personal Interview, February 2018)

The judiciary have time and again come in support of the government's eviction drives. Thus, Justice Barin Ghosh of the Calcutta High Court remarked on one occasion: "Encroaching on government land is better than winning a lottery – buy a ticket for Rs 2 and win Rs 2 lakh... this is a strange situation. The government allows people to take the law into their own hands and then demand compensation, when efforts are made to evict them. Encroachment has to be eradicated from the roots." ("Government Too Soft on Encroachers," *Times of India, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive*, 2004).

The contribution of rural migrants to the city is devalued by denigrating their labour. They are viewed in terms of dirt and filth, leading to the spread of disease. This image is widely echoed among the city's urban middle-classes. A remark by CMC's Member, Mayor-In-Council (MMIC), Sewerage and Drainage, Rajiv Deb about rag pickers in the city reveals this attitude

...in truth they (rag pickers) don't do any work. For garbage there are vats and dumping grounds. The work is done by the Corporation. So the question of consideration of their rehabilitation does not arise. They make the city dirty in the name of picking rags. The Corporation has decided that they will not be allowed to stay in the city permanently. They will not be given permission to cook and eat on the streets. After they have collected the waste, they will have to leave the city... we have received many complaints that these people make the neighbourhoods unclean. That is the reason for this decision... the moment we see that they are creating permanent shelters for staying the night, they are being evicted… ("Kagojkurani Ucchede Abhijan," *Anandabazar Patrika, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* 2003)

The polluted water of the Round Canal and Pali Nala came to be seen as a source of diseases like malaria and diarrhoea and the unclean lifestyle of the inhabitants a nuisance. What was required was a cleansing and beautification of these areas by removing the dwellers. ("Juvenile Boarder Ray Sattyeo Anishchit Punarbasan," *Anandabazar Patrika, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive*, 2001; "Du Saptaha Somay Dilo Court: Pher Ucched er Pothe Lake er Railcolony," *Anandabazar Patrika, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive* 2005)

In middle-class public discourse these areas are also hubs of crime. Allegedly these areas are dens of illicit activities like brewing illicit alcohol, gambling and other petty crimes. The allegation goes, that the political parties do not take action in spite of complaints due to calculations of vote bank politics. Mayor Subrata Mukhopadhyay's observation on an occasion may be repeated here: "Teams of ragpickers often act as links between criminal gangs. This bodes ill for the security of Calcuttans." ("CMC Fears Ragpickers More Than Hawkers," *Hindusthan Times, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* 2000)

Finally, a relatively new delegitimising discourse that has slowly crept in is of the migrants as Bangladeshi 'infiltrators'. It is alleged that the migrants come from Bangladesh and are not legitimate citizens of the country. While this does not find widespread resonance in contemporary newspapers, this circulates among the bureaucracy and police administration. I learned in course of my interaction with the inhabitants of the Round Canal and NGO workers who have worked in these areas about attempts by government officials to construe them as 'infiltrators' from Bangladesh. The following story of a pavement dweller may be repeated here

I live with my children in Gariahat now. Every year, around the time of the Durga Puja, we face *halla* from the Police, who regularly torture us. They often threaten us by saying 'if you don't move from

here, we will deport you to the Bangladesh border." (Rupa Chaini, a rag picker and the wife of a rickshaw puller, a shanty dweller under the Gariahat flyover) ("Living on the Edge: Women on the Streets of Calcutta," *The Calcutta Samaritan*, 2008, 25)

TCS reports note several instances where pavement dwellers are picked up in government trucks during eviction drives and dropped near the international border with Bangladesh. They painstakingly make their way back to their old shanty only to face eviction again ("Living on the Edge: Women on the Streets of Calcutta," *The Calcutta Samaritan,* 2008, 28). Several of my informants at the Round Canal mentioned how their application for Voter's Identity Card were initially rejected by the bureaucracy on the allegation that they are Bangladeshi 'infiltrators'. Some of them managed to secure identification documents after a long-drawn court case. These discourses devalue the labour of the homeless people and see them in terms of illegality, filth and crime. Together they induce the condition of displaceability.

3.2 *Khalpar* and *foot*: a profile

We may turn to the profile of the canal side dwellers and places of their habitation which reveal the integral connection between people and spaces created and nurtured for years. The Round Canal and Pali Nala where my field research was conducted are two major east-west sewerage canals of Calcutta. The Round Canal was excavated in the early part of the nineteenth century. It originates from the river Ganga in north Calcutta close to the Ragbazar area, moves south through some of the central parts of the city including Ramhata. It flows east and after crossing the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, a north-south axis which runs along the eastern fringe of Calcutta, outfalls in another major drainage canal of the city. Initially both Round Canal and Pali Nala were used for shipping commodities of trade between Calcutta and other parts of Bengal. Much later, in the second half of the twentieth century the canals slowly lost navigability due to silting and have become part of the city's sewerage network.
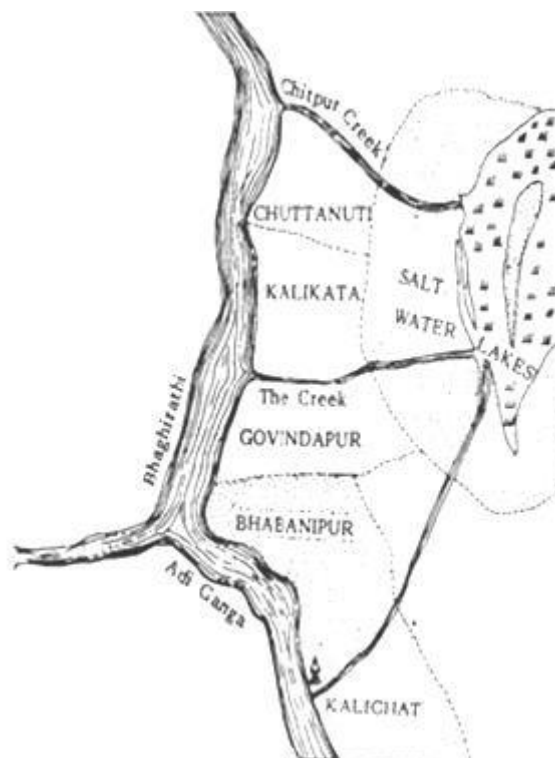
Map 3.1. A conjectural map of Calcutta showing east-west canals criss-crossing the city (Source: J. Mukherjee 2016)

From the early twentieth century, small settlements or trading posts were built in different pockets of the Round Canal, in connection with trade of commodities. A novel by Jyotirindra Nandi, *Baro Ghar Ak Uthon* (Twelve Houses and One Courtyard) gives a description of scattered activities and dwellings by the Round Canal during the 1950s. Today, the long stretches of the canal present a variegated landscape. The C west road and the C east road run parallel to the Round Canal on either side starting from the Ganga in the north, till it crosses the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass along the eastern fringe of Calcutta and flows further east. For reasons of familiarity, I began my field visits at a place where the Ramhata main road intersects the Round Canal along the middle of its course. I have spent the early part of my childhood within a housing complex on the Ramhata main road close by. But the boundaries of my middle-class social circle implied unfamiliarity with these areas. These areas are associated with filth and crime in middle-class commonplace. I was unable to find a contact who could introduce me to the dwellers for interaction. I simply started walking by the C west road hoping to strike a conversation with the families who lives there. I eventually met my main interlocutor, Anwar, an inhabitant and a leader of the area, on my third visit, during attempts to talk to complete strangers. There will be occasion to come back to our many interactions later in the discussion. It will be useful to dwell on the landscape for a while longer.

Map 3.2. The sewerage canals of Calcutta (Source: Travels Finders, Kolkata Map Photo Gallery, http://travelsfinders.com/kolkata-map.html)

The water that flows through the Round Canal is of a dark hue. It emits a strong stench. The canal side roads are potholed and in tattered condition. They carry a traffic of trucks, mini trucks, occasional private cars, rickshaw vans and other vehicles. As one walks on the C west road from the Ramhata main road towards the river Ganga (which is the western most boundary of Calcutta) and

passes the Kuldanga rail bridge (a rail bridge over a railway line of the Calcutta Suburban Railway network passing over the canal) trucks and buses can be seen parked by the sides. Further down, there is a pay and use toilet which has been recently installed, an important marker of the landscape of *khalpar*. Shanties begin to appear behind piles of rags. Big packed sacks can be seen next to heaps of debris. The sacks contain material that are packed after being sorted, which will be sold at nearby shops within the next few days for recycling.

Figure 3.2. A glimpse of the Round Canal from the Ragbazar area where a dense spread of dwellings can be seen on the slope of the canal.

Figure 3.3. Piles of rags can be seen outside the dwellings at the Round Canal.

A little way ahead there is an office of the Greater Calcutta Gas Supply Corporation. There is a mosque close by. The inhabitants of this area, the Kuldanga-Raibazar stretch of the canal, are primarily Muslims. Some of them are Hindi speaking and have come from villages in Bihar. Garbage dumps of different sizes can be seen in the street corners. In some of the garbage vats, a machine called the solid waste compactor has been installed by the CMC in recent years. It is a machine for collecting solid waste from the vats. It threatens to render the local waste pickers who work at these vats jobless.

