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CIRCUITS, REGIONS, BORDERS

#3   **AUGUST 2011**

NOW WE ONLY HAVE A FEW BRINJAL TREES.

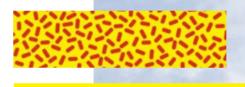NEW TOWN IS INUNDATED EVERY MONSOON.

REALTORS FOLLOW ARCHITECTS' DREAMS.

LOGISTICS KNOWS ITS SUBJECTS.

THE LOGISTICAL CITY

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter

Ned Rossiter

Boarding Gate C10, Suvarnabhumi Airport: midnight approaches at the end of the concourse, beyond the malls and gates collecting passengers for Singapore and Hong Kong. A long line of young Indian men wait to weigh their hand luggage before boarding the Kolkata flight. These are *kuruvis*, low-level 'hand-carriers' employed by shadowy bosses to transport consumer goods like electronics and garments between Thailand and India.
Not surprisingly their pre-weighed luggage comes in exactly at the maximum weight allowance. But it is also carefully apportioned according to value, each carrier transporting just enough to stay under the Rs 5 Lakh limit that attracts prosecution for smuggling electronic goods into India. When the laden flight docks in Kolkata, the baggage hall is resplendent with commodities: plasma televisions, hi-fi systems, musical keyboards, not to mention the iPods, mobile phones, digital cameras and computer circuit boards stowed in makeshift bundles of shabby cloth. This is a full-scale logistical operation – a single link in the many networks of formal and informal labour that distribute consumer goods manufactured in China to markets around the globe.

If the Transit Labour Shanghai Platform engaged pre-eminently with chains of circuit board production, markets for re-assembled electronic goods, and networks of e-waste disposal, this baggage hall scene attests that such patterns of connection and distribution are by no means localised only in urban China.

Yet it is another and quite different Chinese import that provides the focus for the Kolkata platform: the import of the very model of an economic zone. Here, we are faced with the intractable problem of origins and modes or techniques of translation. How is the plan of urban development and infrastructural development mobilised from China to India? Does this also register the flight of capital from the wealthy eastern seaboard of China to the less capital intensive territories of India? Is a new geopolitical configuration in the making here, or is this a material instantiation of more abstract and global work distinct from the legislative power of the sovereign state?

These sort of questions frame our research in Kolkata and will be tested against more specifically local conditions and politics, which include the history of state formation and the transformation of peasant labour into an urbanised labour force finding new forms of employment that subsist on the fringes of the logistical, IT and IT enabled service (ITES) industries. To be sure, this is not an investigation that provides a gloss on the leapfrogging from agricultural to informational economy, as if that exists beyond the delirium of the World Bank and IMF. Rather, we seek to refine a method of research that brings the practice of collective investigation into a meeting with the politics adumbrated by global logistical operations as they manifest within Kolkata's new urban developments.

The Rajarhat New Township is an urban development on Kolkata's north-east fringes originally conceived by the West Bengal government in the 1990s to relieve the city's housing problems. In the late nineties the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation (HIDCO) was established, charged with the development of this new town, and given wide powers to acquire and sell land, install infrastructure, construct housing, build commercial premises and maintain the future city. Once a lush and biodiverse site of peasant farming, Rajarhat is, with the economic crisis of 2008, now a largely stalled development.
Empty land is sparsely dotted with apartment blocks (many of which are still under construction), shopping malls, and office buildings slated for occupation by IT and related service firms such as Wipro, Tata Consultancy Services, Accenture and Infosys. It is here that Transit Labour's collaboration with the Calcutta Research Group will be carried out. Kolkata based researchers who have conducted field work and archival research for over a year will team with Transit Labour participants, some of whom were present in Shanghai and have made preliminary visits to Kolkata, to investigate the complex mobilities between different labour regimes that coexist within or contribute to the production of this space. The aim is to discern the dissonances and resonances that connect the predicament of Rajarhat to the Chinese situation.
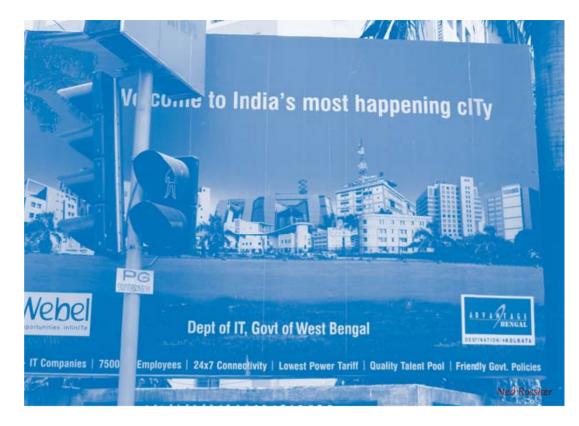
If, as the dominant narratives of Asia's economic rise would have it, China has become the world's factory, then India has become the site of virtual migration – the place wired up to perform the West's cognitive labour. Both of these scenarios present different takes on the concept of the *logistical city*, whose characteristics are distinct from earlier and contemporaneous city formations – the industrial city, the global city and, more recently, the sustainable city. Where the global city has a focus on the concentration on finance capital and its supporting infrastructure – both typically located in city CBDs – the logistical city tends to locate itself on the city's peripheries, taking advantage of cheap land, lower labour costs and, ideally, a 'clean slate' or surface to make easier the instalment of infrastructure belonging to communication and transport industries along with residential and commercial property developments.

