SOCIAL TRENDS
Journal of the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University
Vol. 6, 31 March 2019; ISSN: 2348-6538
Peer-reviewed National Journal
UGC approved (Sl. No. 42176)

13

Informal Settlements: A Study of Displaced Living in a Kolkata Slum

Kahini Palit

Abstract: *In the absence of a sound planning for the ever-growing population and soaring real-estate prices in the city of Kolkata, a large number of people, ranging from labourers in the informal sector to those who migrated to the city in search of means of subsistence, are forced to live in informal settlements, as encroachers of government lands, subject to eviction whenever the government feels like cleaning up or developing urban facilities like flyovers or green parks. Such evictions often do not offer any compensation, let alone rehabilitation. In most cases, the argument made by the authorities for not providing rehabilitation is that the inhabitants were illegal encroachers and did not possess any legal documents. Again, rehabilitation provided by the government in distant places away from the city fails to serve its purpose, since without income generating infrastructure in the relocated area, the new settlers are forced to come back to the city and set up new informal settlements, as the city offers livelihood opportunities.*

Keywords: Development, displacement, eviction, rehabilitation, compensation, informal settlements, slum.

Introduction

Forced evictions have become one of the greatest human rights challenges in India in recent years. In just four years, from 2010 to 2014, more than 2 million people were forcibly evicted from their homes in India (Lok Sabha: Reference Note). Displacements induced by development projects have been a commonplace news in the city (Kolkata), and gradually people seem to have eased into the fact that in order for development to proceed, some structural changes need to take place, and if unfortunately, some hundreds need to be moved, or simply driven away (often the argument is that they had been illegally living on government's lands), it is a sacrifice that needs to be made. Hardly ever, in everyday discussions, the query arises whether this is the only way to "development". Thus, according to Samadder (2013), 'the dream of publishing Calcutta into the 21st century with subways, flyovers, underground markets, wide boulevards and islands of picture postcard

suburban villages vanishing into the distant green, which Louis Mumford characterized as metropolis continues' (pp. 17).

According to the celebrated writer and activist Harsh Mander, 'the people who build cities are considered illegitimate residents with no rights. Cities are not planned in a way that its working population can live dignified lives. And since that does not happen, they are forced to sleep on the streets and live in slums. And when you live in a slum, there is a danger of the state turning against you. And when the state uses non-state actors, especially the mafia and goons, it causes a situation of helplessness, of injustice, and inequality' (Kakoty 2016). According to a 2003 UN Habitat report, one-third of Kolkata lives in more than 5,500 registered and unregistered slums (Bera 2015). Life in a city acts as a pull factor contrary to the push factors of the countryside. The rural poor migrate to the cities where they have no chance of a proper housing, and therefore their inevitable address becomes the *jhopris* and shanties of urban slums. These slums always stand a chance of being demolished to give way to "development projects". However, for the government, these men account for "collateral damage" that cannot be helped if the State is to keep the wheel of "progress" and "development" rolling. Overnight, they become the "no-where men" of the land, ready to vanish (Banerjee 2013). Government of West Bengal started the eviction drive in 2001, when squatters were evicted beside the Tolly Nullah (canal) in south Kolkata. Dutta (2007) reports that since then, the list has lengthened: Beliaghata, Lake Gardens, Bagbazar, Bellilious Road, Singur, Nandigram. Eviction also took place in the rail colonies beside the tracks between the Ballygunge and Tollygunge stations on the south suburban line, a long stretch where an estimated 20,000 people lived. After stiff resistance from settlers in May 2002, the colony was crushed on December 15, 2005. No comprehensive rehabilitation plan has been made for squatters from other canalsides in Beliaghata and Bagbazar. Strong resistance from rail colony squatters at Lake Gardens forced the government to negotiate with them. About 2,000 families were asked to resettle at Nonadanga on the eastern fringe of the city. Only around 280 families went there, as there was no arrangement for living. Others rented dingy rooms far from Lake Gardens. Thus, the city's poorest and marginalized communities often find themselves the victim of the State's authoritarian and destructive development policies. Urbanization in India, in its urge to develop "world class city standards" continues to forcibly evict the urban poor from their settlements.