Figure 3.4. A CMC notice in a vat at the Round Canal declaring that the work of creating a solid waste compactor station is underway.

A wide variety of garages, workshops, timber processing units, saw mills, small clubs, places of worship under the shade of sacred trees, local party offices intersperse with dwellings. Wayside tea and snack stalls and a whole range of other small food outlets also line the canal banks. Further north along the Round Canal, in the Ragbazar area, a weekly market is held on Sundays where birds are sold. I have interacted with the families in this stretch of the canal in the Ragbazar area. They are Bengali speaking Hindus mostly coming from south 24 Parganas. From the first decade of the new millennium, parks have started to appear by the canal banks. At the Round Canal, I found most of the parks to be locked and shut to the dwellers. The railings of the parks are put to various uses like drying clothes or tying cattle.

Figure 3.5. A CMC park by the Pali Nala put to various use by the dwellers nearby.

The other canal where I have conducted field research is Pali Nala. Pali Nala is connected with the Ganga in south Calcutta. It was excavated out of a dead channel of the river Ganga in 1777 and flows through the southern parts of the city in an east-west direction. It flows south-east and after crossing the Eastern Metropolitan bypass moves into the district of South 24 Parganas. Unlike the Round Canal, the western most stretches of the Pali Nala close to the Ganga bear marks of older settlements. The roads on both sides of the channel are not continuous. Long stretches by the Pali Nala do not have walkable pathways. Old roads run along the southern stretches of the canal. These areas bear the imprint of Hindu religiosity in the form of a variety of *shiva* temples, *kali* temples and *ghats* (paved flights of steps leading to the river), many of which were created in the nineteenth century.[11] There are two Hindu cremation *ghats* by the canal bank. A famous *kali* temple, a site of pilgrimage for the Hindus from the eighteenth century is located at this western part of the canal. Slums have grown around the temples and are intermeshed with the landscape. As per a news report published in the wake of the evictions at Pali Nala in 2000, in the 16 kilometre stretch of the canal from its southern most part to Haria in the south east, there were about 7851 semi *pucca* homes, and 3000 brick houses, with a total of 40,000 people dwelling there. It also had many small factories, about 90 temples, 12 cowsheds, 8 clubs, 5 schools and 5 garages ("Pali Nala Sanskar Hoyni,

Othano Jayni Dakhaldarder, Kendrer 30 Koti Taka Pore," *Bartaman, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* 2000)

Figure 3.6. An old temple by the Pali Nala.

Figure 3.7. A temple by the Pali Nala which now functions as a tea stall.

As one moves eastward by the Pali Nala, the dwellings are relatively recent. The eastern parts of the canal present a landscape similar to that of the Round Canal noted above. Shanties intersperse with small workshops, temples, roadside markets and offices of political parties making these places hubs of vibrant activity. Some of the roads in this eastern stretch have been recently laid out. A large part of the eastern stretch of the canal has now been cleared of shanties in course of recent eviction drives and railed as discussed later in the chapter. Evictions took place in the wake of an extension of the city's subway system towards the south and south east along the canal. Newly laid out roads that run parallel to the Pali Nala bear the names of the new subway stations.

Figure 3.8. A place of worship under a tree with an idol of Manasa, a snake goddess by the Round Canal.

The dwellings by the canal banks are made of assorted material including plastic sheets, bamboo poles, pieces of wood, corrugated metals, cardboard boxes and such like. Some structures are two storey, with a ladder placed outside which gives access to the upper floor. The upper floors are usually not high enough for a person to be able to stand, and used for sleeping. The homes of the relatively better off dwellers are partially or fully cemented. The daily chores of people are usually not confined inside the small spaces of their homes. The everyday business of living spills out onto the streets. Women often cook outside their shanties, elders sit on *charpai* (a traditional bed woven

with rope) and chat, young children play, the very young defecate on the streets, people queue up to collect water from what is locally known as *time kal* (tap). *Time kal* is a name given to taps installed by the CMC where water comes at specific times of the day. Young and old alike take bath in the water flowing from the *time kal*, waste pickers sort their days' pick in front of their homes, cattle stand tied to poles and people go about their daily business. Vehicles pass slowly through.

Figure 3.9. Dwellings by the Round Canal. Ladders are placed outside the homes to provide access to the upper storey.

As already noted, the dwellings at the two canal banks have been outside official surveys. The only existing surveys of these *khalpar* were conducted by two NGOs, the HSC and the TCS. TCS's Rapid Assessment Survey is not detailed. The survey conducted by the HSC is of the dwellers by the Round Canal only. It consists of a smaller sample, but contains more detailed information. No similar survey exists for my other field locations, the pocket of dwellings by the banks of the Pali Nala and a few pavement dwellings. Three government surveys on pavement dwellers carried out by the CMDA as noted above and a series of essays by Jagannathan and Halder (Jagannathan and Halder 1988b; 1988a; 1989) published afterwards which analyse the surveys, provide valuable information regarding the occupation and economic condition of these migrants.[12] Drawing on inferences from the CMDA surveys on other pavement dwelling areas in the city, the survey by the HSC (2004) and my own field data (2018), a profile of the canal side and pavement dwellers may be attempted.

The CMDA surveys on pavement dwellers (1987) and the HSC survey (2004) point to a somewhat similar rural origin and occupational break up of these floating migrant groups. Both surveys point out that the families in these areas began to come from the late 1950s. Migration increased significantly in the late 1960s and 1970s. A steady trickle of inflow continued through the later years (Survey of the Hawker Sangram Committee 2004). A majority of the migrants came from the southern districts of West Bengal like South 24 Parganas and Midnapur (Jagannathan and Halder 1989, 315). According to the HSC survey, a considerable number of the inhabitants of the Round Canal, about one fourth, mainly from the younger generation were born at the canal sides. The average family size ranged between 5 to 6 persons per family unit (Hawker Sangram Committee 2004).

These groups engage in a variety of odd jobs in the informal and unorganised sector of the economy. Jagannathan and Halder's account drawing on the CMDA surveys divide up the professions of the pavement dwellers into two groups, i) mainstream vocations and ii) marginal vocations. The first group of occupations, which they label as mainstream occupations, include the transport sector among others. The CMDA and HSC surveys point out that the largest number employed are in the transport sector, about 30% of the mainstream vocations. It includes the rickshaw van pullers and headload carriers like the *khalasi* and the *mutiyas*. Their work involves carrying goods on their heads, or loading and unloading of cargo from trucks. Another important profession is of the van puller. The vans are used to deliver a wide array of goods. Some other professions with relatively lower payments are identified as marginal vocations. These include work as household help, rag

picking and begging. According to the CMDA survey of 1987 (Jagannathan and Halder 1988a, 2602), the marginal vocations taken together involve a significant number of workers, about 22%. Other miscellaneous professions noted in the surveys include cleaning fish in the market for selling, catching worms from the canals which are sold as baits for catching fish, shoe polish and repair, the work of helper at tea stalls, hawking of fruits, vegetable and beverages like tea, making envelops and paper bags and the ubiquitous work of *jogar* meaning odd jobs as and when available. A large majority of the households surveyed by the HSC reported their areas of work to be between 1 to 3 kilometres from their canal side homes (Hawker Sangram Committee 2004).

Table 3.2. Time of arrival of the migrants at the Round Canal, Calcutta (Source: Survey conducted by the Hawker Sangram Committee, 2004).

Year of arrival	Total number of families	Percentage
Born at the canal sides	105	25%
1950-1960	16	4%
1961-1970	87	21%
1970 onwards	207	49%

Table 3.3. Occupational profile of the dwellers of the Round Canal, Calcutta (Source: Survey conducted by the Hawker Sangram Committee, 2004).

Main occupation	Percentage
Household help (primarily women)	19
Khalasi/Mutiya	17
Majdur/Labour (including labour in the construction industry)	14
Van puller	12
Rag picker	10
Jogar	6
Beggar	4

The CMDA surveys do not contain information about the possession of identification documents of the pavement dwellers. But this is significant for their claims to citizenship. The HSC survey contains data regarding the possession of Voters Identity Card and Ration Cards of the inhabitants of the Round Canal. About 34% of the total number reported in the HSC survey possess the Voters Identity

Card and a very small number of people, about 3% own Ration Cards. During my field interactions on the one hand, I encountered a certain reluctance to discuss the matter of identity cards for understandable reasons. On the other hand, two of my interlocutors actually showed their cards to me without prior asking simply to prove they are legal citizens and possess the documents. More is said later about possession of documents and associated claims to citizenship.

Table 3.4. Percentage of possession of identification documents by the dwellers of the Round Canal (Source: Survey conducted by the Hawker Sangram Committee, 2004).

