

Suburban Squatters: New Imaginings on Kolkata's Eastern Fringe.

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## **Abstract**

### **Suburban Squatters: New Imaginings on Kolkata's Eastern Fringe.**

**Jeremy Fewster**

Despite vast amounts of research on urban poverty in developing nations, scant attention has been paid to the social processes by which newly formed slum communities' move from being mere collections of displaced people, to moral entities that stake claims associated with citizenship. This study seeks to fill that gap by asking: *How to slum dwellers living on the outskirts of Kolkata discursively and ideologically construct their community within the context of the development state?* Through interviews, observations, participation on local festivals and library research, my research shows how squatters recast traditional notions of kinship obligations, caste duties, and religious identities, in ways that attempted to forge discursive and moral links between themselves and other social groups. Through an imaginative process, where past experiences are cognitively re-worked in order to understand the present and plan for the future, these squatters are in the process of creating new "moral communities" that seek to reorganize urban social relations in a more inclusive direction. Because the idioms through which slum-dwellers couch their discourse and action are traditional, many observers, academic or otherwise, too easily dismiss of their consciousness as backwards, and out of step with modern times. Therefore the present study will move us towards a way of understanding these processes that account for the subtle semantic shifts that displacement gives rise to, the underlying social critiques that these shifts call forth, and the vernacular forms of modernity that are being created in slums, both in India, and around the world.

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*Thus the midday halt of Chanok – more's the pity!-  
Grew a city  
As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed  
So it spread  
Chance-directed, chance erected, laid and built  
On the silt  
Palace, byre, hovel – poverty and pride –  
Side by side  
And, above the packed and pestilential town,  
Death looked down.*

- Rudyard Kipling

## **Chapter 1:**

### **1.1 Reflexive Beginnings:**

*Journal Entry – September 29, 1997,*

*Mumbai, 8:30 pm. – Arrived last night late, and shared a taxi with a couple from New Zealand fresh from 3 months of Kibbutz-ing in the hot Israeli Negev. Unfortunately all the cheap hotels were either full or locked up for the night, so we decided to go to Victoria Station to buy train tickets south, and to wait till morning's arrival. Bleary eyed, and jittery, we climbed into a taxi and rode off in the sultry Mumbai night.*

*Victoria station, one of the busiest hubs in India, also serves as a homeless shelter of sorts, although it was difficult to distinguish between waylaid travelers and the down and outers looking for a roof under which to sleep. Our arrival provoked little reaction from the snoozing throng, and we managed to find a little floor space by a colourful, multi-lighted scale that would tell you your weight and fortune for a mere Rupee. Despite the glow from the scale and the constant murmur of the sleeping mass, it wasn't long before sleep overtook us.*

*Some hours later I was awoken by loud shouts, and opened my eyes to the sight of uniformed men wielding brooms and buckets of water busily rousing the sleepers; prodding their dreaming flesh, and in some instances giving the truly unresponsive a good dousing of brown mop-water. I went to the counter to buy my ticket on the evening train to Ahmadabad, put my bag in storage, and went out to see what I could of Mumbai...*

*...Right now I'm too tired and overwhelmed to describe this place. Every second of experience could fill volumes. This afternoon I was 'befriended' by a man named Deepak, who I soon discovered was very interested in showing me his shop; and ideally selling me a knock off Snoop-Dogg tee-shirt, or other assorted trinkets so cheap looking that I wondered why anyone would even bother manufacturing them. Deepak's shop was located on Marine Drive beside a demolished building, itself surrounded by rusty barbed wire. In truth, it wasn't recognizable as a shop; more like a dilapidated kiosk set up amidst the rubble. We sat there, and Deepak offered me some tea, and proceeded to roll a joint (this was unexpected). I watched some laughing kids throw their small friend into the rusty barbed wire, and Deepak passed me the joint he had rolled. Out of politeness, and morbid curiosity, I accepted the offer - inhaling the acrid smoke on a pile of debris, in the middle of what to my eyes, seemed to be total chaos. It didn't take long before the effects of Deepak's joint began to gain a toehold in my mind and body. At that moment, the heat, the hot dust, the sea of people, and the strange semiotics of pretty much everything all contrived to instill in me a deep feeling of estrangement – like I had been cut adrift with no point of land to gain a bearing. I also felt a deep pressure in my lower abdomen, which I initially ascribed to nervous energy, but realized would require a toilet to dispel.*

*I asked Deepak where I might find a toilet, and with a simultaneous to and fro of the head, and demonstrative outstretched arms as if he wanted to say "herein lies my kingdom", he replied: "Everywhere toilet!"*



I laughed when re-reading that old journal – a journal written before any formal study of culture and social life had taken grasp of my thought. Looking back that feeling of raw, unarticulated shock still remains with me, and I imagine many have had similar experiences. In retrospect, I'm sure those raw feelings mark the genesis of the present study, so the reader might want to bear in mind that what is written on the following pages springs from a place of perplexity and misgiving, as opposed to clarity and noble-minded purpose. Throughout, I am plagued by the tension between maintaining a certain degree of academic rigor, and a feeling that this rigor is simply a ruse, masking the deeply complex relation between the ills of my age and my own coming to terms with it. For the moral quandary that the sight of poverty and deprivation instills in the well-heeled visitor is well-known. Am I responsible in some way? If so, in what way? What can I deduce from my own disgusted reaction to mass poverty – my tendency to try to push its brutal reality from my conscious mind? How to explain my refusal to entertain the request for ten cents worth of rice made by a ragged woman and her infant child? What does that say about me – about my culture?