Overview of the field

This work is part of the fieldwork I conducted for my research on development induced displacement in Kolkata. The fieldwork was conducted in the slums on the Tolly Canal bank (Kolkata). In course of the fieldwork, a deeper glance into the slum life on the canal bank uncovered many stories. People living in slums are considered strictly as "the other" by the wealthier residents of the city. The slum, in general, was "the unknown", to be feared and despised. But in the course of my journey, I came to find a deeper meaning of the word, that it was not a typical cliché dirty shantytown, unhygienic in all possible ways, and of course, prone to crime. I found families living there to be very peaceful, fun loving, and happy. Even though there was a lingering fear of eviction, it did not interrupt their daily lives. They knew it might come someday, but again, there might be the possibility of a compensation being given. So, they lived their lives forward. In the life in the settlement, there were friends and couples who loved each other dearly, children were born and taken care of, and all kinds of relationships. Their homes were tidy and cozy, and no matter how poor they were, or how small their room, they welcomed guests, shared tea with them, and chitchatted in a most unfeigned way.

My objective was to understand the lived experiences of the displaced, and to understand it from the point of view of the people who experienced it first-hand. The study was conducted by means of the qualitative method of ethnography. It was conducted in course of several weeks in the April of 2017, with several hours spent with the respondents. Most of the respondents remained busy during the day, with either professional work or household ones. Thus, late afternoon was chosen to conduct the fieldwork.

Conversations mostly took place in open spaces, like sitting on a rickety bench on the side of the road, or a makeshift community temple. The informal settings helped to keep the casual tone of the discussion, so that people felt comfortable enough to talk. It also helped in attracting more respondents, who, after their initial queries, got sucked up quickly into the conversation.

In 2001, hundreds of families living on the Tolly Canal banks were evicted, and their houses were destroyed. The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) cleared out houses within 15ft distance from the bank with bulldozers. Thousands witnessed the demolition of their homes along with valuable assets, and were left with no perceivable future. After the dust settled, many were forced to live in rents nearby, for the nearby area provided their bread and butter, some others tried to hold on to their lands and remains of the house they had. Sometime after, some people came

back to their old places, repaired or built bamboo or brick houses and had been living there ever since. Nearly 16 years had passed before news of another eviction had been heard in recent times. Although no official notice had been given, the officials of KMDA had already measured the area to be cleared. The canal bank dwellers were living their days in anticipation.

Lives on the canal banks

The canal bank slums were like any other slum in the city, a shabby neighbourhood, with *kaccha* and *pukka* houses, with naked children on the porch, a long line of women collecting tap water, and a dispersed crowd here and there. None of the lands in the slum belonged legally to the residents, but most families were living in a particular piece of land for several years, many for more than half a century. Most of them had moved there many decades back, pushed by crisis of income sources in their native places like Amtala or Canning. Many had been living on the canal bank for three to four generations. During the time of the fieldwork, most of them were pretty much settled there, with children studying in nearby schools, and their parents contributing to the unorganized sector in the nearby area.

In recent times, an imminent eviction drive by the Government had been sanctioned, and the lands had already been measured for eviction. The officials of the KMDA had appeared with long measuring tapes, and carried out their job of calculating the dimensions of the lands to be vacated, providing just a mere information to the residents that they would have to move. People were living in fear that they could be evicted any day. But since it was not happening, they were kind of living in the hope that it never would. Hundreds of households lived in stark uncertainty regarding their future. Neither they knew the Government policies, nor did they know whether they would be compensated, and what kind of compensation (if at all) awaited them. They lived a marginal existence, and some of them conveyed to me that they felt like they were at the mercy of the authorities. There were no spokespersons for them, although occasionally, at the times of eviction drives, different political parties came to support their agenda, but it mostly served their own purpose of asserting their political voice, and thus ascertaining their own existence in the political world. There was an amount of certainty in the fact that since the lands had been measured, the Government would soon displace those people for the project of widening the Tolly Canal. Those people, their livelihoods, the future of their children and the local economy where most of them worked in the unorganized sector would feel the blow.