From software innovation to the more mundane propositions of beta-testing and business process outsourcing (BPO), India, or at least selected pockets of it, has been linked into global networks of logistics and labour. Not only do these pockets roll out the source codes that run and link the world's virtual infrastructures – the transnational dimension of the logistical city – but they also execute a range of low price services, from telephone marketing to legal processes requiring data entry, from medical transcription to human resource management. Rajarhat aspires to be one such pocket. But the political, legal and economic complexities that apply in this site, as well as the violent history of dispossession that lurks beneath the barren surface of its vacant lots, impede this aspiration. Just as Transit Labour's focus on the logistical operations surrounding cognitive and creative labour in Shanghai questioned the convenience of portraying China as the world's factory, so the ongoing politics surrounding the collision of market and administrative space in Rajarhat trouble the vision of India as the world's business park.

'The global economy is rebalancing'. So begins a pamphlet entitled 'Global Delivery: A Course to High Performance in a Multi-Polar World' published by consulting, technology and outsourcing company Accenture in 2008. The booklet continues: 'In this rapidly evolving environment, business leaders must find innovative ways to access new engines of talent, and manage an around-the-world and interconnected workforce to achieve global delivery and ultimately reach high performance'. This slick corporate language provides an ideological framework that materialises itself in logistical networks and processes that link up, coordinate and monitor the performance of workforces worldwide. Such ideological and material realities touch ground in places like Rajarhat. In February 2011, Accenture opened a Delivery Centre in the Unitech Infospace development, an unfinished IT park with Special Economic Zone status in Rajarhat's Action Area III. Transit Labour's visit to the site revealed a string of ramshackle tea shops assembled across the road. Run by former peasants and agricultural workers forced into 'service villages' during the period of land acquisition, the squalid and makeshift aspect of these informal businesses strongly contrasts the gleaming futurism of the IT development. Moreover, it registers the coeval and contiguous existence of heterogeneous labour regimes across the variegated spatial terrain of Rajarhat.

Transit Labour is convinced that the struggles and debates that have surrounded the removal of Rajarhat's peasant population from the land provide an original and productive angle from which to recast empirical and theoretical discussions of cognitive labour, software studies and the global transformations of capitalism. By the same token, we believe that questions of logistics and IT infrastructure/development provide an analytical lens through which to approach the politics of land expropriation in ways different to the leads offered by subaltern studies and its rival theoretical traditions.

Ned Rossiter

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Anthropologists Marc Augé and Jean-Paul Colleyn observe that the 'Asian examples of spectacular economic take-off owe little to "development" strategies and much more to movements of global capitalism and geopolitics'. Such a perspective resonates with Transit Labour's emphasis upon logistical operations that coordinate movements across populations and borders. In focusing the Kolkata research on the dangerous flip between software applications and peasant dispossession, we want to suggest that processes of primitive accumulation occur not only through the seizure of land but also through the workings of protocol.

For media theorist Alexander Galloway, protocol 'refers to the technology of organization and control operating in distributed networks'. Protocological control, then, is a governing system whose technics of organization shape how value is extracted and divorced from those engaged in variegated modes of production. This includes both cognitive labour within the IT industries and relations with the former peasantry now redeployed as labour-power for services of varying degrees of formality. While different protocols govern the sociality and economies specific to these forms of labour, their relation is established through the development phase of Rajarhat where construction workers, service and care labour, urban planning officials, architects, IT engineers, new residents, and so on contribute to the logistical economy of the IT industries.

The politics that emerge from this variational process are the politics of the logistical city, a city that occupies the peri-urban spaces of Kolkata and connects with transnational circuits of labour and commodities. The political tensions peculiar to the logistical city also include conflicts between protocological systems. In such instances, the global dimensions of logistical calculation coalesce around local sites such as Rajarhat and tensions may arise through different protocols designed to implement standards. The organisational procedure for installing fibre optic cables that meet with international standards could, for instance, conflict with procedures adopted by local contractors responsible for ensuring environmental and occupational health and safety standards are met by workers charged with the handling and disposal of cables. New vistas of the political are made apparent in such scenarios in which protocols and standards constitute logistical systems of governance.

Logistics knows its subjects. In visualizing and managing the movement of people, capital and things, it produces knowledge about the world in transit. The challenge today is to devise techniques and strategies that operate outside the territory of control exerted by logistics technologies and their software algorithms. Such a challenge can never be met from the local alone. Resistance in the form of labour strikes or sporadic acts of protest and infrastructural sabotage are, after all, accommodated for in the spectrum of logistics in
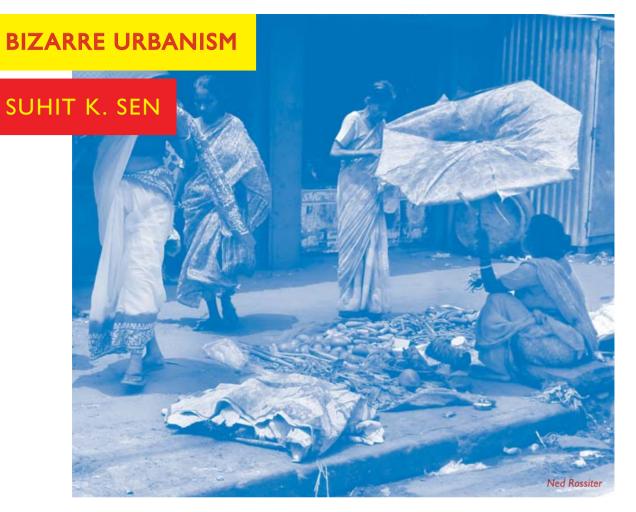
terms of 'fault tolerance'. Even if such actions force the withdrawal of business interests, the retraction is most likely temporary and can readily be substituted by a new corporate actor coupled with a more violent suppression of dissent. Rajarhat is too attractive a site for the public-private alliance between the state and corporation when the potential capital accumulation promised by information economies is already economically enhanced through the sacrificial gift of primitive accumulation.