Identity Card	Number of Household	Percentage
Voter's ID Card	144 (one or more members of the household reported that they possess the Voter's Identity Card)	34%
Ration Card	14 (one or more members of the household reported that they possess the Ration Card)	3%

My own field visits were conducted in 2017-2018, nearly two decades after the last CMDA survey and more than a decade after the survey by the HSC. My field interaction with a total of 28 households including 18 households from the Round Canal and Pali Nala and about 10 households of the pavement dwellers reflected a somewhat similar pattern of migration and professional break up of these groups. Close to half of my respondents claimed to have been born at the canal side. Of the rest, a large majority came from the southern districts of West Bengal like South 24 Parganas. A smaller number of non-Bengali Muslim families mainly in the Kuldanga-Raibazar area of the Round Canal said they have origins in villages in Bihar. Since my field locations include pavement dwellings close to vats, the number of rag pickers have been high among my interlocutors, about 38 %. Apart from this, the two other significant professions among my informants were that of van pullers (about 15%), household help primarily consisting of women (about 19%) and construction labour (about 12%).

The rickshaw van is an important means of livelihood in *khalpar*. It is used to carry and deliver a wide variety of goods to different locations. The possession of a van is a symbol of resourcefulness. Thus one of my research participants, Monirul shared with me how his professional life begun with waste picking. With a little savings, he has managed to buy a van and now delivers goods on his van

(Monirul, Personal Interview, December 2017). But Monirul has not given up his earlier work of waste picking. Like Monirul, most of my interlocutors talked about working in different capacities according to availability of work. Loading and unloading cargo from trucks is another important profession. Rag pickers and domestic workers are predominantly women. Many of my interlocutors at the Round Canal and the nearby pavement dwellings shared their experiences of picking waste at vats in the neighbourhood. They sort their picks at their home, store the collection in sacks and after a couple of days' collection, sell them to paper merchants in the nearby stores to make a living. Most of these professions involve intense physical labour. The condition of work is precarious. As the inhabitants grow old, their physical capacities slowly wane either from age, through frequent accidents or incapacitation. In old age, begging becomes the sole means of earning a livelihood. Evictions separate them not only from their dwellings, but also their meagre source of income that the urban setting and locational advantage provides.

For many of my interlocutors their movements have often been in the nature of back and forth, a fact not comfortably captured in the statistics of the surveys. The reason for migration from rural areas to the city is often the same, lack of resources to make ends meet. It is usual for one member of the family to come to work in the city, while the rest of the family stay back, or come gradually over time. But certain tensions surface in discussions about the nature of this rural-urban connection. On the one hand I encountered a reluctance to talk about days in the village in any great detail. I was told repeatedly that they have *always* been at their present urban site of dwelling. In their narratives the rural background is construed as a somewhat distant past. On the other hand, the rural connection is a vital link of sustenance for many of the migrants. They fall back on their networks of kin at the villages in times of hardship. As two of my interlocutors at the Round Canal mentioned, the more resourceful try to purchase a piece of land in the village through their life's savings. Their urban dwellings are marked by an uncertainty of tenure. In this movement from rural to urban and back, the binaries between forced/voluntary migration blur. I will recall the story of one of my interlocutors which shows the nature of the rural urban movement. Roma, now an elderly lady of 80, belonged to a peasant family near Kakdwip, in a village in South 24 Parganas. She came to Calcutta after her marriage in the face of poverty

> Roma: after marriage they forced us out of my in-laws' house, I came to Dolapol (southern suburbs of Calcutta) with my husband … the rent was Rs 10 per month…
> I: why did you come to Haria?
>
> Roma: it was very difficult in Kakdwip, there was extreme poverty, I divided one sari in three parts and came to Calcutta with that… mine is a very sad life, my husband worked as a coolly…

Roma's husband worked as a coolly in Haria. He died within a few months after their arrival to Haria in an accident at his work place. After her husband's death, Roma survived by working as a household help in the neighbouring areas. Her own income was not sufficient for the upkeep of her infant daughter. She had to send her daughter back to her parent's home in the village. A middle class household where Roma worked as a domestic help, helped her find a place at the bank of Pali Nala. Here she could stay without paying any rent.

> Roma: I looked upon Dabluda's mother as my own mother. 'Can't you help me a little so that my daughter can stay with me?' I said... I asked her… can you request Dabluda… he is a party member (CPM)… can't he provide me a small plot of land at the *khalpar*?
>
> I: when was this?
>
> Roma: this was… two ages ago… at that time there were many families, our house was near Bidhanpalli… I built the house myself, they gave me bamboo poles… afterwards, two of my brothers came here from our village and build their shanties just next to mine… (Roma, Personal Interview, February 2018)

Connection to networks of kin at the villages, however tenuous, remain a means of survival during difficult times. For people who resort to movement for survival, negotiating displacement happens from a position of relative disadvantage. Roma's two brothers had come after her to the *khalpar*. They started living there with their families and made a living by pulling rickshaw in the southern suburbs of Calcutta. Both of them would eventually be displaced and pushed back to their native village after the evictions at Pali Nala in 2001. Roma managed to stay on.

3.3 Municipal neoliberalisation and the condition of displaceability

My field visits at the *khalpar* and *foot* was carried out from December 2017 to March 2018. In the Round Canal area, I was often in accompaniment with Anwar. Anwar, a man in his 60s is a long term inhabitant of the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal and a local leader. His ancestral origin lay in Bihar. But as he claims, he was born at *khalpar* and has always lived in his present home, first with his parents and then with his wife, children and now grandchildren. Anwar used to work as a *khalasi* (headload carrier) earlier. After TCS started working with the families in the area from 2003, he and his wife Tanjum, started working for them. He also works in the paper recycling business. He has survived multiple eviction drives and now serves as the broker of the political party in power. Spaces are cleared up in times of evictions, and powerful people come to occupy more land than others

when dwellings are rebuilt afterwards. Apart from his own dwelling unit, Anwar owns a few more huts. Some shanties are rented out to the dwellers for a monthly rent. In his frank admission, he was a supporter of the CPM earlier and has changed his affiliation to the AITC after they came to power in 2011. He claims to have familiarity with the field of the 'homeless' through his NGO work.

Anwar and I usually started our day at the Round Canal with a cup of tea at Niamot's. Niamot's ancestral village was in Bihar. His parents came to Calcutta in search of work. He used supply goods in a rented van earlier. But he met with an accident, injured his leg and lost the capacity to pull a van. Now with his life's savings he has started a tea stall, attached to the front his home. After our morning tea at Niamot's, Anwar would accompany me to meet his friends in the neighbourhood for interviews and discussions. Let me recall two unsettling field moments.

Moment One

On a pleasant late December morning, as Anwar and I were sitting at Niamot's, talking about the 'problems' of *khalpar*, one of Anwar's friends joined us. He was excitedly complaining about the unruly behaviour of some CMC officials and an eviction at a nearby area. There had been an eviction the previous night at a *foot* nearby, about 500 metres away. Anwar insisted that we should visit the place to see things for real. As we reached the area, I saw a group of families on the pavement of a main road, engaged in their daily chores. The day's meal was being cooked on a clay oven by an elderly lady. A couple of vans stood packed with goods on the road next to the dwellings. When we reached, they greeted Anwar as an old friend. Anwar had informed me earlier, that he had made the acquaintance of this group of families during his work with TCS for 'homeless' families in Calcutta. They told Anwar that the CMC officials had come the previous night, cut through their plastic sheets and dispersed them on the allegations of making the pavements filthy. The families have returned in the morning, but have not bothered to unpack their belongings. In case the officials visit again to chase them away, they will quickly flee to nearby areas.

Figure 3.10. A pavement dwelling on the KC Road.

A group of about 40-50 families live at this *foot* on the Krafulla Chandra road (KC) next to a vat. The vat is the source of livelihood for these waste picker families. The KC road is one of the main north south arteries of the city. The dwellings are also close to an important government school. According to the dwellers, they have been living here for more than three decades. They negotiate eviction threats on an everyday basis. They hear rumours of a future plan of creating a small park at the area by cleaning the pavement.

My discussion began with Hasina as she tended to her cooking. Hasina was born and brought up in a village in South 24 Parganas, known as Ghatakpukur. She had come here with her handicapped husband in the face of economic hardship in the village. She does not have a home in the village anymore, neither any network of kin or friends back in the village. In the city, her main source of income is rag picking and begging. Earlier she and her husband used to live in a makeshift house on the other side of the road. During the time of widening of the KC road, their house along with the

houses of some other rural migrant families were broken down. They have crossed over near to the vat and been living on the pavements since then, for about three decades.

> Hasina: this (evictions) happens almost every month… from the last two days they have really been bothering us, the police came and said you have to vacate the whole area… we have packed and put our things on the van, we will flee if we see them anywhere nearby… we have not unpacked anything… they often disturb us in sleep
>
> I: do you go back to *desh* (ancestral village)?
>
> Hasina: no, we flee to nearby areas…

Tamannabibi is also from Ghatakpukur and had migrated about the same time as Hasina. She lives next to Hasina. She joined the conversation

> *Didi* (sister) do you know what we want from the government? We don't want money, or jewellery… all we want is a roof over our head, we told them yesterday when they came to evict us, we don't want anything else, give us a roof over the head, where we can stay, work hard and earn our bread… we are exposed when it rains, when these areas catch fire, we run for our lives with our children… (Group Interview, December 2017)

As I would soon realise through several more interactions with families on living pavements accompanied by Anwar, at the *foots* displacements are frequent. Rather than official evictions with prior notice, here unofficial everyday forms of displacements are more frequent. I repeatedly encountered stories of havoc wrecked by CMC's *halla* in their daily lives. The term *halla* literally means chaos. In the local parlance it refers to occasions when trucks of the CMC come to *khalpar* and *foot*, break their dwellings, loot or destroy their belongings, disperse them and go away. The commotion created by the activities of these corporation vehicles resemble *halla* or chaos in their daily lives.