For the news of eviction that lurked in the air, no announcement of compensation had been made. During the 2001 eviction, only a handful of families, who were favoured by the then ruling political party got a meager amount as compensation, which was undoubtedly inadequate in present times. They had heard that evicted people from many other slums got one room flats as compensation in Nonadanga, in the eastern fringe of the city. The canal bank contained hundreds, if not thousands of households lined along the narrow edge. Most of them hoped for a flat as compensation. The small settlements in the slum faced different kinds of trouble during different seasons. Sometimes the monsoons severely damaged the roofs which were already leaking, sometimes the bamboo walls screeched in a heavy wind. An apartment life would be a welcome change for many who barely had money to repair the leaking roofs, or broken walls.

Presently, even though they knew about the imminent eviction, most of them had not made any plans for the future, as they lacked the resources to buy a house or a plot of land in the city. In the event of eviction, they would probably have to move to a rented house nearby and request the authorities to give them time to move out before the demolition took place, for if the government decided to evict them, then there was very little they could do. But there was a silver lining after all; a good compensation, hopefully a flat, or land nearby which would help them rebuild their lives.

During the fieldwork, people shared with me many stories. In the following section, I will try to narrate a selected few of those interviews that were taken in most informal places.

I met Puja while she was lying in wait with a few other women to collect tap water in plastic containers. She was a gaunt middle-aged woman, and the water felt heavy on her thin arms. Her maxi dress was stained from dirt and sweat, and looked baggy on her slender body. As we started talking, she complained vehemently about the injustice of eviction. During the past eviction drive of the Tolly Canal banks, they were not served with any official notice of eviction, and one fine day people came and broke the houses which fell in the measured line of 15 ft from the bank. Puja and some of her neighbours had since rebuilt what was left of their houses. But not everyone was lucky enough to have that. She showed me the bank of the Canal where there had been houses once. But after they were evicted, the bank was widened, and thus the land on which the houses stood was no more.

Puja seemed petrified of the recent news of eviction that people were talking about. She lived there with her ailing old father along with her two unmarried sisters. They worked as household help in the nearby area. She had been living there all her life, her grandmother had brought her mother when she was a child, from their ancestral home in Amtala, pushed by crisis of income opportunities in the native village.

'*Oh sister, where will we find the money to buy a house? We are daily wage earners, with so little income*….' She went on.

There was an utter helplessness in her tone of voice which was difficult to ignore. They were a family with marginal income, with the additional responsibility of caring for their sick father. The dread in her eyes was visible as she talked about their predicament in the event of eviction. And the horrible fact was that they had no way to stop the authorities from carrying it out.

After talking a while with Puja, I found myself in conversation with Babai. He was a short, stout man in his 30s, stylish in his attire and earring. He talked about his experience of eviction and house demolitions by the bulldozers during the eviction of the Canal bank in 2001. He complained that only the people who were closer to the then ruling political party in West Bengal (CPI-M) received the compensation money, while others got nothing. Losing their house, his family was forced to move away to a far location near Joka. But the semi-rural area offered not enough income opportunities, on one hand, and, the commute to workplace was long and costly, on the other. As a result, their earnings dropped severely. As life was becoming increasingly difficult there, a friend helped him to rent the place he and his family presently lived on the Canal bank (6 years since).

Since Tolly Canal was situated in the middle of the city area, houses for rent in the areas nearby were too costly for the canal bank dwellers to afford. Moreover, there were not enough rented houses nearby, so, in case of eviction, they had to move far away to resettle, which again didn't have the urban facilities and avenues of income. As a result, their already marginalized status was further reinforced. Thus, moving away from the Canal bank where they had their sustenance was not a feasible option for them, nor could they stay there if they were evicted. Hundreds and hundreds of families lived in that grim reality.

Babai thought that in the event of another eviction, paying a meager sum of money as compensation was highly unacceptable. Money could be earned, but since their homes would be taken away from them, the only

compensation should be to provide them with a tract of land where they could build their homes.