The method of research we propose requires attention to the ways in which the local imports the formula of the logistical city into the fabric of its own urban imaginaries. We are especially struck by the resemblance Rajarhat's urban planning has with residential and commercial infrastructure spread across China's cities. What is the passage of communication at work here? Is this an instance whereby legions of urban planning consultants and government officials from India and China enact technocratic procedures of 'knowledge transfer'?

Our discussion in Rajarhat with researchers from Calcutta Research Group suggests otherwise. Ishita Dey's research understands the resemblance between China's new urban developments and Rajarhat as more a case of Indian urban planners gleaning impressions of how such developments might appear and proceed in a space like Rajarhat. It would seem experience is

the ground upon which the plan is generated. But the projections of planners are not the only kind of fantasies set in motion by such encounters. There is also the commissioned economy of global architecture firms that play an enormous role in producing the sort of urban imaginaries that help connect places like Rajarhat with, say, new urban developments in cities like Tianjin in China's north-east or Ningbo in Zhejiang Province.

Architectural renderings of buildings, spaces and even entire economic zones that will inhabit the logistical city of Rajarhat project a bizarrely sleek and well-proportioned future in which the only evidence of human life is carefully positioned silhouettes. Who are these shadowy figures? And what are the social, economic and political processes that will produce their subjectivity? These are questions that Transit Labour investigates, working through the logistical operations that connect this space to China and the strange temporality that interrupts this ever less plausible future form of Rajarhat's agricultural past and economically unpredictable present.

BIZARRE URBANISM

SUHIT K. SEN

Ned Rossiter

The Rajarhat story is fundamentally a story of displacement, loss of livelihoods and ecological degradation brought about by West Bengal's Left Front government in cahoots with a real estate mafia allied to business interests. So what's new? There *is* something new about the story of the building of a new township in Rajarhat and that is what this piece will focus on.

Some background would help sharpen the contours of my argument. It would be fair to say that there has been an intensification of struggles over land in the past five years or so – or to be more exact, struggles of a particular kind. Over this period, in public debates, centred on the media or not, the land question has come to mean the rights of 'peasants' to their land as against the claims of the state exercising its right of 'eminent domain'. This has mainly been the case since the enactment of the special economic zone (SEZ) law of 2005 and consequently the clearance of huge industrial projects for which oftentimes the agencies of the state have stepped in to acquire land under the guise of 'public purpose' only to hand it over to private entrepreneurs. That is to say, when land has been acquired for 'public purpose' to facilitate the pursuit

of private profit. This is in contradistinction to earlier understandings of the land question, when it signified the contending claims of various social classes – landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, small and marginal peasants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers – over the land and its produce.

In the wake of this development, there has been a spate of popular movements against such land acquisition countrywide. Even the judiciary, which played a conservative role in the protection of private property in the first two decades or so after independence to frustrate state policy designed to redistribute land and other agrarian resources, has stepped in to define the notion of public purpose more rigorously. The Supreme Court ruled in one case that land acquired in the name of public purpose could not be given away to private players for the pursuit of private profit. A string of anti-acquisition, anti-SEZ movements have been mobilized countrywide in the past few years – against POSCO, the Tata project in Kalinganagar, the Vedanta project in the Niyamgiri hills, all in Orissa; against the Reliance SEZ in Maharashtra; and the Adani project in Gujarat.

I would argue, in the Bengal context, that it was this countrywide ferment that provided the charge which made the Singur and Nandigram agitations so successful. But that is not the major point. What is germane is that over a decade before this wave of anti-acquisition movements had galvanized significant sections of the peasantry as well as activists and political groups, the conceptualization of the new town in Rajarhat had started, as well as notification and acquisition of land – in terms of intent about eight times more in extent than in Singur – and there was barely a murmur of protest in the public arena. It was only activists on the ground and those who stood to lose their lands and livelihoods who waged a losing battle against the forced acquisition of land. By now we have a rough idea why this happened: briefly the opposition was co-opted, the media complaisant and elite opinion ignorant of what was going on. These need not detain us here for now.

What we do need to begin with when we look at the Rajarhat story is something curious. At no point during the conceptualization of the new township project was it considered to be primarily an industrial/commercial hub. On the contrary, it was clearly conceived of as a residential space that would take the pressure of habitation off Kolkata – more than 50 per cent of the land that was to make up the new town was allocated for residential use; just over 10 per cent was for industrial/commercial use. There was no rhetoric about creating employment opportunities in the early days; it was much later, in fact well after the SEZ Act was passed, that some noises were made about employment-generation and skill-impartation for the dispossessed and, as we know, that was mostly pie in the sky. In other words, implicit in the design of the new town project was the unashamed proposition that one group of people were to be deracinated, denied access to the resources they had earlier enjoyed, stripped off their livelihoods, so that another, mostly affluent, set of people could be provided habitation in a 'green' and sylvan setting, in well-appointed gated settings with access to a luxurious, hi-tech lifestyle. That this utopia was to turn into a dystopian, shambolic nightmare is another matter.