Moment two

One month into my field work, on a usual day as I was walking towards the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal, I could see a red fire engine at work. Upon reaching, I learned that a fire had broken out the previous night. I saw the ward councillor seated on a chair at the canal bank. He was overseeing the process of clearing ashes and charred goods from the burnt area of the *khalpar*. People could be seen standing in small groups, talking in low voices. Everyone seemed uncertain about how the fire broke out. Most of the inhabitants were fast asleep when the fire had started.

Had the night been windy, they were discussing, the fire could have spread much further bringing more destruction.

Anwar told me that eleven dwelling houses had been burnt down by the fire. And a few vans have been burnt among other things. I saw one government medical van standing nearby. People who had suffered burn injuries were being offered emergency medical treatment at the van. During the next couple of days, the affected families were given blankets and cooking utensils through the initiative of a local Church. Anwar mediated and channelled relief. Surprisingly the affected families did not receive the most basic materials for putting up a shade over their heads, the bamboo poles and plastic sheets. When I visited them the last time, they were still living on the open. It was winter in mid-January and these families had to sleep in the open. They had improvised a strategy of sleeping by getting inside big sacks and wrapping themselves into the sacks. Their rag picking sacks were functioning as a substitute for blankets.

Incidents of fire and dislocations are often mediated by a local *dalal* (middle man), in this case, Anwar. We might note in passing Anwar's role during the fire and the nature of his mediation. It was through Anwar that relief were channelled. He repeatedly assured his friends and me that the displaced families will be given some compensation. But he kept silent on the question of rehabilitation. After three to four days visit at the area after the incidence of the fire, and multiple queries, I was told on conditions of anonymity that there is a plan to build park at the area that has been cleared by the fire. The eleven families who were still staying there, will eventually have to move away.

The manner in which the news of the fire was reported the next day in newspapers is also revealing. The importance of incidence of fire are measured in newspapers by the number of fire engines required to douse the fire. In case of involvement of a minimum of three fire engines, it makes a small news. When more than six fire engines are involved, it makes for a big news. While the fire at the Kuldanga belt did involve seven fire engines, it was still a small news. More surprisingly, none of the news reports published the following day, provided an explanation for how the fire started and prospects of rehabilitation of the affected families. In this framing, fires in the slums of Calcutta are a *normal* occurrence. It does not require an inquiry into the causes of the fire or any discussion of the prospects of rehabilitation of the affected families.

Figure 3.11. In the aftermath of a fire at the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal on 14 January 2018. Eleven dwelling houses were burnt down. Cleaning operation is seen to be under way under the supervision of the ward councillor.

These areas have increasingly seen more everyday forms of displacements. The two pockets of dwellings at the Round Canal and the one at Pali Nala that I visited have known many instances of fires. Stories of fire are alive in the memories of the dwellers and are repeated during long discussions. In their memories, often no clear separations are made between official eviction drives and the numerous everyday forms of displacements that are intermeshed with their lives, meted out by increasing number of fires, by the *halla* of the corporation, or simply by the local boys of the party in power. Prior notifications are often not needed and evictions do not make any news at all.

We may briefly take note of the changed contexts from the 1990s, when dislocations have come with increased frequency. This period was marked by a departure from India's socialist styled planned development model and initiation of the process of neoliberalisation of the economy and polity.[13] In the face of accumulating external debt and foreign exchange crisis, a new economic policy was adopted in India in 1991, arranged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

World Bank. An important element of the new economic policy is the adoption of what are called the structural adjustment reforms which sought to change the nature of Indian economic system by ultimately establishing a free market. Under this the public sector has shrunk with increasing privatisation. The central government has liberalised its policy regarding trade and foreign investment. My usage of the term neoliberalism denotes the market friendly changes in economy and a mode of governance that embraces the idea of a self-regulating free market, with associated values of competition and individual self-responsibilisation as the model for efficient governance.

Following the initiation of structural adjustment program in 1991 all over India and the opening up of the economy to free market policies, the state of West Bengal also adopted a new economic policy. The state government invited capital investment from the Asia Pacific region as part of India's Look East Policy. The West Bengal Government tapped funds from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Department of International Development (DFID), Government of the United Kingdom. The ADB and DFID provided funds for suburban development and improvement of sewerage and drainage system in the urban centres of the state. Together with development, environmental upgradation and beautification drives came to the forefront of economic agenda. Following on from the new beginnings made in the 1990s, a country wide urban renewal mission, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) was launched. Action under the JNNURM started in 2005 and continued till 2014. All the big cities in the country including Calcutta saw a frenzy of demolitions and rebuilding.

At the municipal level in the city, neoliberal policies of accumulation through development and aestheticisation had several manifestations. A plethora of new projects for metro railways, malls, multiplexes, flyovers, expressways, high end residential enclaves and elite new towns were designed to come up. The Kolkata Environmental Improvement Investment Program (KEIIP) was kicked off at the turn of the new millennium with funds from the ADB. The KEIIP is primarily concerned with improving suburban sewerage network, water supply and solid waste management. Its avowed goal is to transform Calcutta into a, "smart, resilient, green, water-sensitive, and (more) competitive urban center" ("Our Water-sensitive, Climate-resilient Dream for Kolkata," Pokhrel 2016).

Together with development projects, the city came under all round beautification drives. Beautification of major roads, parks, pavements, street lights were taken up. There was a plan to utilise ADB funds to create 1000 new parks in Calcutta. The railings of the existing parks were to be freshly painted ("Ak Hazar Notun Park Gorbe Purosabha," *Sangbad Pratidin, Hawker Sangram*

Committee Archive, 2004). There were plans to renovate lane dividers in big thoroughfares. Decorative street lights were posted by major roads and old traffic lights were painted. Trees were planted in some of the city's footpaths (Kolkata Sajbe Notunbhabe, *NEWZBangla* 2012, 5). In 2014 the Calcutta Municipal Corporation adopted a 'clean city campaign', to make Calcutta a 'garbage vat free city'. The plan involved abolishing open vats and putting in the service of solid waste compactors for the management of solid waste ("Kolkata Municipal Corporation Launches `Clean City` Campaign," 2014). Calcutta acquired new statues and structures like the Big Ben, or a theme park in the northern suburbs of Calcutta with replicas of iconic monuments of the West. All of this catered to a certain image of Calcutta as a 'world-class' city.[14] Initiatives were taken to beautify three major drainage canals in the city, Pali Nala, Round Canal and Kestopur Canal. There were plans to repair the roads along the canal banks, plant trees and operate ferry services through all three canals ("Agami Bochore Kestopur Khale Launch Chalu," *Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* 2009). The responsibility of beautification and maintenance of the new infrastructure were to be jointly shouldered by the municipal bodies and private industrialists ("Shilpamahalke Park, Footpath 'Dattak' Purosabhar," *Anandabazar Patrika* 2007, 1). Under the conjoined influence of an anti-poor developmental, environmental and aesthetic discourse, Calcutta was to be rendered 'clean' and 'green'. The poor were violently targeted for their seemingly incorrigible unclean lifestyle.

The dislocations and dispossessions at *khalpar* and *foot* should be understood within this overall context. The two *khalpar* studied here have seen repeated eviction drives ever since these areas became densely populated from the late 1960s. For example, eviction took place at the Round Canal during the declaration of national emergency in India in 1975-76. Afterwards evictions were planned in these areas after the Left Front came to power in West Bengal in 1977. The plan was later dropped. In 2001-02 however, an eviction drive of a much larger scale was planned and executed. Much before the initiation of the ABD funded project of the Kolkata Environmental Improvement Investment Program (KEIIP) for upgrading suburban sewerage (conceived in 2000), the Round Canal and Pali Nala had come under renovation under the Ganga Action Plan (GAP). The GAP was a central government scheme launched in 1986. The GAP aimed to improve the water quality of the river Ganga by intercepting domestic sewage and industrial chemical wastes from entering the river. The state of West Bengal was one of the beneficiaries of the scheme. Under this scheme, the Round Canal and the Pali Nala, which are offshoots of the Ganga came under renovation. The project aimed at increasing the flow of water through the canals by dredging and widening the channels, diverting sewage water, placing sewerage treatment plants along the canals etc ("Gap in KMC's Bid to Check Ganga Pollution," *The Times of India,* January 2016). The implementation of the GAP was delayed

and did not start until the beginning of the new millennium. Together with this, there were schemes of beautification of the canal banks. From 2000, ADB funds were also put into use for sewerage canal renovation. The canals were to be made navigable where boats could ply. Gardens were to be grown along their banks where the middle-classes could take a morning stroll, or enjoy a boat ride in the evening. Later on, added to the beautification drive, an extension of Calcutta's metro railway line in the southern suburbs along the course of the Pali Nala was undertaken. It was declared that the shanties by the banks of the canals should be cleared for the proper implementation of the projects.

