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

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Conclusion

In this thesis I have pursued two central thematic, displacement and citizenship. My contention has been that in post-colonial contexts displacements are an *endemic* condition for the urban poor. Such all-pervasive dislocations are most visibly at work at informal urban margins. Taking the cue from recent theories of informality (Ong 2006; Roy 2009) which explain informality as an integral part of state planning, I have tried to extend the same logic to understand forces of displacements. For this I have found useful the analytical lens of displaceability that captures this deliberateness of the process. Rather than thinking of displacement as an act, displaceability implies an overarching condition of marginal and informal urban living, whereby actual displacements or the impending threats thereof are utilised as an administrative tool to extract services from the urban poor. Displaceability opens up analytical insights into dislocations which are almost everyday occurrences, otherwise invisible and remain undiscussed. By highlighting the insidiousness and all pervasiveness of such processes, this study underscores that displacement is a broader and more endemic phenomena than conventionally granted.

Rather than taking the failure of refugee rehabilitation or migrants' lack of shelter as resulting from deficiencies of otherwise well intended development or rehabilitation plans, I have emphasised that the tenuous access of displaced people to their dwellings and associated weakening of citizenship are part of deliberate policy regimes. Furthermore, displaceability works in neoliberal contexts, but is not entirely explained by the logic of Structural Adjustment Programmes and the 'accumulation by dispossession' approach to contemporary displacements which foregrounds the role of the SAPs. Informal urbanism is not always causally tied to neoliberalism and neither are dislocations that ensue within such conditions. In my study I have found these processes at work from an earlier time, which have perhaps increased in intensity of late.

The first three chapters of the dissertation have addressed mechanisms of deliberate de-planning in its different manifestations with regard to the migrants. In the first chapter I have explored migration to Calcutta in the transitional decade of the 1940s and highlighted how a wide array of mobile people were categorised in keeping with the agendas of governance. Two labels were devised for classifying the migrants, 'sick destitutes' and 'evacuees'. The reality that did not fit the official grid of legibility were displaced. Such archival displacements have emerged as crucial for migration governance in the subsequent years. In chapters two and three, I have examined governance through *planned* informality by tracing the role of official tools of surveys and

enumeration with respect to two different migrant groups. In the immediate aftermath of the partition of 1947, the dalit refugees coming from East Bengal were enumerated and included within the fold of government policy. They were recognised as 'displaced persons' with the promise of rehabilitation. The religious partitioning of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of two-nation theory implied a historical debt the nation owed to the religious minorities displaced from the territory of the so called 'enemy' nation. The new Indian nation-state could not deny the promise of rehabilitation to the refugees coming from Pakistan. But I have shown, how over the years the legally recognised status of a large number of dalit refugees have been eroded through a process of state initiated informalisation. Informalisation operates as a graded regime. A considerable number of dalit refugees have succeeded in transforming their marginal social status through long drawn struggle, resisted informality and achieved varying degrees of formality. They have done so by way of the legalisation of their dwellings, by drawing benefits from protective discrimination, through securing jobs in the formal sector of the economy. But many dalit refugees live in the informal zones of indistinction. Their lives are informal, their dwellings are insecure and their political loyalties are controlled. The second case study presented in this thesis is of 'distress' migrants, dislocated due to long term structural violence of poverty. Their right to urban shelter has never been acknowledged. For them the state has followed a purposeful politics of non-enumeration. While they are not counted, they are *seen* in the official discourses through the images of illegality and crime which devalues their life and labour.

Zones of such purposeful informality foster the condition of displaceability. Displaceability emerges as a deliberate policy instrument. Displaceable migrants have a tenuous right to shelter and live through a series of interconnected deprivation that result from lack of housing rights. In this condition sometimes people are physically evicted for usurpation of land. More often, rather than actual displacement, the threat of displacement becomes an instrument of governance. The menacing prospect of eviction is used to extract a variety of political services depending on contextual power equation. However, subjects of state intervention are seldom passive recipients of policy. The meaning of displaceability is refracted by the aspirations and actions of the displaced.

For some of the dalit refugees, the condition of displaceability has emerged as 'grey-space' of temporary living, where they are stigmatised and socially ostracised. Here refugee agency manifests in oscillating between claiming to be rightful and deserving citizens by assuming a Hindu religious identity or by imagining non-normative collectives, drawing on the tropes of linguistic or caste based solidarities. For the rural 'homeless', displaceability is more coercive. It erodes their political

subjectivity and renders them into a disposable and bodily existence. They provide certain services for politics while themselves being excluded from the political. I have shown that rural migrants who are reduced to *mere* bodies, are political in a more basic sense and retain political agency at the level of the body. For groups whose voice do not register in the conventional political speaking order, forms of bodily communication, alliance and politics take precedence. Shifting focus from appeal to rational mind based cognitive capacities for political action taken to be characteristic of the political realm, this calls for re-imagination of the political in terms of embodiment.

Integrally tied to displaceability is the question of citizenship, addressed in chapter four. Displaceability has an inverse relation with citizenship. The more widespread and coercive its functioning, the weaker the migrants' claims to legal status as well as social rights of citizenship. Some of the dalit refugees have fought for their legal rights to be included within the nation, and acquired *de-jure* citizenship. However, the recent series of transformation to the Citizenship Act and the instrument of the NRC threatens a large number of migrants with disenfranchisement. This is perhaps the newest device which aims at large scale disenfranchisement. They are now experiencing communal polarisation around the politics of citizenship. The dalit refugees have started to couch their allegiances to the nation in terms of a Hindu religious identity. But feelings of solidarity based on caste and the Bengali language also surface in dalit identity politics. The footloose and impoverished migrants move from place to place to survive and it hinders their access to identification documents. For them the *de jure* status and legal rights of citizenship often remain in deferral. Their right to franchise is devalued, and they largely continue at the margins of mainstream politics. Social rights accruing to citizens has always been a matter of hard negotiation for the migrants. Legal and social citizenship interweave and ultimately involve a political question, and one form of deprivation leads to another. In the spectrum of the rights of citizens and aliens, socially disadvantaged migrants are placed at the very far end and constitute citizen-outsiders.

The experience of a large section of dalit East Bengali refugees and urban 'homeless' reveal citizenship not so much as an expression of equality, but a way of organising relations of superiority and hierarchical difference. The progressive notion attached to citizenship, which perhaps found its fullest modern expression in eighteenth century enlightenment (for example in Kant's Idea for a Universal History) and viewed citizenship as essential for the full realisation of human capacity, emerges as somewhat banal and full of vagaries in its post-colonial rendition. In many erstwhile colonies like India, citizenship was defined through its colonial encounter and subsequently in the context of violent and bloody partition of territories as new nation states emerged. Here all

subsequent ideas of political membership have been refracted particularly in and through ceaseless migration. In this thesis I have traced some of the disruption migration has caused to a sense of civic community, lying at the core of ideas of citizenship. The story of post-colonial citizenship and its relation to migration cannot be understood in terms of linear progression of migrants towards an emancipatory and universalising status of citizen, but needs to be told through its moments of rupture, crisis, and breaks.