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The Mischievous City. The Kolkota Poor and the Outsmarting of Neoliberal Urbanisation

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It is hardly difficult these days to come across academic research done and papers written on the victimisation and marginalisation of the urban poor due to the processes of neoliberal urbanisation. It is, however, in the very nature of things, that tales of defeat do not inspire one to victory and narratives of powerlessness hardly ever empower. The present paper however has a different story to tell. It is a narrative of creative mischief – a narrative of the outsmarting and out-manoeuvring of neoliberal urbanisation at the hands of Kolkata's urban under-dogs. The two cases presented in the paper show two, apparently contradictory but intrinsically inter-related, faces of neoliberal urbanisation. In one case, the urban poor were embraced and in the other the residents of an informal settlement were booted out of their homes. In both the cases, the people resisted, evaded, rejected and ridiculed the projects in their own curiously creative ways.

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A Few Words on Theory

This is a story of two slums, its people and how they tackled and outsmarted two large-scale urban development projects. Unfortunately, this is also an academic paper. Therefore, before we get down to the story certain theoretical matters would have to be dealt with first. In the case of the present paper, these would be the theories surrounding neoliberal urbanisation, a phenomenon which has arguably caused the maximum misery to the urban poor of both the developed and developing nations in the recent years. However, while discussing theory it is always worthwhile to remember Oscar Wilde's words that "nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." Over the last decade a voluminous literature has come to exist on the themes of neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanisation. Much is known about what these particular species of capitalism are, but hardly anything is known about what to do about them. It is a bit like trying to understand the nature of a man-eating tiger roaming freely through the streets of a city, when the primary task should be to try to put it in a cage. There shall be plenty of time to study it then. The people of the slums discussed in this paper seemed to have tackled the tiger better than most academic scholars would be able to, and it is needless to mention, that none of them did it after a serious reading of the books and articles of Harvey, Brenner, Theodore, Swyngdeouw or Baeten. They don't know what the "N" word is or what it means. After digging through the literature it does make one wonder and question - are we reading the right books at all? David Harvey stresses this very point right at the beginning of his new book *Rebel Cities*.

> "We academics are quite expert at reconstructing the genealogy of ideas. So we can take Lefebre's writings...and excavate a bit of Heidegger here, Nietzche there, Fourier somewhere else...But what we academics so often forget is the role played by the sensibility that arises out of the streets around us, the inevitable feelings of loss provoked by the demolitions, what happens when whole quarters (like Les Halles) get re-engineered or *grand ensembles* erupt seemingly out of nowhere" (Harvey, 2012: X-XI).

Personally, for me, the 'sensibility that arises out of the streets around us' has been a far more effective one than the wisdom I mistakenly believed to have acquired by reading the books. It is of course an unfortunate fate of themes on which the writing never stops that after a while the books start talking to books and the scholars start talking to scholars and the people go farther and farther away from this largely ineffective intellectual acrobatics of the neo-Brahmins. I felt that the existing literature on neoliberal urbanisation and the planning responses to it, suffer from two limitations. Firstly, they largely dealt with cases from North America and West Europe, that is, from cities of the developed countries where neoliberalism meant a departure from the welfare oriented policies of post-war Keynesianism. That post-war Keynesianism was itself part of a larger political project of keeping radical socialist tendencies at bay at a time when the Soviet Union was a reality, that it was intrinsically linked to the politics of the cold-war and disruptive intervention in the affairs of third world countries, that it was essentially a way of keeping capitalism alive and vibrant through troubled times and that neoliberalism could arise due to these very contradictions that were inherent in it, is generally left out of the literature. This whole understanding of neoliberalism that one finds in the writings of Brenner, Theodore, Peck, Tickell, Swyngdouw and even Harvey, is a very developed-country affair. The crisis that comes in the form of neoliberalism follows a period of development and prosperity during which the economic and political position of the working classes was strong. In most third world countries, the working classes can look back to no such period of well-being which is being snatched away from them. Here it is a story of replacing one kind of misery with another kind of misery; replacing the apathy and stagnation of a bureaucratic government with the energetic greed and efficient exploitation of the capitalist.