In its own defence, the Left Front government argued that the area – well over 3,000 hectares – that had been acquired was low-lying, low-yield land, much of which was not under cultivation, the not-so-subtle implication being, of course, that the loss caused was minimal by way of gainful livelihoods. We shall for the moment not go at any length into the implications of this argument, which, briefly, is that there is nothing much wrong with depriving people of their livelihoods merely because they yield meagre returns, without making sure that

they are rehabilitated with livelihoods that yield plentiful returns. In point of fact, the area acquired, and its environs supported a large number of people with a variety of agricultural or agriculture-related activities – paddy and vegetable cultivation, horticulture and pisciculture, or fishing in general, not to speak of household industry or trade and other services related to agriculture. I shall not go into statistics related to yields and extent of cultivation, apart from pointing out that claims made by local cultivators and activists, corroborated by independent studies (one, for instance, conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute) bear out the fact that yields were much higher than claimed by the government. I am implying that this was in no way an agricultural economy in total decline.

It must be admitted, however, that from the data relating to agrarian stratification it does appear that the vast majority of the people were agricultural labourers and a vast majority of owner-cultivators were small and marginal farmers, with a smattering of middle peasants and almost no big peasants in the picture. In other words, this seemed to have been a broad-based agricultural economy that operated mostly at a subsistence level, but was meshed with the market in that it supplied some amount of vegetables and fish to Kolkata. This also implies, logically, that the Rajarhat area contained a sustainable agrarian economy that provided livelihoods to a large number of people and that the new township project destroyed it depriving over 100,000 people of livelihoods and access to resources. The government's claims were patently false.

Those who have lost resources have not been retrained on a significant scale, whatever the government may have claimed. Consequent to acquisition, the labour of the dispossessed is being re-deployed. Preliminary investigations suggest that many of the women work as domestic help, while the men have set up small roadside eateries or ply van-rickshaws. Others are similarly employed in the informal sector. Many have not been able to find gainful work. Some may have moved out of the area. At any rate, they have no access to the new avenues of employment – even semi-skilled and unskilled – that have been created. The labour employed on construction sites, for instance, is brought in from other districts by labour contractors. The cultivators of Rajarhat do not have the skill to work in construction, while those being brought in do.

The new township project didn't just destroy livelihoods; it also destroyed the environment. Replying to accusations that it had indeed destroyed a wetland area, made in several forums, including the Calcutta High Court, the state government iterated

2011 New Town, Kolkata, West Bengal

2006 New Town, Kolkata, West Bengal

2002 New Town, Kolkata, West Bengal

and reiterated that area acquired was not notified as a wetland. Simultaneously, it claimed that it was going to create more water bodies than it would fill, on its way to creating an environmental-friendly city with vast areas of open, leafy swathes of territory, apart from the increased water bodies of course. To begin with, it has to be pointed out that whether it was notified as a wetland or not, it is abundantly clear that it did partake of the character of a wetland in no uncertain manner. If it was not notified, that must be put be down as an act of criminal irresponsibility on the part of the government in the first place. That being as it might, whatever the government's claims, it is quite clear that the environment in the Rajarhat area has been despoiled on a massive scale, with the unconscionable filling up of huge amounts of water bodies and low-lying areas and the felling of a large number of trees. This and other encroachments have not only endangered the fragile ecosystem and biodiversity of the wetlands, but also put the drainage system of Kolkata and its northern suburbs under acute stress. It is a matter of no mean irony that the new town is inundated every monsoon.

I would like to end with two questions – one specific and one of a more general nature. First, why did the state government find it so easy to steamroller resistance on its way to building the new town? Was the reason purely conjunctural in the sense that there was no political opposition, little media coverage and public awareness, or were there some deeper structural reasons? The answer one suspects is a bit of both. But then what were the structural causes for the relative failure of resistance? One can only conjecture. But it probably would not be too far-fetched to advance the following hypothesis. As we have seen, Rajarhat's agrarian population consisted largely of agricultural workers, who obviously had a stake in the local economy but no formal claim to the most important resource – land. Of the rest of the population, most people involved in agriculture were small and marginal farmers. At a political economy level, this seems to suggest that this would give them a greater stake in resisting because the amount of money they would get for their land would hardly sustain them for any length of time. At another level, it could well be the case that since there were a large number of small and marginal farmers to organize, who had limited wherewithal to survive the combined attack of the state and its mafia allies, the resistance could not be cogently organized.

Second, in what larger political theoretic frame should we try to locate Rajarhat? Two influential frameworks have been proposed for looking at Bengal politics, especially under Left Front rule. One is Partha

Chatterjee's idea of political society, which looks at the negotiations outside the formal political process through which rights and entitlements are distributed or garnered by social groups. The second is Dwaipayan Bhattacharya's idea of party society, which proposes that resources, including social and political power, are distributed through party channels as parties insinuate themselves into society and society itself becomes polarized along party lines generating a competitive scramble for these resources. Neither of these, clearly, applies to the Rajarhat case in which there was, in fact, a polar opposite of negotiation and where a cross-party consensus in part killed any scope for resistance (or negotiation, for that matter). A third model has been proposed, which suggests that we try to look at Rajarhat as a case of 'primitive accumulation' where extra-economic power wielded by the state in conjunction with business interests and their paid thugs pulled off the expropriation of the peasants and the appropriation of their land by private entrepreneurs through the good offices of the state. This framework explains Rajarhat more cogently, with a caveat. I am uncomfortable with the use of the idea of 'primitive accumulation' because in my reading it has connotations that go beyond the mere use of extra-economic muscle to make accumulation possible. If we substitute it with the idea of accumulation by dispossession, which has more limited ramifications, I think we have a frame of reference, at least to begin with.

HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/
BLOGS/BIZARRE

NEW TOWN AND LABOUR IN TRANSIT

ISHITA DEY

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Though West Bengal was late in catching up with the creation of satellite centres compared to its counterparts in India, it has made its mark in the country's 'New Town' geographies through the creation of Sector V, Salt Lake and Jyoti-Basu Nagar, Rajarhat (formerly known as New Town). These sites are interesting spatially as they connect the city to the airport and vice versa. These cities operate and function today through the lens of productive forces – the labouring lives involved in circulation of capital. An ethnography of labouring accounts across sectors like construction, IT/ITES and street food vendors shows how the urbanisation of goods and services not only thrives on production of space conducive to capitalism but also how these spaces facilitate a certain circulation of capital. What do the stories of labourers reveal about these new spaces?

LABOURING SPACES

While Sector V was designated as the industrial area of the new township of Salt Lake, New Town was conceived as an urban continuum. A 1999 HIDCO project report projects that Calcutta Metropolitan Authority's population would reach 20 million and adds that 'it is only obvious that the urban continuum around the cities of Calcutta and Howrah would continue to grow'. The report recommends that the city needs two business centres: a) eastern side of Calcutta and b) the other in Howrah. 'New Town at Calcutta', it adds 'offers a very good location for establishing a New Business District'. This new business district would be 5km

from the central area of Salt Lake which also functions as a business centre, 10km from the Central Business District of Calcutta and 1km from airport.

In the section on Land Use, the report states that New Town is being developed as an 'environment friendly city with large areas of open green land, water bodies, parks, plantations, etc.' The New Town, it indicates, 'will primarily be a residential town and therefore, principal use of developed land will be for residential purpose along with ancillary service and community facilities. Another important use will be for clean industries'. So what is the scope for people who are already settled here? They are left with the choice of what HIDCO calls service villages. As the report says, there will be service villages 'at different parts of the Newtown. The service villages will provide facilities for work and living for the service. The location of the service villages will be near the existing settlements within the project area'.

So what kinds of jobs were envisaged for the functioning or even making of Rajarhat? A study conducted by Uttam Kumar Roy in 2005 shows that people from already existing clusters were forced to work as contract labourers or to form syndicates (like Hatiara Land Loser's Co-operative, Nababpur Land Loser's Co-operative) which supply raw material to the real estate companies. As one reaches the Bengal Unitech building, one of the largest IT Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Rajarhat, there are a series of tea shops and eateries owned by the dispossessed. Most of these street vendors run the risk of losing their livelihood as they

have set up shops on HIDCO acquired lands. One of the tea shop owners said most of the lands under the New Town Project were wetlands: 'Initially they hired local people for land filling. We were paid Rs 3000-3500 per month. We did it because it was a lot of money for us'. Another person who now runs a makeshift eatery echoed the same feelings. He added most of the locals either work in these makeshift eateries or work as coolies. Those who have been lucky and have contacts work as small scale labour contractors. He said hardly any people participated in the construction work as it is a semi-skilled job: 'We had lands and know how to grow crops; it is difficult for us to train ourselves to work as construction workers'.

In one of my many visits to Baligari village, an existing settlement in New Town Project Area, I met a few women who were chopping vegetables. When I asked them if the vegetables were from their kitchen garden they lamented and said: 'Yes, they are. In earlier days, we could have given you some vegetables but now we only have few brinjal trees'. There was a young girl in that group. She studied in Class IX of Bhatinda School. When I asked her what future she sees in this New Town, she looked up and said pointing to the high-rises that her mother works as a domestic servant in three households in Akansha Highland and her father died in an accident while unloading land filling material from a truck. To which her grandmother added that her mother is a brave woman. She mentioned that one of her sons died while working as a painter in one of the high-rises. His wife was pregnant when he passed away. To which her granddaughter adds that New Town is good for people who can make money. She proudly adds one of her maternal uncles is a land dealer. He has been able to make money.

Who are the construction workers in Rajarhat? The construction workers are mainly from Murshidabad and Bongaon. Most of them migrate to Kolkata for construction work of short duration (3 months) and go back to their respective towns and villages during the time of harvest. I met Jahirul Sheikh (a subcontractor), 54 years old, while he was taking his lunch break (1-2 pm) in a tea shop near Baligari. He is from Chakpanchari Mouza, P.S. Lalgola. He is a veteran in this line. He started working in his early 20s. He recalls accompanying people from his native town to various places for construction work. He learned to work on job sites. He joined a project site in Rajarhat after completing work in Kolkata. There are 25-26 workers of around 25-30 years of age from his village and nearby areas who work under him. He mentions that in this line of work workers below the age of eighteen are not allowed. 'The minimum wage a worker in this line of

work receives is Rs 150 per day and the maximum is Rs 225 per day', which includes Rs 50 as food allowance. Mostly companies create provisions for makeshift shelter/labour camps in close proximity to the project area. Work starts around 8am in most project sites in Rajarhat followed by a tea break in shifts from 10.30-11.00am, followed by a lunch break from 1-2pm. The last tea break is from 3.00-3.30 p.m. The workers prefer to cook their dinner meals in labour camps. Each group is headed by a Labour Sardar followed by a Munshi who looks into the accounts. Most of the workers in the construction sector are migrant labourers.

Not only are migrant workers working as construction labourers but also as street vendors. A series of shops have come up in front of DLF Building which houses IBM and IBM Daksh. One of the street vendors said he has paid money to some people to set up an eatery here. Shops lined on this row sell Momos, Dosa, Biryani and even sweets. The sweet shop vendor daily travels from Naihati to Rajarhat to sell sweets. He buys sweets from various sweet shops across Naihati and commutes everyday to sell sweets from his makeshift stall. He opens his stall around 11.30am and he winds up his sales around 6pm.