Figure 3.12. A CMC signboard stating that throwing garbage in the Pali Nala is a punishable offence under the Calcutta Municipal Act 1980.

Thus, multiple projects targeted to renovate these marginal locales along the sewerage canals by evicting the dwellers. While there have been several evictions previously, the official eviction at the two *khalpar* carried out in 2001-02 were the largest so far. Evictions started at Pali Nala from 22 September 2001. Before the evictions, names of some of the dwellers by the Pali Nala were erased from the electoral roll in order to de-ligitimise their claims of citizenship (*Shalti Research Group,* Kolkata, 2003, 38). The evictions were carried out jointly by the Irrigation Department, Government of West Bengal, the CMC together with the aid of other civic bodies like the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC), KMDA and the Kolkata Telephones etc. The displaced families were given a 'coupon' which would entitle them to a 'shifting cost' of roughly Rs 1500 (approx. $20) at the Pali Nala. This was a minimal compensation by way of a transport cost to carry their belongings away.

Again, very few actually received the compensation money. After the first round of evictions, as per government estimate, about 4000 families were displaced from a 8 kilometre stretch at Pali Nala who received the coupons ("Pali Nullah Banks to be Cleared of Encroachers," *The Statesman, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive* 2001). Afterwards evictions were carried out on 10-11 December 2002 at different stretches of the Round Canal in the name of canal renovation ("Shanties Set Ablaze at Ramhata During Eviction Drive," *Times of India,* December 2002). A similar process was followed. A meagre amount of Rs 2000 (approx. $27) was offered by way of compensation for the shanty dwellers at the Round Canal. According to contemporary news reports 3277 evicted families from Round Canal received the coupons ("Ramhata Khaler Dhare Jhupri Ucched Shuri Kaal Theke," *Bartaman,* December 2003, 3) ("Khalpar: Taka Pacchen Ucchinnora," *Aajkaal,* April 2003, 2). But during our many conversations, the dwellers have put the number of displaced families to around 10,000 for Pali Nala. For the Round Canal again, the dwellers put the number at 20,000. The precise numbers are unclear, but it is safe to assume that a much larger number than the official estimate have been displaced. These areas saw repeated eviction drives. A second round of eviction was carried out at the Pali Nala on 12 April 2002 and at the Round Canal on 15 December 2003 ("Aaj Pali Nalar Du Dhare Ucched," *Sangbad Pratidin, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* April 2002; "Jhupri Ucched Shuru," *Sangbad Pratidin, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* December 2003). During my own field visits to these areas, I learned of evictions of smaller scales from the dwellers that are more frequent.
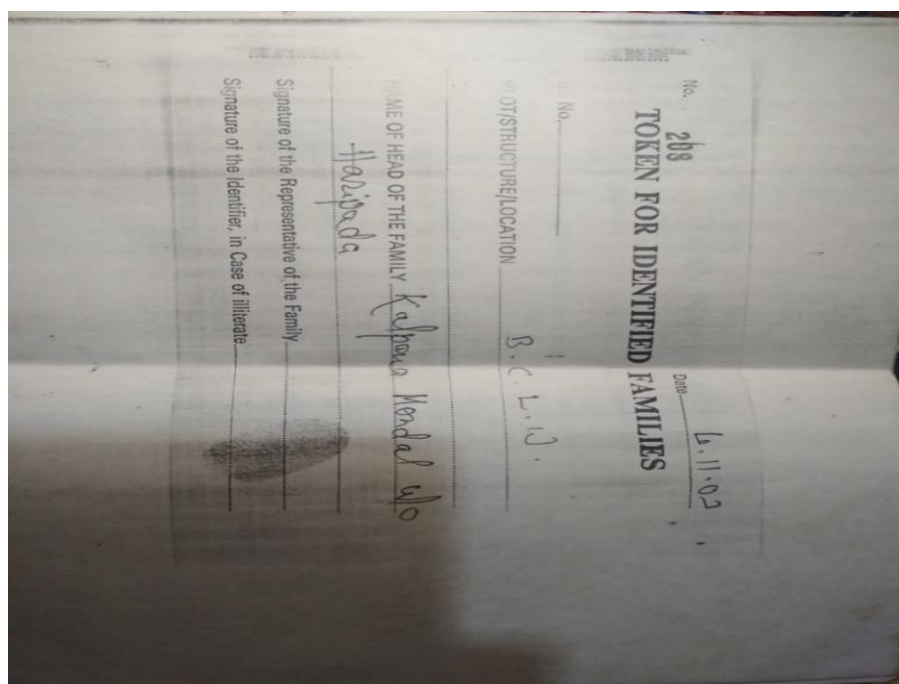

Figure 3.13. Image of a 'token' given to families before the evictions were carried out.

Figure 3.14. A photo of a food kitchen opened at the Pali Nala by volunteer organisations in the immediate aftermath of the evictions in 2001 (Source: Hawker Sangram Committee Archive)

Figure 3.15. Walls have been built by the south-eastern stretch of the Pali Nala after evictions.

Figure 3.16. A wall painting by the Pali Nala depicting an idyllic image of the canal side where boats ply and women reap paddy from fields on the banks of the canal.

It was officially declared that the 'encroachers' had no right to rehabilitation. But at the same time, the government also made vague promises of some form of rehabilitation for the evicted shanty dwellers in government housing schemes for lower income groups, like the Balmiki Ambedkar Abash Yojona.[15] But as the subsequent years proved, no rehabilitation was provided.

In spite of repeated evictions, many of the dwellers have returned to the canal banks. In my field area, two groups have repeatedly and persistently returned in the face of multiple evictions i) the people living in the Kuldanga area of the Round Canal and ii) at the Ragbazar area of the Round Canal. As against this, the dwellers by the south-eastern stretch of Pali Nala have been evicted. The banks of Pali Nala have been cemented and walls raised to foreclose possibilities of return of the dwellers.[16] Their equation with the local state, which includes their local political patrons and their aides, the officer in charge of the local police station (who often work in tandem with the political party in power) and a range of middle men play an important role in the eviction-return cycles. At the Kuldanga area, the dwellers had managed to develop a link with the erstwhile CPM councillor of the area. In the immediate aftermath of the evictions in 2002, the group of families at the Kuldanga stretch of the canal were provided political protection. They received tents from the men of the

councillor after their shanties were razed by bulldozers. They were distributed flattened rice and molasses for a few days. They were given the assurance that they could slowly, over the course of a few months, rebuild their shanties by one side of the canal, maintaining a certain distance from the canal bank (Nusrat Bibi, Personal Interview, December 2017). A considerable number of the dwellers in this area have come back through the support of their political patron. At the Ragbazar area of the canal, the dwellers lacked any bargaining relation with their ward councillor mentioned earlier, Gautam. Here repeated eviction drives have taken place from that time onwards. People had to stay away for a much longer period after the evictions. Over the years a significant number of them have slowly crept back in. At present they still don't have strong connections with the ruling political dispensation and live in relatively greater fear of future evictions.

Two of my interlocutors, Imran at Kuldanga and Sanat at Ragbazar, noted that with their life's savings they have finally bought a piece of land in the Sundarban region (Imran, Personal Interview, December 2017; Sanat, Personal Interview, January 2018). They will eventually move there. It was repeated to me multiple times, that people who have some means of sustenance try to move elsewhere after evictions. It is the most disadvantaged sections who have nowhere else to go, that come back in large numbers.

I will ponder on two more life stories of living through such eviction-return cycles. Shalini, a woman of 33 and mother of two young girls lives at the Ragbazar area of the Round Canal. Her mother had migrated from a village in South 24 Parganas to the Round Canal in the face of economic hardship after her husband left her for another woman. Shalini was born at the *khalpar* in Ragbazar. She has been living there since her childhood and was married there. Shalini's family was displaced during the evictions at Ragbazar in 2002. Shalini recalled

> they came here with the police and informed us about the impending eviction… I had left before they came, my daughter was very young then, I broke down my house and took the material along… it was winter… I went to my in-laws' place in Sundarban. I begged them to take us in... they tortured me a lot, I could not live there even for six months, I came back to Ragbazar with my two young daughters and lived on the pavements… just at the foot nearby… under the open sky… I used to work as a domestic help at a house in the neighbourhood for all day… I ate and slept at the foot…. I kept my younger daughter with me, they did not pay me a salary, they only provided me one meal... it was only sufficient for me and not for my daughter… I used to work all day, all kinds of work…
>
> I: where was this place?

Shalini: SB street, I don't go anywhere too far away from the Ragbazar *khalpar*… this is the only place I know…

Shalini put her elder daughter, who was only five years old at the time of the evictions, to work as a domestic help in another household. She kept the younger daughter with herself. This ad hoc arrangement continued for more than five years.

Shalini: I have worked at their house for five years… my elder daughter used to come to me and cry, 'mother I cannot continue like this any longer'… I used to tell her, what can we do, we don't have a shelter…

Sometime in 2011, a night shelter for women was created at the Ragbazar stretch of the Round Canal. Shalini's maternal uncle, Sanat, whose home is a couple of dwellings away from Shalini's present home in the Ragbazar *khalpar*, became a committee member of the night shelter. Shalini could secure access to the shelter through him. She worked all day and came to sleep there at night with her younger daughter. She lived in this manner for another one and a half year. Sanat eventually helped her to rebuild a shanty by the canal. She has lived a shelter-less existence for almost about a decade before she could rebuild her shanty by the canal. But even now, they live under the fear of possible evictions (Shalini, Personal Interview, January 2018).