It is true that the characteristics of neoliberal urbanisation mentioned in the literature – 'closed architectural competitions, compliance in the local press, a focus on the very construction of the project as a main motivation, the virtual absence of social matters, and the virtual absence of debate, dispute or disagreement altogether' (Baeten 2012: 21) are all very familiar things even in an Indian context, but they were a reality, and perhaps a stronger reality, even before the advent of neoliberalism in the early 1990s. Rather, in some ways it can be said that the eagerness to attract investment to the cities and making them globally competitive often make the authorities consider the plight of the poor in ways that are far more energetic than before. Of course, the energy may translate into brutal evictions, but with a reasonable check kept by civil society and activists, it often translates into a slum up-gradation project. The situation here is therefore more complex. Neoliberalism throws tempting crumbs at the poor while constructing an over-arching geographical, political and economic system which is unequivocally in service of capital. This is a situation in which the poor themselves speak up and defend the rich and the lowers hail the uppers in the hope that more will trickle down. During an interview with Shyamal Chakrabarty, one of most senior and respected members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Centre of Indian trade Unions (CITU), a national level trade union allied to the socialist parties, the veteran Marxist lamented that in the present times the workers themselves opt for temporary contract jobs in private firms rather than permanent ones, with benefits, in a sick ailing government industrial units. (Interview with Shyamal Chakrabarty, August 2010). In such a situation, an organised political assault on the forces of neoliberalism might be resisted and opposed by those who are supposed to be the victims of it.

The other limitation of the existing literature on neoliberalism is that they are largely end up being narratives of woe where the forces of neoliberalism always get the better of the forces of the people. Following the triumph of capital, the scholars use very correct and very complex terminology and language to explain the process in detail. The irony is that a very correct and comprehensive description of despair generally compounds it. Moreover, the complex academic language alienates the analysis from the ordinary people, the activists and the political leaders who are usually the main forces to issue a credible challenge to neoliberalism. The scholars can't wage this battle alone, but they seem happy enough to be heard, understood and published by each other.

In such a situation, opening ones ears and eyes to the streets and acquiring the sensibility that arises from that seems to be a crucial task. This paper is a modest attempt in that very direction.

The Story of Two Settlements

Based on ownership rights, the settlements of the urban poor in Kolkata fall within two broad categories – the regularised slums which have security of tenure and the informal slums which do not have any security of tenure. The informal settlements in the city are in a far worse state than the regularised slums, which have benefitted from slum up-gradation projects. The former, on the other hand, are deprived of the most basic physical and social amenities. Moreover, they are often located along crucial infrastructure corridors such as arterial roads, railway lines and urban waterways. Any attempts to up-grade these infrastructure corridors have to tackle the problem of the informal settlements too.

In the case of third world cities in general and Kolkata in particular the forces of neoliberal urbanisation first have to deal with the problems of urban poverty and shabby infrastructure before the commodification of the city can be undertaken. However, the attempts to address these problems assumed a very contradictory nature in Kolkata as the planning authorities took two totally different approaches viz-a-viz the two kinds of settlements – participatory slum up-gradation in the case of the regularised slums, and swift eviction in the case of the informal settlements.

One of the settlements presented in this paper is a regularised slum called Pyarabagan which was targeted under a USD 400 million, Asia Development Bank funded project called the Kolkata Environment Improvement Project (KEIP) to undertake, among other things, a comprehensive physical improvement of one hundred and forty-one regularised slums in the city from 2003 to 2010. The other one is actually a cluster of informal settlements located along a prominent urban waterway system called the North Canal System, which was targeted for dredging and beautification by the government in the year 1998.

Pyarabagan and the KEIP

Pyarabagan slum is located adjacent to the prosperous Ballygunge neighbourhood in ward number 69 in southern Kolkata. It is inhabited by approximately 750 families and is spread over an area of approximately one hectare. The up-gradation project in the slum focussed on physical aspects such as creation and repair of community water supply and sanitation systems, paving and lighting of streets and a social aspect which focussed on creating women's self-help groups in the slum (www.keip.in). A stakeholder consultation process preceeded the commencement of physical up-gradation to ensure that the process remained a participatory one and the views and opinions of the residents were fully taken into account. This crucial component of the project was entrusted to a local non-governmental organisation (NGO). The NGO in its turn resorted to a range of participatory activities to involve the residents of the slum in the project right from the start (interview with NGO field-workers, June, 2004). They undertook baseline surveys, interviews, group discussions, community resource mapping exercises, pasted posters and organised street-theatre shows on environmental awareness and organised meetings for young women in the slum urging them to form self-help groups. Despite, all their efforts, the NGO workers hardly seemed satisfied with their work when I interviewed them about it. According to them, it was impossible to win the trust of the slum residents no matter what they did. The more they tried to inculcate a spirit of project ownership and participation, the more the people seemed to be interested only in petty and selfish concerns.