The stories of labourers on the fringes of Rajarhat show the ways in which an alternative parallel economy has emerged alongside the three predominant malls that service Rajarhat: Axis Mall, Home Town and City Centre II. The parallel economy is further visible in the transport system as pool cars often ferry passengers to the main centres of Kolkata at a rate of Rs 10-30 per passenger depending on distance. The struggles for survival of the parallel economy, which is not legally sanctioned, are multifarious as evident in the struggle of Nabadiganta Pariseba Samity in Sector V.

PERIPHERAL LABOUR FORCE

Nabadiganta Pariseba Samity (NPS) is a registered society of street vendors in Sector V. Each shop has an ID card authorised by Nabadiganta Industrial Authority. The identity card carries the following details of each shop: stall number, type of stall (B: Big stall of 3'/8'; S : Small Stall of 3'/6') and is valid for one year. Surajit Mondal recounts the struggle that NPS members face despite being registered. While they have been able to tackle the problem of extortion of monthly money arrangements with local goons after the issue of ID card, they are constantly evicted and asked to shift around. One of the shopkeepers who opens his shop only during lunch time says that the authorities should realise that they cannot work at computers and this is their only source of livelihood. Despite being organised

Ned Rossiter

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they face the challenge of being evicted. Currently they run stalls close to the State Fisheries Development Corporation's outlet. Surajit Mondal recalls that they have made repeated appeals for the use of vacant land. There were talks of mobile kiosks which would be distributed among the street vendors and they had drawn up a list of shops which were more than three years old and have been operating in Sector V. But nothing happened. He emphasises that when they are asked to move from one place to another they suffer a loss, as the minimum cost for setting up a makeshift shop is around close to Rs 20,000. NPS has made repeated appeals for a permanent solution as they live under the risk of constant eviction for reasons such as the company considering them a menace or the visit of a VIP in Sector V premises. While NPS stalls contribute to the everyday functioning of Sector V, they continue to be looked upon as a peripheral labour force. Their contribution to the circulation of economy is undermined. It is neither under capitalist surveillance like the coffee shops, restaurants and food courts of Sector V nor under state surveillance like the restaurants and kiosks run by the State Fisheries Development Corporation.

In the vicinity of the two New Towns there are two functional SEZs: WIPRO SEZ in Sector V and Unitech IT/ ITES SEZ in Rajarhat. Promoted by private developers and guarded by security guards at the entry and exit points, these are sites of exclusive production of private capital. English speaking middle class youth walk in at a designated time to a world where they work in cubicles, and for their recess have access to food courts managed my multinational food chains. The members of this service class become global citizens through production of goods and services for a global market and consumption of goods and services from this same market.

The vicious cycle of production and consumption is entwined with working hours and times that are adjusted as part of the international labour process. Working hours and holidays are not defined by Indian standard time but governed by the parameters of those for whom the production is conducted. One of my informants migrated from Delhi to Kolkata to work with Capgemini. She is a Senior Consultant and works from 1.30pm-10.30pm. She is under the UK Process and handles the human resources of Capgemini employees in UK which she calls end-to-end sourcing. She is responsible for sourcing, recruiting, payroll services and mobility services. In other words, her team in Kolkata
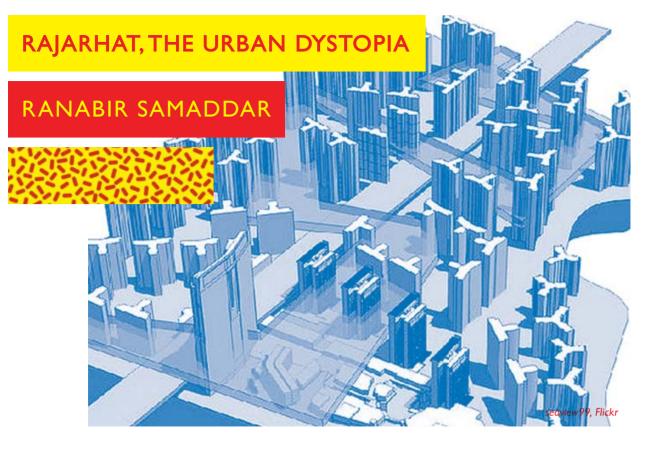
is responsible for the learning and development services of UK Capgemini. A five member team in Kolkata manages the entire HR account of 8,200 Capgemini employees. She indicates the possibility of growth as one of the members of her team was promoted to be the editor of the in-house news service. While she is happy with her institutional profile, she is unhappy with the services offered by the city of Kolkata. She says in Delhi even when she was a call centre employee she was given a pick and drop for all shifts in an air-conditioned car but now she has to come half way to Ruby Hospital where a bus service ferries the workers to Rajarhat. She says at times even if she completes her work she has to depend on transport services offered by the office because of a lack of adequate transport facilities from Unitech IT/ ITES SEZ after 6pm.

Rapid urbanisation has not brought about a change in work practices. It has rather created a superficial style quotient without basic amenities. For my informant the worst part is that 'people are complacent'. She says despite being housed in Eastern India's largest IT SEZ, there is no clinic, trained nurse or chemist shop. She adds that while Rajarhat has two malls the idea of going to one of these for lunch is a nightmare if you do not have private transport. Interesting to note is that none of these workers are aware of any organisations that are unionising IT/ITES workers. One interviewee who filled in a questionnaire wrote 'I would hate if that happens' and only one out the twenty who filled in questionnaire

from workers in Unitech IT SEZ mentioned an interest in knowing about unions working. There is also ignorance among the workers relating to the structure and function of SEZs. For instance, nobody was aware of the role of the Development Commissioner of SEZ.