Shalini had some support from networks of kin, however meagre, in the city and in her in-laws' village, and could eventually rebuild a home, however insecure. Kanak, a rag picker aged 30, lives on a pavement by the Ambala street, a north south road in central Calcutta. She lives there along with a group of about 20-30 families near a vat. All the families living here are waste pickers. Anwar accompanied me to meet and interact with this group of family in another of our visits to pavement dwellings. Kanak's family was evicted from the Round Canal in her childhood. Unlike Shalini, she did not have any reliable network of relatives either in the city, or back in their village. Her family could not return to the *khalpar*. They did not have the option to go back to their ancestral village. Instead, she and her family took shelter at a pavement. Here is an excerpt from my conversations with her

Kanak: I was born at the *khalpar*… they evicted us from there, after that we moved here, I was a young girl then…
I: how many times have you gone through evictions?
Kanak: many times, you won't be able to count, we have endured more hardships than them (points to Anwar implying people at *khalpar* in general), we were very young then, I was sleeping with my parents, this was around mid-night… the *halla* used to come at night those days, they would charge us

with their batons through the top of our mosquito nets and tear them… they would not care if there were human beings inside… they were heavy handed with beatings… 'GO AWAY' they would shout… they have tortured us a lot…

I: did you come here after that?

Kanak: yes… it's the same story here, this is how our life is, it happens every now and then (Kanak, Personal Interview, January 2018)

The pavement where Kanak has ended up presently has a difficult equation with the officer in charge of the local police station. They live through more frequent evictions. Large scale official eviction drives and numerous small displacements are a part and parcel of their lives. This marks the condition of displaceability. In this condition people are unmapped, informalised and seen through incriminating discourses which de-value their life and labour. Paperless people are sometimes meted with evictions. At other times, the threat of displacement is utilised as a tool to control the loyalty of the sans-papiers and govern them in the service of their political masters. The threat of displacement becomes a means to extract a coercive political participation as discussed shortly.

While the right to rehabilitation of the peripatetic rural migrants were not acknowledged, in 2010 something more interim came up. In January 2010, following increasing media reports on the death of 'homeless' persons in the streets of Delhi due to exposure to cold wave, a Supreme Court Directive was issued, which acknowledged that people living in the open should be provided shelter (Mandar and Jacob 2010). The court directive instructed urban governments to create night shelters for 'homeless' population, where rural migrants coming to the city could temporarily stay the night. The process of building night shelters has been initiated in Calcutta as well. According to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation there are about 69000 'homeless' people in Calcutta, requiring about 700 night shelters. So far, about 15 night shelters have come up. These include a shelter for the mentally challenged functioning in South Calcutta and one for women and children in the Ragbazar area on the bank of the Round Canal. The city authorities intend to draw a comprehensive plan for night shelters by 2022 ("Lagbe 700, Ache 3 ti Noishabash," *Anandabazar Patrika,* March 2018). The Supreme Court Manual for Shelters has pointed out that shelters are temporary in nature and should be treated as a first step towards affordable housing. The Manual notes

Shelters are not a solution to their problems. They require access to affordable housing, public services and decriminalised, safe and dignified livelihoods. But shelters are the very first step in their journey to pull themselves out of chronic hopeless poverty. ("Imagined Homes: 'homeless' People Envision Shelter," *The Calcutta Samaritan & Action Aid*, 2011, 43).

During my field interactions some problems of the night shelters were pointed out to me. The officially envisioned 'homeless' night shelters are sex segregated. There are separate shelters for the old, infirm, children, people with substance abuse and those mentally challenged. The night shelter scheme does not acknowledge that the urban 'homeless' live as families. The shelters do not serve the need of a home. It was unequivocally pointed out that it was not possible to live in sex segregated shelters, as this would break up families. They required housing where the whole family could live together. The night shelters have become symbols of perpetual deferral of their hopes of a home and permanent rehabilitation.

3.4 Mobile bodies as a site for politics

Displacements are an everyday experience for a large number of floating rural migrants. Two related means of empowerment of these groups in their struggle for urban shelter and livelihood are alliances with NGOs and their participation in politics. If we turn to NGO activism in these areas, for the longest part of their existence, NGOs have been absent. The evictions of 2001-2002 at the two *khalpar* Round Canal and Pali Nala were large scale. They drew public attention to the families living there. In its aftermath, the TCS started working with the community members at *khalpar* and *foot* in Calcutta from 2003 for a decade. The main thrust of TCS's work has been education for 'homeless' children, anti-drug campaigns, campaigns for right to shelter and creation of identification documents for the migrant families. Together with another NGO, the Action Aid, TCS conceptualised the formation of a community members' organisation formed by the 'homeless' and run by the 'homeless'. It was to be a platform for all 'homeless' people in different parts of Calcutta. With this vision the Kolkata Naba Jagaran Mancha (KNJM) was formed in 2009. The activities of the organisation were initially financed by the Action Aid, with financial contributions from the TCS as well. A few areas were identified for drawing members for the KNJM. These were divided into four zone: south, south west, north, central zones. About 100 groups were formed among the 'homeless' by TCS, each group consisting of about 20 people in average. A large majority, about 70% of the members were women ("The Urban Alliance for Addressing Rights of 'homeless' in Kolkata, Programme Strategic Plan," *The Calcutta Samaritans*, 2007-2009, 24-31).

The TCS and the Action Aid helped create local committees and educate leaders. Training was given to close to 100 individuals who were to assume leadership role. The leaders were trained to be able to communicate with external society. The organisation aimed to capacitate members with the

knowledge of their rights and entitlements and agitate for their demands. The main demands of the KNJM were

- Ensuring the right to shelter and housing for 'homeless' people
- Standing in solidarity with oppressed 'homeless' individuals and mobilising communities to oppose evictions
- Ensuring the right to education for 'homeless' children

They have spread their base among the 'homeless' population in 54 out of the total 144 wards in Calcutta. Within one year of its creation, the KNJM had close to 2000 members. From 2010 KNJM started issuing membership cards and started collecting Rs 12 (approx. $0.16) as annual membership fee which it hoped would fund its own activities. Increasing visibility for the 'homeless' groups has been an important theme of the KNJM. With help and financial support from TCS and the Action Aid, they organised activities like rallies and street corner meetings to draw attention of the government, duty bearers and the general society to the demands of the 'homeless'. The plan was to organise occasional street theatre shows to build awareness. One of my interlocutors, Monirul, fondly remembered

> Monirul: I participated in a play which was about the Rajiv Abas Jojona (a government scheme for affordable housing for the urban poor)… the story went like this… the young children should be provided mid-day meal, those who live on foot should not be evicted… we should be granted our rights as per the Rajiv Abas Jojona…
>
> I: where did you stage the play?
>
> Monirul: at many places like Hastings, Majerhat, Khidirpur, Gariahat… it was on the open streets…
>
> I: around what time?
>
> Monirul: during late afternoon, when the government offices close for the day and people start returning home from work… our plays continued for a few months…
>
> I: what would be your demand for rehabilitation? here or somewhere else?
>
> Monirul: people have a right to stay here, houses were built under the Rajib Abas scheme… homes… it was in response to our plays that the night shelters were built by the government, but only widowed men and women or single men can stay in the night shelters … where will the children go? We started our street theatre again… we demanded that nobody will stay at the night shelters, we should be given rehabilitation… be it 100 feet space or 50 feet… the government has provided homes to some people near the Ruby hospital and also at Ultadanga… homes should be given to everyone… the government does not want the poor people to live in Calcutta. (Monirul, Personal Interview, December 2017)

For some time, they conducted meetings at regular intervals among themselves to discuss issues of common interest. The KNJM also organised yearly general meetings for two consecutive years in 2012 and 2013.

Figure 3.17. An image of the first Annual General Meeting of the Kolkata Nabajagaran Mancha
(Source: The Calcutta Samaritans Archive)

A decade of NGO activism in the area has increased the confidence of the community members. With the help of TCS and the Action Aid, the president of KNJM, Mr Ajad, a community member himself, drew on the Right to Information Act (RTI) on two occasions. He successfully sought information about the applications of Below Poverty Line (BPL) Cards and provision for mid-day meal in a school nearby where the inhabitants of *khalpar* and *foot* send their children. But the power relation between the NGO and the community members have remained unequal. During a long conversation, Anwar complained that their Calcutta Samaritan bosses did not hand them the papers relating to the KNJM and did not facilitate the legal registration of the body.[17] According to Anwar, the TCS has deceived them in the end.