"The slum residents are not so ignorant about development projects. Often, the community refused to cooperate with us unless some tangible development was undertaken in the slum. For example, the residents would ask us to repair a toilet which is in sound condition just because they have found out that toilets are being repaired in another part of the slum. Sometimes, they would damage the toilets themselves and then ask for it to be repaired" (Interview with NGO workers, June, 2004).

Indeed, even in my visits to the slum, despite the otherwise vibrant nature of the settlement, I did not sense any marked enthusiasm about the up-gradation project. A resident of the slum Narayan Jana threw some light on the matter.

"Have the people spent their own money that they would feel a great sense of ownership regarding this project? All this was done with the Government's money. Everything came from outside and the people got the benefits of the project. Obviously, you would get only that much participation as is natural under such circumstances!" (Interview with Narayan Jana, June, 2004).

According to another resident Lokhhi, "They took all our views and opinions and then did exactly as they felt like!" (Interview with Lokhhi, June, 2004).

Somehow, the people sensed that there was more happening behind the scenes in this project than was being shared by the NGO in all its participatory openness. And indeed, there was a whole lot that was screened from the community, but it was totally outside the power of the NGO to take that story to the people. The NGO workers had reasons to be disillusioned after all the hard work they had put in. However, the crucial point that seemed to escape them was that the very design of the project and the

priorities of the funding agencies seemed to betray a lack of interest in genuine participation. The amount of money allotted to the slum improvement component, the number of slums to be targeted for upgrading across the city, the amount of time to be spent on participatory activities and even the type of physical upgrading to be undertaken in each slum were all more or less fixed from before. Some amount of standardisation of process and intervention is expected in a project of this scale which has a city wide scope, but one wonders how any participatory stakeholder consultation process, under such circumstances, can avoid being anything but cosmetic. If, in such a situation, the slum residents expressed a quick disinterest in the intangible processes of the project and demanded tangible deliverables, then it can be said that they appraised the true nature of the project rather correctly.

I could witness the mismatch between the intention and the outcome of the participatory process first hand when I attended one of the meetings of the self-help groups. The NGO workers tried very hard to convince the women present about the benefits of pooling in their savings, receiving some vocational training and setting up their independent businesses. In all these tasks the NGO would give any guidance necessary. However, they were also disturbed that most of the women did not attend the meetings regularly. When they shared this concern, it became clear that most of the young women already had jobs inside or outside the slum. Meeta Mandol, one of the most vocal participants of the meeting spoke up.

"How can we come for every meeting? Don't we have work to do? I myself take several tuitions in the slum! It's a good job and I like it. The women of the neighbourhood are already employed! Every one is doing some job or another to earn some extra income for the family. They are already so busy. If you want to take their time then it has to be for something that they really need" (First meeting of Self-Help Group Maitri, July, 2004).

This response made it clear that while the NGO was under the illusion that they were 'helping' the community, it was actually the community that was being considerate and helping the former in their work by giving them time out of their busy schedule. They simply did not need any help.

They had understood very clearly, that the city at large needed the slums to be clean and hygienic to prove to the whole world that Kolkata was a clean place to be in. Lokhhi told me in one of the interviews how foreigners were brought to the slum in teams after the up-gradation project was over.

"They (the NGO workers and engineers) never shared any information with us, never gave us any reports or any maps, which we ourselves prepared. But when the project was over, foreigners started coming along with the project officials to see what had been done. Finally one South African delegation came. The slum residents were amazed. Earlier they thought all rich foreigners were white. Now even the black people were coming! Ha ha!".