But it seemed immaterial what they wanted or needed. For the needs of development, they had to stand aside. It is absolutely dependent on the Government to pay for compensation or rehabilitation, but whether they would pay for it was another question altogether. The people were unsure about their rights, and what they were going to get had little parity with their demands.

On the canal bank, by the broken brick wall, I also talked to the cheerful 47-year-old Raju whose native land was Madhubani in Bihar. He was bare-bodied, wearing a blue lungi (a long piece of cloth to wrap around the lower abdomen, and which extended up to the ankle). He approached me, and in a hushed tone asked me how many feet inwards from the bank would the Government clear up. As I assured him that I had nothing to do with the Government, he seemed unconvinced. He thought that my work must have something to do with the Government, and it was reflected throughout our conversation. The first thing he assured me was that he was not a tenant like many other canal bank dwellers, and that he had himself gone to the Alipore Court for the ownership of his house.

'*Write down that I have Electricity Bill as my Identity proof',* he said.

He must have hoped in his heart that in the next eviction drive, only tenants would be evicted, and those who had legal papers would be spared. That was the most probable reason he emphasized with grave seriousness on his ownership of the house and that he possessed the necessary documents.

His story was similar to many others in the slum. Half of his house fell under bulldozer during the past eviction of the canal. He and his brothers stayed alternately on that half-broken room which they covered with plastic sheets, until things came to a calmer state, and they could build the broken part again. He had since been living there with his two unmarried brothers, his wife and his son; all five of them living in the same room. At first, I thought that I had heard wrong, but he assured me that they could not afford a bigger place, and it was absolutely necessary for his brothers to live there, since they worked nearby.

Raju thought that it would break his heart to leave that place.

'*This place is so beautiful, and we are happy here.* '*We live in so much freedom here, you see, this is a very beautiful place. Where will we go? Wherever we go, we will feel pain to leave this place. Where will*

our children study, and where will we work? We do not want to leave this place, Sister. Will you please write about us, that we do not want compensation, we want to spend the rest of our lives here…'

Kindly tell the Government this' he said as we departed.

The dubiety in which all those people were living was appalling. They had no idea when they might be evicted, and what else would follow. Their homes would be bulldozed, bamboo huts would be set on fire. I felt their horror as they talked about how happy their lives were on the bank, and what would happen to them in the event of eviction.

I visited another part of the Canal bank in the following days. Aligned along the edge of the bank were houses. I walked along the narrow cement path, on one side of it was the canal, an open deep ridge sloping down to the shallow water level, and on the other side was the array of houses. As I treaded forward, someone warned me to walk along the side of the houses because the path towards the canal side was slippery. I dreadfully looked towards the bank and thought that should somebody slip, that person would slip down several feet, in the black sticky mud of the side of the canal. Luckily, I stuck to the safe side of the path, and did not slip.

Glancing forward, I could see the wide canal with shallow water, trees on its other bank created a beautiful green landscape, the sky looked wide and blue; it was a nice, calming sight.

No matter how small their houses were, or how meager the income, many of them didn't want to leave their homes in probability of a better prospect of rehabilitation, like a flat. But since they had no means of knowing what awaited their future, or informing the authorities of their dispositions, their ardent request to me was that I must write about them.

Relocation appeared to be an inadequate solution to the problem of displacement. Without sufficient income opportunities in the relocated place, people were forced to search for alternatives in or near their old places.

I found perfect families, lives with rich stories- most of those people were surely known for their labour in the city, but their existence was defined by it, and very few of their employers were concerned with where and how they lived. In the event of an eviction, the disruption of lives of those people would indeed be immense.

The thing that was most intriguing in the entire fieldwork was that people were not entirely sure about why they were evicted from their homes after living there for 40 or more years. Although they didn't possess legal papers

of ownership of their homes, they had been contributing to the local economy and had been a part of the city for a long time. Most of them were voters, and local political parties acquired their support in times of political rallies. It was not the question of rights of a few people only. Disruption of lives of thousands of people due to eviction was not something the authorities could ignore. But they ignored it nevertheless, in stark violation of human rights.

