



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Mukherjee, A.

Citation

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

Version: Publisher's Version

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

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

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

Summary

In this dissertation I have explored everyday forms of displacement in third world metropolitan contexts by drawing on the concept of displaceability. The empirical references of the study come from migrants in Calcutta and North 24 Parganas in West Bengal, India. Rather than displacements of climactic and exceptional magnitude, this dissertation takes into account the low key and everyday modalities of dislocations, techniques of its operationalisation through post-colonial governmentality and the way such dislocation shape the nature of citizenship for socially disadvantaged migrant groups. To understand such drawn out processes, I have found useful Oren Yiftachel's concept of displaceability. It expands understanding of displacement from an act to a systemic condition through which power is exerted by means of policy and legal systems (Yiftachel 2020). Such shadowy presence of displaceability particularly pervades informal urban contexts. I unpack the nuances of the concept of displaceability from three inter-related vantage points: i) by tracing the operationalisation of displaceability at informal urban margin among socially disadvantaged migrants, ii) by looking at its negotiation by the migrants themselves, and iii) finally, by exploring how displaceability shapes legal and social citizenship of the migrants.

I draw on two case studies of two different groups of migrants in Calcutta and North 24 Parganas in West Bengal: i) East Bengali dalit partition refugees coming from East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) to West Bengal and ii) a group of peripatetic impoverished rural migrants coming from the villages of East Bengal and West Bengal to the urban agglomeration around Calcutta. I have followed the methods of historical anthropology, combining archival research with multi-sited ethnography. The time frame of the dissertation is from the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 till the present.

The first three chapters of the dissertation charts the operationalisation of the condition of displaceability. I have traced mechanisms of deliberate de-planning with regard to the migrants, through which displaceability works. I highlight the importance of the official tools of surveys and enumeration for the operationalisation of *planned* informality vis-a-vis the dalit partition refugees and the peripatetic rural migrants. The first case study of the thesis, the East Bengali dalit refugees were initially surveyed and documented. They were given an officially recognised status as 'displaced persons'. But I have shown that this legal status has eroded over the years through deliberate state initiated de-planning. The status-less rural migrants have also faced a deliberate politics of non-enumeration. Both migrants live informal lives. 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. Their lives are informal, their dwellings are insecure and their political loyalties are sought to be controlled.

However, subjects of state intervention are seldom passive recipients of policy. The refugees and the migrants negotiate this condition to the best of their abilities. My study highlights that the dalit refugees skilfully negotiate such informality through different context driven strategies. They oscillate between assuming a Hindu religious identity (which enables their claims to citizenship rights) or imagining non-normative and non-statist collectives, drawing on the tropes of linguistic or caste based solidarities. The peripatetic 'homeless' migrants live under more coercive conditions and their agency manifests through a form of 'bodily politics'.

The other concern of this thesis is how such informal and displaceable migrants experience citizenship. My study shows that 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. The experience of the two different migrant groups studied here underscores that 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 ruptures, breaks and crisis.