

# Migrant and the Neo-liberal City

## An Introduction

RANABIR SAMADDAR

The neo-liberal envisioning of cities and the accompanying hyper-commodification of land and new forms of social marginalisation have increased precarity among migrant labour, severely impairing their ability to negotiate the city space and society at large. This set of four studies, conducted in Mumbai and Kolkata, brings to the fore the relationship between labour and urban space, the fundamental problematic in the emergence of the neo-liberal city. Though playing a critical role in the neo-liberal restructuring of urban space, the migrants have been targeted by state agencies and sections of civil society, who find it difficult to accommodate them within the physical, social, political and cultural spaces of the city.

Proposing this set of four papers to the *Economic & Political Weekly* had two purposes: first, to reinforce the point, which is not novel and is common sense to the migrants, that the migrant sits at the heart of the city in neo-liberal times; second, to suggest a provisional theoretical framework that can accommodate the figure of the migrant labour as a critical element in the transformation of the city to a rental outlet and at the same time a site of extraction. These two points reflect on the relationship between labour and urban space, the fundamental problematic in the emergence of the neo-liberal city. They also reflect on the hidden processes of the shift of the modern city as a site of industrial production to a site of knowledge-based economy, which requires besides localised concentrations of human capital, a complex of place-based services to support the knowledge-based economy. As this set of studies (on Kolkata and Mumbai) indicates, the neo-liberal city encapsulates the central social contradiction of modern global capitalism, namely, increased return from global connectedness accompanied by hyper-commodification of land and new forms of social marginalisation, most notably the increasing informality of labour and life.

These four studies also show the historically specific problem of urban governance today: if the neo-liberal city symbolises infrastructural power (and some will say infrastructural sovereignty), how much can the city be a “state?” Can, with all the Weberian attributes of a modern bureaucracy, the professional government agencies control the movement of the migrants and settle the population of a city? At the same time, can these agencies faced with all the republican demands of citizenship, free themselves, at least partially, from dependence on the fiscal resources generated from the capacity of the state to extract revenues from the private sector, which turns the city into a site of rental and other forms of extraction? We may thus sum up the central slogan of this set of studies: without the migrant, no infrastructural power!

Through these four papers, we are thereby suggesting the following: (i) infrastructure reorganises the city in a way that not only fragments work and reproduces the old social conditions, but calls for the permanent presence of the migrant as the impossible but necessary factor in this process; (ii) this reorganisation of the city is also a reorganisation of space that depends on rent economy; (iii) yet the reorganised city (always in the process of reorganisation) in terms of urban governance has a permanent problem posed by the anomalous figure of the migrant, the migrant labourer, who cannot be dispensed

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with and who cannot be settled; and (iv) consequent to all these, the city is not a harmonious entity brimming with the energy of the citizens, but an extremely contentious place marked by groups of people fighting for resources, space, rights, claims and justice.

### Labour Migration and Displacement in Kolkata

Let me now briefly present the four studies—two on Kolkata and two on Mumbai. Iman Kumar Mitra explores the interfaces of urbanisation, settlement practices, and issues of labour migration and displacement in contemporary Kolkata. He begins with interrogating the given historical narrative of urbanisation and zoning practices in the city in the 1960s and picks out few threads, which still seem relevant in studies of contemporary modes of urbanisation. He discusses the practice of “*thika* tenancy” in the Kolkata slums—the most prominent site of habitation of the migrant workers in the city, and challenges the hypothesis of the “bypass model” of urbanisation in Kolkata. In its place, he introduces the concept of “urban recycling,” which facilitates a continuous juxtaposition of displacement and accumulation of human and other resources as part of the urbanisation process.

Debarati Bagchi in her study tracks the life and work of the migrant female waste pickers in Kolkata to understand the processes and structures of migration, occupation, life and labour conditions, and their access to infrastructure and other urban resources. She argues that the gendered question of waste picking cannot be addressed by just understanding the act of waste picking but in conjunction with their spatiality of dwelling which is often subsumed in our a priori understanding that waste pickers must be migrants for they do not belong to the city’s formal regime of tenancy. She seeks to understand the time, territory, family structures, and the pattern of shifts in occupation taking place in and around a particular dwelling area. Given the fact that the act of aggregation and segregation of waste is at the heart of the informal waste picking economy, she asks, what moulds the relationship between the contingencies of occupation and social reproduction of urban space?

### Informalisation of Labour and Homelessness in Mumbai

Based on empirical work in Mumbai, Manish Jha and Pushpendra Kumar inquire into experiences of homelessness of the migrants, and locate these experiences in the larger processes of a neo-liberal envisioning of Mumbai as the global city. They argue that this dual reality of Mumbai results in an ever-growing informalisation of labour, displacement, and inadequate resettlement, which in turn restricts access to affordable housing, services, workspaces, and social welfare. Their analysis brings out what may be called a permanent condition of suspended citizenship for the homeless migrants, whose domestic life will be always under public gaze and who face violence and the civil society’s growing assertion for rights over public spaces. Through a study of a garment manufacturing unit in Dharavi, they show how the interrelated dynamics of work,

workplace, and shelter conjoin to extract the maximum labour from a worker and, at the same time, keep the worker homeless and insecure. The Dharavi unit, they argue, is an example of how the present capitalist production relies on supply of cheap labour from the rural sector. And migrant labour, the world over, unfailingly provides a fertile field to understand the nuances of their precarity, insecurity, struggle, coping, and ability to negotiate with city space and society at large.