The plan was to legally register the KNJM. But that did not take place. Since the beginning of 2014, the process of withdrawal of the NGOs and the handing over of the responsibility of the KNJM to the community members begun. Among those who have been trained as leaders, very few are

educated. Bulk of the members of the KNJM are illiterate. By their own admission, the leaders of the KNJM depended on TCS to carry out official formalities, drafting and documentation. They find it difficult to conduct negotiations with office bearers regarding different problems faced by the community members. The members do not have the confidence to undertake legal action of their own. Procedures relating to filing complaints in the police stations, following up on complaints, methods of initiating Right to Information (RTI) petitions used to extract information from official departments are difficult for them to conduct. They face threats by local goons, political parties and sometimes by the male members of their own families ("Impact Assessment Report on Intervention under Project Titled: An Alliance to Address the Issue of Urban 'homeless' and Unregistered Slums in Kolkata," *The Calcutta Samaritan & Action Aid,* n.d., 25-45). Many of my interlocutors mentioned that eventually the KNJM has stopped functioning.

Figure 3.18. An identity card of an erstwhile member of the Calcutta Naba Jagaran Mancha.

Presently, another NGO, the Tiljala Shed runs an informal school for the children of the inhabitants at the Round Canal. With the help of the Tiljala Shed, an informal association of rag pickers has also been created, called the Association of Rag Pickers (ARP). For the past two years, they have organised an annual rally with the rag pickers from different parts of the city, including people from the Round Canal. Beyond this, the NGO does not have any involvement with the lives of the community members. Without any registered organisation of their own, the capacity to tap funds, and without the resources to form larger alliances, they struggle for the very basic necessities of life.

Figure 3.19. The converging point of a rally organised by the Association of Rag Pickers (ARP) on 19 December 2017 at central Calcutta.

Figure 3.20. The rag pickers handing their memorandum to the police sergeant at the Dharmatala area on behalf of the Association of Rag Pickers (ARP) with their demands

We may turn to the nature of political participation of the floating rural migrants. Peripatetic groups who survive through small movements often lack franchise. Lack of a *permanent* address makes their access to identification documents difficult. They often depend on their political patrons for securing identification documents. One usual practice is to use their patron's home address in the application for documents, in return for political support. Again, the possession of identity cards has not proven to be a guarantee of either long term stay, or other rights/entitlements of legal citizenship. Often during fires, or during eviction drives, their possessions are burnt, broken, thrown away and the documents are lost. Below are some excerpts of conversations with my interlocutors

> Amina: I have nothing left except this sari I am wearing…
> I: have you been able to save your documents?
> Amina: nothing… I had a van, I used to earn my living with it… (breaks into tears) (Informal conversation with Amina on the day of the fire at the Kuldanga *khalpar*, January 2018)

Amina's house along with her documents and every other earthly possession was burnt down during the fire noted previously at Round Canal on 14 January 2018. Her van stood next to her, completely charred by fire. Monali is a long time inhabitant of a pavement located at the north eastern side of Manash Mitra park in central Calcutta. She possesses a category of BPL Card, known as the Antodyay Card, which entitles her family to subsidised food grain. But after some months, the supply of food grain has stopped. Monali observed

> Do you know how I feel now? There is nothing for us, I have erased all hopes from my mind… they were providing us with ration [subsidised food grain], now it has suddenly stopped… the Voter's Identity Card or the Aadhar Card that you have provided us with, some day they are going to say that the identity cards will not be valid at footpath address anymore, mark my word, this will happen… (Monali, Group Interview, January 2018)

Their statuslessness functions in a loop. The fact that they frequently need to resort to movements and lack a secure 'home' in a sedentary bourgeoise sense of the term obstructs their access to documents. Their lack of documents and dubious legal status in turn, makes them vulnerable to threats of evictions and induces further movement. The rules governing the right to shelter and those of citizenship are premised upon different measures of long term stay. People who are constantly on the move to offset economic hardship and political violence do not stay put in a sedentarist sense of the word. They are suspect to its laws. This lack of a legal status is reflected in

their political participation. The kind of informal politics involved here are not well explained in terms of the idea of political society (P. Chatterjee 2004) or occupancy urbanism (Benjamin 2008). Underlying Chatterjee's conception of political society or Benjamin's formulation of occupancy urbanism, as with a host of other discussions on informal politics, is considerations of vote bank politics. The groups studied here do not form a consolidated vote bank. Sometimes they have their names enlisted as voters in their villages. Some of them have secured the right to vote in their urban areas of residence (few in number). But due to their movement, they are simply not considered important as voters. They lack the important bargaining power that comes with franchise.

Their political participation is skewed. They often provide various coerced services for their political patrons. For example, they are coerced to participate in political rallies. They are used for conjuring up a large mass of people at rallies and meetings of the political parties. An observation by Ratan, a political worker of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) is relevant here. He comes from a well-established political family, and was a popular leader at the erstwhile dwellings at the Pali Nala. During a long discussion on the evictions at Pali Nala, he explained

> …there are certain benefits of *khalpar*… politics should be kept within the middle-classes, you cannot do politics with people at canal banks, canal banks are good for *jamayet* (assembly) (Ratan, Personal Interview, February 2018)

Some of my interlocutors have noted, that they cannot refuse to participate in political rallies. In case of refusal, they are threatened with evictions. Their presence is not sought as political subjects capable of voicing well articulated political demands. They are included in politics as *massified bodies* whose value lie in creating a spectacle of popular support for these political parties addressed at other constituencies who are its legitimate political subjects. In such modes of coerced participation, they are depoliticised and treated as *mere bodies*.

They are often entrusted to do the 'dirty work' behind the scenes for the political parties. Thus, Munna's observation, an inhabitant of Kuldanga area of the Round Canal, in the immediate aftermath of the evictions there in 2002 is revealing

> …we went all out to win votes for the CPI candidate. We cast false vote, threatened voters with guns and bombs and forced them to vote in his favour and also sustained injuries in turn… but when the settlers need them most, the political leaders have deserted them. ("Eviction Deals Suicide Blow," *Times of India,* December 2002)

They provide the service of securing votes for their political patrons through various extra-legal and often violent methods. Through such task, they are consigned outside the legal domain and ensure its functioning from its margins. Their legal personhood and political subjectivity are denied. In this instance, displaceability has induced a form of bio politics, which is coercive, where they are reduced to a mere bodily existence and their bodies are exposed to physical and corporeal violence.

The people at *khalpar* and *foot* are disposable as the sovereign speaking political subject expressing their political opinion through different mechanisms of mainstream politics like forming political associations, vocalising demands through conventions, memorandums and through the exercise of universal franchise. In exposure to the violence of eviction drives, in the more low key everyday violence of street life, in living under conditions of heightened bodily exposure, in their accident prone work conditions with intense physio-corporal labour, and finally in their modes of coerced political participation, they are reduced to *mere* and dispensable bodies. If the contemporary bio political paradigm is aimed at 'making live' by means of managing populations (Foucault 2003), these groups are its disposable other, whom the political dispensation has 'let die', from lack of social security, from malnutrition, from shelterlessness, from perilous work conditions in informal labour market, and from being exposed to the violent underside of post-colonial quasi democratic functioning. They are a precarious group, abandoned to conditions which engender injury and untimely death.

Judith Butler has discussed one form of opposition to the neoliberal bio political paradigm, through the notion of plural and embodied assembly. Such assemblies are directed against ideologies of individual responsibilities advanced by neoliberalism at the face of decimating social services. Butler equates assemblies as momentary forms of popular sovereignty, which enacts an embodied demand for a livable life that makes visible the simultaneity of being precarious and acting to change it (Butler 2015). Taking the cue from Butler's notion of embodied action expressed in assemblies, I would like to emphasise that precarious populations, who are disposable for the mainstream of state and society and reduced to a mere bodily existence, turns bio-politics around. They conduct a 'bio-politics from below' or a bodily politics.

It is my contention that an emphasis on politics articulated through linguistic meaning and expressed through well formulated spoken or written demands while important in its own right, does not exhaust possibilities of political participation. In conditions of extreme deprivation, where basic bodily needs of food, shelter and health care are not met for large numbers of people, the fleshly

body as an analytical category becomes important. It provides understanding of nuances of politics left out by exclusive emphasis on politics of speech. Such political participation takes place at the margins of the politics they are pushed away from, dominated by *speech*. Meanings enacted through the body are closer to voicing these primary and bodily demands of food, shelter and health care. Here the demands of the enfleshed body are itself made into an object of political demand.

I advance the idea that this experience of the informal for the peripatetic 'homeless' people, is not a space of vote bank politics as many contemporary researches on the informal highlight. It is one of a *bodily politics*. Politics for the mobile groups happens at a more basic level, at the level of bodies in collective. It can be seen as an expression of 'bio politics from below' or a bodily politics. This politics is bodily in a dual sense. Here political statements are enacted through the body and at the same time the body itself is made an object of political demand. In this conceptualisation, the body is seen in an embodied relationality which goes beyond the mind body dualism. The body is both a biological and a social category, which is in a non binary relation with other bodies and the material environment. Such precarious bodies are capable of forging alliances with other bodies, even if momentarily, through various forms of assembly, disassembly and reassembly. Both presence and movement of bodies through space are well thought out political statements. The inhabitants make their bodies vulnerable to violence and in turn resist forces of dispossession with their bodies. The most pervasive expression of this form of bodily politics that I have found is their corporeal encounter with the forces of urban authorities and the police in their everyday lives, during evictions and in their silent and all pervasive return after evictions. Often during times of evictions, they create forms of bodily obstructions to the authorities and corporeally fight those who cast their bodily requirements into oblivion. After the destruction wrought by large or small evictions, I have repeatedly encountered stories of stealthy but an all pervasive and insistent return at these marginal locations at the risk of making their bodies vulnerable to injury and death. This is not a vocalised protest, but a bodily and political act. Through insistently rebuilding their shanties, they obdurately assert an embodied presence and embodied demands. In persistently existing, occupying space and living through repeated eviction return cycles and putting bodily resistance to such processes, even when they do not speak and do not present a set of negotiable spoken or written demands, the call for justice is enacted.