To remember David Harvey's description of the city, New Town is an 'agglomeration of productive forces built by labour employed within a temporal process of circulation of capital'. Temporariness marks each category of labour that contributes to the making and functioning of the city. It is a production site where the workforce is engaged for not more than 3 years in IT sectors, not more than 6 months in the construction sector and 2 years or even less for the street vendor. HIDCO and Nabadiganta Industrial Authority have managed to create a organised space of development where workers cutting across sectors contribute towards the idyllic image of a global citizen by being willing to work and produce across different time zones. The mall worker sells durables and goods in an environment completely alien from his local surroundings. The city is an agglomeration of people in transit even as the locals live under the stress of being displaced and dispossessed from their livelihoods.

RAJARHAT, THE URBAN DYSTOPIA

RANABIR SAMADDAR

seaview99, Flickr

Kolkata has changed quite a lot in the last few decades. It wants to become Delhi. It must catch up with the flash and glitz found elsewhere. It too must have its high-tech township and must embody a new mode of circulation of money, information, human resources, and power. It does not think that its old organic character is worth retaining. If discarding the old organic character is the necessary sacrifice to make in order to develop, let that be. If road space increases while the space for human interaction decreases, that price Kolkata must pay. Likewise parallel journals have lost their edge, parallel theatre has lost audience, the river line earlier dotted with old storehouses has changed, and tram cars carry only the distant memories of a city criss-crossed with tramlines and streetcars. Old urban resources have wasted in a state of neglect. In this change of guards, something new is happening. As a product of this developmental imagination Rajarhat is coming up beyond Kolkata.

Where is Rajarhat? If you enter the city from the airport side, after few kilometres, near Koikhali, you take the left turn, and then you will traverse the newly laid road that cuts through miles and miles of waste land, here and there marked with a shiny mall or few glass buildings, high rises built by new developers, and sign boards announcing the coming up of an office, or

an e-firm, or a conference centre – all that Kolkata apparently did not have. This is a notified area, named after the deceased venerable leader of Bengal – the Jyoti Basu Nagar. After you have covered about fifteen miles in this way, you will bypass Salt Lake and reach the artery that will re-connect you with Kolkata. Possibly you will be relieved for you have not seen in the thirty minutes or so you were going in a car or the speeding bus ferrying you from the airport to the city any pond, any water body, any village, any school, any farmer, any farming land, any herd of cattle. All these are gone. Land has been taken over to meet the deficit of Kolkata. But from the city side that is from the west, Rajarhat is beyond Kolkata, with few buses to connect, only one road to lead to, and as a person of Kolkata you have no reason to go beyond unless you are a BPO employee, or an employee in a mall, or a construction worker (in that case you of course stay there), or have relatives who have bought houses there. When the night falls, then of course there is nothing for you. Only syndicates dealing with money, land, building material, waste disposal business, and firearms, are the denizens of the new city at night, the city beyond Kolkata.

The project of the New Town is a commentary on post-colonial capitalism, the return of primitive accumulation, on the way space plays a critical role in transformation,

and the receding of the colonial city in the history of accumulation with the accompanying emergence of the *new town*. In short Rajarhat is a saga of space, capital, and people in the vortex of globalised time.

Rajarhat is not connected with Kolkata in any sense; it is connected with Sector 5 of the Salt Lake area, while being connected on another side with another notified area, the empire of BRADA (Bhangar Rajarhat Area Development Authority). Flanked by North 24 Parganas, the estuary region of Bhangar and Haroa in the South 24 Parganas, and Basanti, its real trade (daily, petty, and small) connection in terms of men, cash, vegetable market, etc. is with Baguihati, an unkempt dirty bazaar, bus stop and terminus, banking centre, eating place, cycle rickshaws, narrow lanes, hordes of day labourers waiting to be hired, and various kinds of sundry stalls – all rolled into one. The farmers, fishermen, vegetable growers and sellers, boatmen, and agricultural labour now robbed of livelihood – all roam around these marginal places, if they are not already serving the new comers of Rajarhat with domestic labour, transportation, vegetable supply, or serving tea and sundry Tiffin food. But those who work in the New Town (as the Jyoti Basu Nagar is called), in those malls, e-firms, hotels, other companies, or live in those high rises, have few reasons to visit Kolkata or these dirty marginal places. This new inner city supposed to produce urban wealth today is at once exterior to the city proper. It looks like a wasteland, combining virtual production with new types of consumption, symbolised by the mall, the City Centre of the North, or the giant building material depot. Interior to late twentieth century and early twenty first century mode of wealth production and therefore exterior to traditional wealth pattern of a city, Rajarhat represents simultaneously the virtuality of capital and reality of the primitive mode of accumulation – a utopia to financiers and speculators and a dystopia for urban imagination.

Architects are excited over Rajarhat New Town, like long idle military commanders getting excited over the prospect of waging a war, or an idle doctor finding finally a patient, or a manufacturer of weapons finally getting chance to display his/her weaponry. So the plan began with designing sectors and action areas. They were then busy in designing placements of traffic intersections, bus stands, new transport system, new markets, new malls, and remember all in their greenest form. Remember also in this context that Rajarhat, as the planners say, will soon become with the help of US technology the first zero-energy town in the country. Realtors follow architects' dreams, at times the other way round. Therefore even though there are

very few essential infrastructural facilities in the area (and we cannot expect architects becoming excited over the presence or absence of those facilities, which they will leave happily to town planners and municipal engineers), schools in New Town and BRADA areas must have more space, more designed buildings, and more amenities. Since the cost of developing land is relatively high in a new town, schools become business. These schools (for instance Delhi Public School) must be 'ideal' schools with huge open spaces, different playgrounds and halls, community grounds, etc., with of course different priorities for different types of schools – nursery, primary, and higher secondary.