Conclusion

In accordance with the objectives of my research, through the keen eyes of an ethnographer, I tried to unfold the everyday realities of the people who lived on the Tolly Canal bank who had faced eviction in the past (2001), and who waited for another eviction which they feared would disrupt their lives yet again. I watched the horrors in their eyes as they talked about the imminent eviction that would take place soon. I uncovered two sets of views among the people regarding eviction- some wanted to hold on to their homes by any means necessary, and did not want any kind of compensation or rehabilitation in exchange for their homes; while some others were more optimistic, since they hoped that if rehabilitation was given by means of a flat, it would be much better than the jhopris where they currently lived. Although, most people I met during fieldwork loved the ambience of the canal bank, with the urban facilities available in the area. Moving to a different locale was heartbreaking for them. Many had also heard about the state of rehabilitation offered by the Government, and decided that they were better off without it.

But the irony of the situation was that people were unsure of whether they were going to be offered any kind of rehabilitation at all. They felt helpless about it. They were a marginalized section, and had no power to voice their demands and problems to the concerned authorities. And most of all they were unsure about who made the final call which sealed their destinies. They were aware of their rights, and during 2001 they tried to stall the eviction drive with the help of the ruling political party, but with little success. The coming eviction would surely deal a harder blow to the daily lives of those people.

Rehabilitation was surely a welcome solution to the horror of eviction, which many on the canal bank hoped for. But careful consideration of the socio-economic conditions of the people being rehabilitated, along with allocation of optimum space for all family members, in addition to income generating sources in the relocation area must be the top priorities of the Government trying to rehabilitate hundreds and thousands of evicted families. It was not

as simple as uprooting a few people from a place, and placing them in a different locale. It was uprooting a whole lot more, their lives and livelihoods, and the future of their children. Relocation to a place with insufficient income opportunities to sustain their lives often proved to be fruitless, as people came back to their old places or nearby due to the convenience of income in the location.

Ethnographic work on the Tolly canal bank provided me with an unambiguous picture of the condition of people who were evicted without the Government providing any rehabilitation, and the way people had to cope after losing their homes, and the role of the Government in the whole eviction scenario. I also came to understand the way canal bank dwellers felt about another imminent eviction, and was deeply touched by their anxiety of the uncertainty of the near future. In conversation with them, I uncovered their history of living in the place, how their lives were entangled with the area, and just how much they loved their homes.

The story which I uncovered revealed a few important things. Although regulations regarding rehabilitation in case of displacement were in effect, the first instinct of the Government had been eviction, without even a compensation, let alone rehabilitation, in several cases. The would-be evicted people were often kept in the dark, without any prior official notification, and they felt helpless as the demolition of the houses started one day. For development of the city and its extension, as well as infrastructural growth, those people had to pay a heavy toll. Even though being the major part of the informal working force of the city, the rest of the city seemed oblivious of the whole thing. Nobody knew what happened to the evicted people afterwards. After being evicted from one place, they moved to another slum in search of a house, and lived there until another eviction. Many came back to whatever space was left after their house was grazed to the ground. The Government had no central law for the criteria of getting rehabilitated, so that people were entirely unsure whether they would be offered any rehabilitation. News travelled of people getting rehabilitation in nice flats, but they were often considered to be the lucky ones, as people didn't get rehabilitation every time eviction took place. Many of the slum dwellers also fought for their rights of getting rehabilitation, and sometimes the fights turned ugly.

My fieldwork provided just a glimpse of the development induced displacement, and the state of the rehabilitation scenario in West Bengal. Many such evictions had taken place in the last few years, and many more would be taking place in near future. But the Government required a

comprehensive plan for developing the city, with as few casualties as possible. Eviction is a human rights violation, and when carried out without rehabilitation of the evicted, it violated regulations. Thus, in case of evictions, rehabilitation was unquestionably the immediate necessity. But rehabilitation in the outskirts of the city without proper planning and groundwork failed to serve the purpose, and reinforced the already vulnerable status of the evicted people. In case of rehabilitation in locales far away from the heart of the city, in addition to providing a house or land, the Government required to generate income opportunities in the area. Without the means of subsistence, the marginalized people like wage labours or women working as household help could not continue living in the relocated place, and were forced to search for alternatives in other slums in the city, as living in rented houses was beyond what they could afford. In that case the vicious circle continued, people continued to move from one slum to the other, and rehabilitation did little to solve the problem of the slum population of the city.