Continuing the analysis, Mouleshri Vyas points to the evolving nature of the urban labour market, where age, skill, body capacity, location, caste, and gender act as interstices of urban economy. The market is not the market with equal access as the neo-liberal agenda of urban reforms would have us believe. She picks up the case of the elderly migrant labour working as security guards. As she says,

The benign image of elderly security guard in a housing society who performs an extension of care work—supervising children at play, noting the entry/exit of vendors and visitors, and communicating messages to the society members, and of the guard at the ATM outlet, who is poorly paid, and working a 12-hour shift, is indicative of the urban informal labour today.

Indeed, other studies on the expanding role of child labour (including, child labour from other countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal) and old-age labour in urban economy substantiates this point.

### Phenomenon of Transit Labour

It is not that the profile of a neo-liberal city emerging in these studies is a completely new thing. It retains strong continuities with the old city. Informal labour was still there in the old city, urban clashes and conflicts were still happening, and the city used to have on a regular scale migrants from villages and other towns. Yet the discontinuities are striking. We have to only recall Arjan de Haan classic study (1997) of the migrant jute workers in Calcutta, and contrast it with Kundu’s (2003) exhaustive report on Kolkata slums, and we shall understand the transformation of the migrant question. The scale and form of migration have changed. Informalisation of work is linked to the availability of migrant labour—whether in the scrap metal industry, or waste processing zones (including processing of e-waste), or care and entertainment industry that has expanded enormously, or the rental economy that has expanded exponentially, requiring all kinds of new services to be performed by the migrant labour. Several studies have shown the construction sector accounting for a substantial chunk of migrant labour, featuring urban transformation along neo-liberal lines. Yet what is important to remember is that the migrant labour—we have the construction labour in mind here—never settles. It also unsettles the city. Roving bands of labourers, moving from one construction site to another, remind us of the late 19th century phenomenon of destitute labour. At the same time, they indicate that the neo-liberal city is based on a combination of the most virtual and primitive forms of accumulation. In this paradoxical combination, migrant labour becomes the “transit labour.”

The phenomenon of transit labour becomes comprehensible when we keep in mind the conjunction of infrastructure, logistics, and labour at which the Indian economy stands today. Hundreds of projects involving construction of the special economic zones (SEZs), power plants, airports, railway corridors, highways, bridges, new towns and new buildings and houses, flyovers, information and technology parks, and other residential and commercial projects, need not only steel, cement, and aluminium but also labour, particularly in the construction and mining sectors.

The construction industry is one of India's largest employers. Thousands of construction workers build new apartments and offices, while living in squalor in roadside tents along the new buildings that come up in due course. They are like the informal miners of Bellary: migrants from the decimated agricultural sector, escaping poverty and disease at home only to be sucked into an immensely exploitative labour market,

According to one report, on an average one labourer dies in the city of Bengaluru every day (<http://marcobulgarelli.com/migrant-workers-in-india/>). In all these sites, as in West Bengal, a local contact in the village supplies workers to the contractor. Both extract cuts out of the wages paid to the labourers. There is no direct transaction between the builder and the labourers, and this system of subcontracting frees the actual employers of all responsibilities towards labour. In the last couple of decades, several infrastructure, commercial and residential projects in cities such as Mumbai (for example, the Bandra–Worli Sea Link, Bandra–Kurla Commercial Complex,

the Thakur village, etc) and Bengaluru (for example, the Brigade Metropolis, the Electronic City, the flyover to Electronic City, etc) are parables of the current phenomenon of transit labour, because these places symbolise the conjunction of infrastructure, logistical software, and labour. Add to this the construction of several fast corridors, smart cities, SEZ in various parts of the country, and we get a fair idea of the conjunction mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In short, the neo-liberal city in order to be a logistical hub becomes an extraction site. It survives on extraction of physical power, air, waste, soil, water, and other conceivable resources. The postcolonial milieu of this transformation makes more acute the contradictions of urban policy regime and neo-liberal urbanity as a whole. The migrant stands at the centre of these contradictions. The issue of justice has to be seen from this angle. Else, the slogan, “right to the city,” will remain vacuous.

These papers form part of a larger set of studies by the Calcutta Research Group, with the support of the Ford Foundation. Besides the ones discussed here, the studies raise issues of legal framework of urban governance, forms of labour, logistics and transit labour, postcolonial dynamics of accumulation, urban politics around the migrant, violence and social justice.

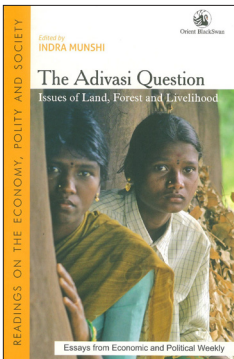
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## The Adivasi Question

*Edited By*

**INDRA MUNSHI**



Depletion and destruction of forests have eroded the already fragile survival base of adivasis across the country, displacing an alarmingly large number of adivasis to make way for development projects. Many have been forced to migrate to other rural areas or cities in search of work, leading to systematic alienation.

This volume situates the issues concerning the adivasis in a historical context while discussing the challenges they face today.

The introduction examines how the loss of land and livelihood began under the British administration, making the adivasis dependent on the landlord-moneylender-trader nexus for their survival.

The articles, drawn from writings of almost four decades in EPW, discuss questions of community rights and ownership, management of forests, the state's rehabilitation policies, and the Forest Rights Act and its implications. It presents diverse perspectives in the form of case studies specific to different regions and provides valuable analytical insights.

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