Truly, the slum residents wanted the physical improvement of their slum, as anyone would under the circumstances. But even when it came to that aspect of the project they did not seem particularly desperate. According to Madhob Moira, one of the oldest residents of the slum: "The condition of the slum was alright even before the project. Yes, the work done has been good. They came and they did it. We had our own work to do" (Interview with Madhob Moira, June: 2004).

One of the wisest ways in which the people cooperated with the project had nothing to do with the visually appealing activities of cosmetic participation. A few young girls in the slum explained that to me:

"We knew that some development work was going on and most probably it would benefit us. We participated by not complaining about the inconveniences caused to us when the workers were digging the streets, laying the pipes and paving the streets. If one street was being worked on we started using other streets even if we had to walk more. We cooperated with the process and tried to make it smooth and quick" (Discussion with Meeta, Shefali, Reeta and Shona, July: 2004).

Interestingly, in a rare case of co-incidental justice, the people ended up treating the state exactly as the state was treating the people – as a way of getting the main job done. The state needed the slums cleaned up for attracting capital into the city, and the slums needed some physical benefits on the site to improve their living conditions a bit and get on with their lives.
However, the condition of the informal settlements was a totally different one. These were the ones that needed physical and social up-gradation the most, and yet, by virtue of being informal, and therefore illegal, the state had no qualms about showing them very clearly what the whole big picture was about.

The North Canal Reclamation project

The second story of this paper is of a cluster of informal settlements lying along the banks of a prominent urban waterway system called the North Canal System. The strategy to revive the canal system consisted of two main parts. The first part consisted of dredging the canals and the second part consisted of initiating various post-dredging services and development projects, such as operating a ferry service on the canals, improving and widening the roads along the canals, developing recreational and commercial uses along the canal banks and around the proposed ferry terminals etc. In 1998, the state transport department, appointed ICICI-Winfra (IWIN) a joint venture company, to prepare a feasibility report for the canal reclamation project. In the month of September IWIN approached British Waterways for assistance regarding the preparation of the feasibility report (www.icici-winfra.com). The report prepared by IWIN and British Waterways was submitted to the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2000. It covered all the technical, market and financial feasibility aspects and expressed the view that the canal project was both technically feasible and financially viable. The report estimated a project cost of USD 12 million approximately. It is important to note that the feasibility study excluded the cost of evicting and resettling the informal residents from the canal banks (Dutta 2001, www.icici-winfra.com).
The eviction of informal settlers from the canal banks and the dredging of the canals was to be undertaken by the Irrigation and Waterways department of the Government of West Bengal in cooperation with various local governments through which the canal system passes. Following the clearing of the canal banks and the dredging, a private developer was be appointed for implementing the second phase of the project on a 30 years build-operate-transfer basis (www.icici-winfra.com).
Despite all the planning, practically no implementation happened on the ground for the next two years. The political and human costs of evicting the informal residents continued to haunt the implementation process. In 2002 and 2003 massive eviction drives were undertaken in various stretches of the canal system. Four contingents of the anti-riot Rapid Action Force and scores of normal police personnel were present to keep the bull-dozers from harm during the 2002 evictions (The Telegraph, 11 Dec 2002 and 29 July 2003). Yet when I visited the sites in 2004 and then again in 2005 I still saw substantial number of hutments still standing. The informal settlers knew that in their case no mercy would be shown. They were not familiar with the human side of development projects which strives to ease the blows of change with various kinds of participatory techniques.
The residents of the informal settlements outlasted these eviction drives using a range of techniques which operated at such a local level that the project authorities could not spot them on their radar. The residents of one settlement of about two hundred hutments, had made a working arrangement with one of the local youth clubs, which in turn was allied to the ruling Left Front. For a small fee paid to the club, which in turn ended up in the party coffers, the residents ensured that their settlement would not be demolished. One resident Meena Ghosh described the arrangement.

"To tell you the truth, all the residents have to pay a onetime fee to the Shiv-Kali club. When I first came here four years back, I had to pay Rs 3000. Now it must have gone up to Rs 5000 or 6000. The club works for the Left Front. We are all very active during elections" (Interview with Meena Ghosh, July 2005).