Glancing in another light, since many such marginalized, would-be evicted people looked forward to a good rehabilitation, by means of proper planning, by helping in the development of socio-economic conditions of the places of rehabilitation, the Government could fruitfully use the human resource in the development of the area on one hand, and reduce poverty on the other. And since '*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'*- the resolution taken by United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015 mentions that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, lending a hand to the marginalized by means of proper utilization of resources seem to be long overdue.

Reference

Atkinson, Paul & Hammersley, Martyn. 1994. 'Ethnography and participation observation', in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 248–261.

Banerjee, Somraj. 2013. 'Redefining Development and Reclaiming Subaltern Space: Arundhati Roy and the Post-Development Critique of Indian Modernity', *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (IOSR-JHSS) Vol. 8, Issue 5 (March – April): 32-36.

Bera, Sayantan. 2015. 'Kolkata evicts ecological refugees', *Down to Earth*, July 04, 2015. URL http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/kolkata-evicts-ecological-refugees—37948 (accessed on March 23, 2019).

Chaudhry, Shivani (eds). 2015. *From deprivation to destitution. The impact of forced eviction in Topsia, Kolkata*. Apna Aap Women Worldwide and Housing and Land Rights network: 6-13.

Dutta, Nilanjan. 2007. 'Bulldozing over people', *The Times of India* (New Delhi), Jan 10, 2007.URLhttps://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Bulldozing people/articleshow/1113720.cms (accessed on March 10, 2019).

Escobar, Arturo. 1992. 'Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements' *in Third World and Post-Colonial Issues.* Duke University Press: 20-56.

Escobar, Arturo. 1991. 'Anthropology and the Development Encounter: The Making and Marketing of Development Anthropology', *American Ethnologist*, Vol.18, No. 4 (Nov.): 658-682.

Esteva, Gustavo. 1992. 'Development', in W. Sachs, (ed) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books: 1-4.

Fernandes, Walter and Vijay Paranjpye (eds). 1997. *Rehabilitation Policy and Law in India: A Right to Livelihood.* New Delhi: Indian Social Institute and Pune: ECONET.

Fernandes, Walter. 2001. 'Development induced displacement and sustainable development' 87-103 *Social Change*, March-June 2001: Vol. 31 Nos. 1 & 2.

Hammersley, Martyn and Paul Atkinson. 1983. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. (2nd Edition). London: Routledge.

Kakoty, Juanita. 2016. 'The story of a forced eviction'*, The Thumb Print-A magazine from the East*. April 21, 2016. URL http://www.thethumbprintmag.com/the-story-of-a-forced-eviction-in-kolkata/ (accessed on February 05, 2019).

Kippler, Caroline. 2010. 'Exploring Post-Development: Politics, the State and Emancipation. The question of alternatives', *POLIS Journal*, Vol. 3 (Winter): 9-10. URLhttp://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/students/student-journal/ug-summer-10/caroline-kippler-summer-10.pdf (accessed on January 29, 2019).

Lok Sabha Secretariat. 2013. 'Displacement and Rehabilitation of People due to Developmental Projects', No.30/RN/Ref./December. URLhttp://164.100.47.193/intranet/Displacementand Rehabilitation.pdf (accessed on February 21, 2019).

Rahnema, M. and V. Bawtree (eds) 1997. *The Post-Development Reader*. London: Zed Books.

Reddy, V. R. 1994. 'Urbanisation in India: Disturbing Trends, Reviewed Work by Amitabh Kundu', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 53 (Dec. 31): 3323-3324.

Sachs, W. (ed). 1992. *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. London: Zed.

Samadder, R. 2013. *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977-2011*. New Delhi: Sage: 17.

Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. NY: Oxford: 15-16.

United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development 2015. Informal summary:1-6.

URLhttps://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/8521Informal%20Summary%20-%20UN%20Summit%20on%20Sustainable%20Development%202015.pdf (accessed on March 21, 2019).