There will be 'educational zones' – with additional space for peak office hours and parking facility. There will be designated places for vocational and training institutions. There will be 'hardly any scope of a university' there, as the architect declares, the 'traditional concept of university/college in a bigger land is hardly viable without government subsidy.' But with other kinds of 'skill-oriented units', urban areas will become 'engines of the development of rural hinterlands'. Effective planning on a regional scale will provide 'appropriate preference and promotion of industries and commercial activities'. Generation of jobs will attract people from the rural surroundings for livelihood. In Kolkata, an architect declared, 'Several New Townships are being developed. This is creating a major development impetus in the region. Namely New Town, Rajarhat has already been started its development. This will create enormous employment opportunities, which obviously would be a benefit for the rural surroundings and villages. The change of the livelihood from the primary sector to the secondary and tertiary sectors is getting very fast. In the near future the profile of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area obviously will change due to the development of those New Towns. The economic activities will be well decentralized if the development goes as per intention.' The urban architect has to think also of the faster circulation of men, money, services, and commodities. So, HIDCO is now acquiring 'smart buses'.

The point is: Is Rajarhat then the private game of capital, its own business to shape the world in its contemporary image, while the public character of the city becomes irrelevant in the history of urban imagination today? We may ask, is this difference between Kolkata and Rajarhat, their opposition, a structural one? Rajarhat will be what Kolkata is not? Or is it a matter of urban style only? Maybe, we can still consider Rajarhat as part of Kolkata and not beyond Kolkata. But in that case we must be ready to integrate the structural opposition between the utopia of a city and the dystopia of a wasteland within a narrative and explanatory

framework that must go beyond a binary opposition. I have already said that Rajarhat suggests the unity of the most virtual form of capital accumulation and the primitive form. Eviction, threat, coercion, murder, gun running, and presence of bands of coolies from Murshidabad and Malda – these combine with shiny glass buildings, e-firms in the special economic zone, new health care facility built by the Tatas, new banks, gradual spread of ATM centres and this combination suggests the already happening breakdown of an integrated circuit of money, power, and capital into various segmented circuits; and it will be worth looking into the ways in which these local circuits of power feed into a bigger grid of capital. But merely stating this is not enough, the statement represents a problem or some problems. Let me mention here three problems.

Problem number one: If by the wild play of the architects, planners, and moneybags a space is destroyed and a new space comes up, how to apprehend that change and its long term consequences? How shall we study not simply the *product* (the new city), but the *production, the process, the practice* of producing a city, with all the hazards of contemporariness?

Problem number two: If the opposition between public and private, primitive and virtual, representation and void, city and periphery breaks down, what will be the new forms of collective action? After all, these binary oppositions had genuine social and historical context. Will they die down? Or will the contexts survive? In any case what will be the new public space, which was till now essential for public mobilisations and public actions?

Problem number three: What will be the authentic nature of the private in this new public society? The private pleasures that shape our consumption patterns, encourage new commodification, and new ways of arranging the space? If they cannot be separated out as independent elements in the designed place called Rajarhat, and the model it develops, where consumption will take place side by side of production, will there be any authentic private, except the new centres of public assemblage for 'private' consumption and pleasure?
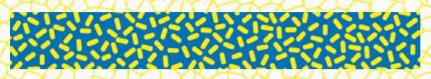
In short Rajarhat beyond Kolkata disrupts the earlier pattern of the mutually constitutive relationship between space of accumulation of capital and the urbanity of democratic citizenship. In the immediate exclusion of one from the other, we may witness a new kind of realism in politics, possibly not desirable to our urban tastes. The spatial programme of the new town and by implication of the evolving new entity called Kolkata-New Town will demand new specifications about public action marking the new relation between capital and citizenship. It will take time to fill the empty fields of Rajarhat (a huge area of about 3100 hectares of land) in a planned way with houses, roads, streets, schools, people, office units, 'green' industries, shops and malls, water pipes, lanes, power and cable lines, etc, for much will depend on developers, land shirks, estate owners, software giants like WIPRO, INFOSYS, TATA Consultancy, etc., and the general state of the economy. The government stands penniless. The HIDCO has hardly any capital. All it has is the land looted from the local villagers, and now it has to sell them to private players to make the dream of public-private partnership successful. With no integral infrastructure of urban services in Rajarhat, the empty fields there (since 1998) represent in this scenario the death of agriculture with its subsidiary activities as a substantive occupation in Bengal, its murder by capital, savage commodification of land, and the resurgence of private property in city – private roads, private power generation equipment, private pleasure houses, private sources of drinking water, private schools, private villas, private housing estates with private guards, and the most private of all, private production units in the SEZs in Rajarhat-Sector V of Salt Lake. What will be the politics of anti-capital in this new spatial system of capital?

Where is then Rajarhat? The Rajarhat I am speaking of here is at once a real place – a block of territory, a municipality, a new town in the process of emergence, a scenario of destroyed farmlands – Rajarhat is also a trapped land, a ghost for urban planners, dream for many more such planners, and a collective name of an ensemble of places. Rajarhat is a surface, which is made of miles of wasteland, a destroyed top level of earth. This surface is made of filled-in ponds, other water bodies, pilfered and acquired what was previously tilled land, vegetable gardens and farms, wetlands, small villages and hamlets. But Rajarhat is also the depth of several relations figured in space. In contrast with the sentimental image of space evoked by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard in the phrase and account, the *poetics of space*, we must situate the *politics of space*, which will mould several subjectivities in a particular way. This particular way is *variational* as opposed to the *constitutive* way of the city.

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