She also described the advantages and dis-advantages of living in an informal settlement:

"It is a hard life without any civic amenities. But we don't have to pay any rent. Moreover, most of the people in the slum are involved with garbage collection and sorting. How can they possibly do that in a decent neighbourhood? Do you think we could carry on with our work if we lived in a formal neighbourhood?" (Interview with Meena Ghosh, July 2005).

Most of the settlements also got into informal arrangements with local municipal councillors and even the local police who were sympathetic towards them. The informal residents knew well, that none of the middle-class neighbourhoods near their settlements would survive a week without the crucial services they provided. One informal resident told me how she was saved from eviction by the middle-class household where she works as a maid.

"The gentleman who employs me works for the government himself. He used his contacts to ensure that our huts don't get demolished" (Interview with Lathika Sarkar, July 2005).

Another resident called Azad told me of his arrangement with the local police station.

"The police never bother me at all. I have a monthly arrangement with them. I give them Rs 50 or 60 every month and that settles it. When the project teams came and started dredging the canal, my family moved a bit further away for some time. After they were gone we returned and set up our huts again" (Interview with Azad, July 2005).

However, in the case of this project the top down nature of the process meant that the authorities could not even make use of the negative side participatory techniques in terms of knowing what the people were clandestinely doing to avoid eviction. The heavy handed approach made the project authorities assume that once the eviction drives had been completed the canal dredging would happen smoothly. It did happen smoothly, but in a very different sense.

There were many bamboo bridges constructed by the informal settlements at different points on the canal so that people could cross over and go to the other side. It was assumed that before the dredging happened, these bridges were demolished. However, only the local residents knew that many of the bridges in prominent locations were never demolished because the people put up a stiff resistance. Even the local councillors of the Left Front supported the people against their own government. The result was that the dredging was done incompletely but it was never reported to the higher authorities. All this resulted in a rather embarrassing situation on the day of the inauguration of the ferry service on the canal.

On 8 August 2006, two launches carrying important political leaders, governmental officials and other dignitaries set off from one end of the canal system but got stuck before reaching even half way down. One journalist described the debacle in the following words:

"The VIPs made quite a picture, clutching on to their clothes and hopping to the ground from the wooden plank with great relief. Hundreds of spectators from the shanties, including many children, cheered and clapped" (The Telegraph, Kolkata, 9 August 2006).

Finally, a project official confessed to the media that "the launches got stuck due to low depth. The excavation work was not carried out properly" (ibid).

The plans to run a ferry service on the canal and undertake the beautification and commercialisation of the banks were abandoned and remain so till the present times.

The Sensibility of the Streets

The above two cases illustrate how the people of the two settlements refused to be fooled and overwhelmed by the two contrasting but intrinsically linked faces of neoliberal urbanisation in Kolkata. Be it the face of benevolence or brutality, the people, in their own way, saw through the overall design of the projects, and decided to get the best of them. In the case of Pyarabagan, the slum dwellers frustrated the efforts of the agents of participation; got whatever physical benefits they could get from the project and then got on with their lives. In the second case, the people knew that hardly any benefits would accrue to them from the project and the primary aim was to survive the eviction drives using any means possible. It also got revealed at the end that the very tactics used by these poor informal residents not only protected them from eviction but also dealt such a blow to the project itself that it got suspended altogether and gave the settlements a new lease of life. Just as the slime mould in the introductory chapter of Nabeel Hamdi's book *Small Change,* 'solved the problem of the maze and found the food' without the aid of any 'power elite' or 'single brain' (Hamdi, 2004), the residents of the settlements described in these two cases solved their own mazes. The planners and decision makers were, in both cases, puzzled and frustrated, as their roses and their batons were equally shunned. But rather than any grand 'emergence', to use Hamdi's term, happening at the end of it all, the people just got on with their lives – as normal, sensible, regular people would.

In both the cases, the upsetting of the designs of neoliberal urbanisation was not done through a thorough understanding and investigation of the phenomenon itself, which may have overwhelmed the people more than the projects themselves could, but by the sheer will to survive and to keep their aspirations alive. The task of academic researchers and scholars in such a situation is not to sit within the safe confines of the academia and re-invent the complex language of theoretical correctness but to ally themselves directly with these processes and create the new theory by both learning from and giving guidance to the sensibility of the streets.

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