3.5 Conclusion

Frequent movement and displacement intermesh the lives of the peripatetic rural migrants. Their lives are deliberately unmapped, informalised and their rights suspended. The rural migrants' participation in conventional politics by means of universal franchise, through forging larger alliances with NGOs, bureaucracy and other socially disadvantaged groups go through multiple fractures. Their mobile ways deprive them of the legal rights and social rights of sedentary citizens. They live under the shadowy presence of displaceability. Here urban displacement has emerged as a policy instrument and in turn a framing condition of urban citizenship. Under displaceability they participate into coercive politics whereby they are bereft of political subjectivity, reduced to a bodily existence, and exposed to injury and death. Here displaceability has induced a form of bio politics. I have tried to highlight that in conditions of extreme bodily vulnerability and exposure to violence, the body itself becomes a vehicle for expressing political agency. Their political choices need to be located in their mobile bodily acts of moving back and forth between the villages and urban locales, their embodied resistance to evictions and persistent return after displacements. These are bodily and political acts that ultimately enact a call for justice.

Notes

[1] Peripatetic groups are usually understood to be people who move about due to specific professions like pastoral nomadism and non-food producing nomadism. These groups usually maintain some group cohesion through practices of endogamy (Rao 1987). I attribute to the term a slightly different connotation from this conventional meaning. I stress mobility as a conscious strategy to offset mechanisms of dispossession, but at the same time highlight the violence involved in the process.

[2] There is sedentarist bias in migration studies as well. As Rogaly has noted in his study on rural to rural migration in West Bengal, that when migration is considered, the focus tends to be on those who settle, on immigrants. The spatial embeddedness of the lives of workers who are mobile for relatively short periods of time – weeks or months – where accommodation will necessarily be makeshift and temporary, has tended to be neglected (Rogaly 2009).

[3] For an in-depth discussion of consolidation of the powers of the *jotdar* in colonial Bengal, see (Bose 1986; P. Chatterjee 1986; Rajat and Ray 1975).

[4] The United Front was a political coalition in West Bengal, formed shortly after the West Bengal Legislative Assembly Election in 1967 by defeating the INC for the first time. It was a coalition of left wing political parties. It was succeeded by the Left Front in 1977, a more permanent alliance of left wing parties in West Bengal. The founding parties of the Left Front were the Communist Party of India

(Marxist), All India Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Communist Party of India among other parties. The Left Front ruled the state for seven consecutive terms from 1977 to 2011.

[5] The Operation Barga was conducted by the Left Front government from 1978 till mid 1980s as a comprehensive land reform program to address the sharecropping system. It recorded the names of the sharecroppers locally known as *bargadars*. It provided the *bargadars* legal protection against eviction by the landlords, and entitled them to the due share of the produce.

[6] A gram panchayat is an elected body at the level of the village, responsible for governance of villages under its jurisdiction.

[7] Development activities carried out by the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) primarily meant demolition of *bustees* (slums) and displacement without compensation to the inhabitants and driving roads through densely populated areas. For a history of CIT's development work during the colonial period and its adverse impact on Calcutta's slums see (Partho Datta 2012).

[8] Two left political organisations that were active in the slums in the 1950s and organised the struggle of the slum dwellers were the Bastee Federation of the CPI and the Bastee Sammelan of the Praja Socialist Party. A Calcutta based NGO that has also significantly contributed to the movement of the slum dwellers is Unnayan.

[9] Technically many *bustees* in Calcutta are characterised by a three-tier tenurial structure. Earlier, the land of the *bustees* belonged to prosperous families locally known as zamindars. These families leased out the land and earned substantial revenue from it. There was an intermediate category between the zamindars and the dwellers, known as 'thika tenants'. The 'thika tenants' were the intermediary developers of the land. They took the land on lease from the landowner and constructed huts for renting out. The *bharatiyas* or hut dwellers were the third category in the *bustees*. They rented rooms in a hut from the *thika* tenants. They were the dominant residents of the *bustees* though, in many cases the *thika* tenants (hut owners) were also dwellers (Unnayan 1992, 8-9). When development projects affected the *bustees*, it was customary to pay compensation to the landowner. The intermediaries and the dwellers were displaced without compensation and alternative housing provisions. In the face of persistent movement by the slum dwellers under left leadership a few changes in policy took place. The first to come was the Calcutta Thika Tenancy bill, 1949 which granted legal protection to the *thika* tenants settled in *bustees*. The Calcutta Improvement Amendment Act of 1955, for the first time recognised the rights of rehabilitation of slum dwellers in case of eviction. Finally, the Thika Tenancy Act of 1981 vested the right and title of the landlords of the *bustees* in the state. Other than changes in the tenancy rules, the government policy regarding improvement in the slums also changed. The initial government policy regarding slums were demolition of slums and rehabilitation of the dwellers at government built one room (or sometimes two) tenements. The slum dwellers fought against the Tenement Scheme. From the late 1960s this

struggle resulted in a change of policy. Rather than slum demolition, the policy became in situ development of slums through CMDA funds. This is known as the Bustee Improvement Scheme.

[10] For a history of the middle-class East Bengali refugees in West Bengal and the process of the regularisation of the middle-class refugee squatters' colonies in West Bengal, see (Chakrabarti 1999; Chatterji 2007a; Sanyal 2008; N. Chatterjee 1992).

[11] Shiva is one of the principal deities of Hinduism. Kali is also a Hindu goddess, an embodiment of female power, of time and death.

[12] These essays are informative but at the same time reveal a certain economic reductionism, whereby lived lives of the migrants are reduced to monetary calculations and numbers. The predominant tendency in these writings is to view the migrants living on public spaces as a 'problem' for policy which may be solved by more comprehensive planning. This literature fails to centrally engage with the structural violence faced by floating rural migrants. I take the position that shelterless-ness and other deprivation faced by peripatetic rural migrants at the urban margins cannot be understood in terms of inadequacy of plans or lack of development. It has to be studied in terms of a deeper analysis of informal mechanisms of exploitation of the urban poor which is spatialised through myriad forms of dislocations. A point of emphasis of my research is that such exploitation is built into planning endeavours and is not a result of lack of it.

[13] In the post-independence period, India embarked on a path of a socialist styled planned economy, which involved centralisation of industry and regulation of private sector. This model was taken as a compromise between extremes of capitalism and communism. Indian economy faced accumulating external debt and foreign exchange crisis all through the 1980s and eventually a new economic policy (NEP) was adopted in India in 1991.

[14] One of the dream projects of the Mayor of Calcutta, Subrata Mukhopadhyay (2000-2005) was a 300 feet high Calcutta gate on EM Bypass, which would have cost Rs. 200 million (approx. $26831.22). The project was stalled, as it could not obtain clearance from the Pollution Control Board ("Kolkata Gate may have to be shelved: Mayor," *Times of India*, September 2003)

[15] Housing were being constructed by the CMDA under the Balmiki Ambedkar Abash Yojona at places like Chetla, Baishnab Ghata Patuli and other parts of the city. It was said that evicted shanty dwellers from the canal banks would be given priority in allotment of flats in the low cost housings ("Khalpar er Manush ke Garden Reach e Flat Debe Rajya," *Anandabazar Patrika,* January 2003, 5; "Jhupri Ucched," *Sangbad Pratidin, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* December 2003). Under the Balmiki Ambedkar Abash Yojona, the houses would cost roughly about Rs 74000 (approx. $1006). Out of this the state promised to give Rs 30000 (approx. $408) as a grant. The rest of the amount had to be paid by the buyer at instalments ("Daliyo Rang Dekhe Garibder Abasan Nay: Buddha," *Sangbad Pratidin, Hawker Sangram Committee Archive,* February 2004). While the government made vague promises that the displaced families at *khalpar* would be allotted flats under this scheme, in the end the families did not receive any allotment under the Balmiki Ambedkar Abash Yojona.

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[16] It may be pointed out that a very small number of the migrants at the Pali Nala, about 250 families have managed to wrest rehabilitation from a reluctant government in a scheme known as Balmiki Amdebkar Abash Yojona at one room tenements in leu of a small payment for the flats and have been rehabilitated. These families have a long history of struggle in the modes of alliance formation and negotiations in the informal domain, aided by political patrons and NGOs. Theirs is an exceptional story, not directly traced in this chapter. Here the concern is with a larger number of people who more often than not fail in such bargains due to lack of franchise and social and cultural capital and resort to certain embodied practices.

[17] In Bombay advocacy organisations are important political and policy actors. In Calcutta political parties and their labour unions are more hegemonic than NGOs.