These aren't academic or anthropological questions – they are moral and ethical ones, and while they don't formally govern the content of this work, this work would not have been undertaken without the urgency that they inspire. I fail to see how it could be otherwise. Over the years I have made four trips to India. I have tried various strategies to come to terms, or the better understand these pressing moral questions: orphanage volunteering, Hindi lessons, helping white robed nuns drag corpses from railway platforms, countless books, and even a partial submersion in the Holy Ganga - *I* tried them all.

The following is my thesis on how small communities of squatters, living in the rapidly developing suburbs of Kolkata, use whatever tools (in the broadest sense of the word) are available to grasp and shape their individual and collective future. At the same time it is a sort of record of my own doubts about the value of such an enterprise – with its highly personal origins. As such, it is presented in two narrative registers. The first is scholarly, dealing with theoretical, methodological and topical concerns that I feel are germane to the subject. The second is more descriptive, and perhaps reflexive. Here I attempt to bring the reader into the life-world of the squatter settlement, develop my own authorial persona, and reflect on my own responses to suburban squatting as they relate to the thesis topic.

### 1.2. Introduction:

Many of the slum (*bustee* in Bengali) communities found on Kolkata's eastern periphery are relatively new constructions. Many of the people living there have migrated, over the past three decades, from rural West Bengal, Bangladesh, and nearby states of Bihar and Orissa. Some of these small settlements are relatively homogeneous, linguistically, caste-wise, and in terms of the professions practiced by their denizens (for example, Bihari rickshaw-pullers have formed their own, well-studied, communities). Many other communities, however, are more diverse – incorporating different castes, professionals, and language groups. One might say that these are communities that have been started from scratch; embodying a multitude of notions as to what a community is, and, perhaps more importantly, an ad hoc collection of ideas as to what the proper foundation of a community, and its relation to other communities, might or should be.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceptualize this idea of community as somehow ‘free-floating’ or totally random – a space into which individuals imbue meaning irrespective of the ebbs and flows of larger cultural, historical, national, or transnational forces. Context is the overused word that need to be examined, and more recently globalization – another vague word that we absolutely need to consider. More concretely, I claim that people squatting in cities throughout the world bring with them a wealth of personal and collective experiences – often experiences of rural poverty, but also experiences of their rural culture, and ways of relating to, and understanding communal living. In this general sense, squatters in most places share the experience of dislocation – of having to move, to live, and to earn their way in a foreign, often hostile urban environment. What makes competitive ethnography difficult are the highly specific contexts from which individual squatters emerge, and the vernacular knowledge they bring to their new situations.

During the course of my research, I became interested in how squatters understood, and attributed *qualities* to their new community. Throughout my interview, two recurring tropes became glaringly evident; first, the self description of the community as a family (*shongshar*) - a description employed in a variety of contexts. Because of this multivalent usage, the meaning of this trope was ambiguous, for unlike the villages from where the residents of Rajdanga Para (my field site) hail from, extended family networks did not exist (the kind traditionally studied by anthropologists). Rather, the familial bond described my informants, was rooted in the collective illegal occupation of a clearly defined piece of land – an occupation that was and is becoming increasingly under threat. While an idea of fictive kinship bonds was used to characterize their

settlement, many of my informants also used a second, more general term, to situate their community. The idea of the nation (Desh) was often employed to highlight both the hopes and fears of my informants. Like the use of the family as a description, the idea of the nation was often ambiguous. The political theorist Ernesto Laclau (1996: 12) referred to the idea of the nation as an “empty signifier” in that in itself the term is meaningless, but serves as a vacant receptacle that specific groups compete over to inscribe with a certain meaning. The meaning in this case oscillated between a certain notion of coercive state power as an obstacle to meaningful change, and the opposite idea on which the state is viewed as a potential vehicle for social justice and social cohesion. The discursive interplay between the family and the state, and the tension between and within these terms, forms the ideological and cultural backdrop that provides a set of coordinates through which the urban poor, at least in my field site, understand their current situation, and plan for the future. Through these ideas the antagonistic relation between very real experiential deprivations and the developmental structures and ideologies of the nation are both mediated and understood.

The nexus that interests me, and informs this study, is how recently formed slum communities move from being empirical congeries of displaced people, to moral entities in the form of recognizable population groups that stake claim to social recognition and economic redistribution – usually in the form of government programs and relief benefits. The basis of the thesis – its scholarly justification – will be to explore the relation between what Michel Foucault termed governmentality (the ways in which the state identifies populations as a target for policy) – and the (inter)subjective and discursive tactics employed by slum dwellers in response to, and indeed as a crucial component of,

the politics of recognition in a liberalizing urban setting. To put it in question form, I ask: *How do the slum-dwellers in Rajdanga Para discursively and ideologically construct their community within the context of the development state, and what have been the outcomes of this encounter?*

The structure of the thesis is as follows: I begin with a chapter dealing with the history of Kolkata; its rise from a provincial trading post to the capital of the British Raj, and how classes and castes articulated themselves within this process. More specifically, I trace the relations between the middle class and the urban and rural poor, as it is these relations which very much frame the way poor squatter try to legitimize their fragile rights.

The next two chapters deal with theory and methods. Here I discuss the imagination, and its crucial role in constructing and projecting attributes and values onto poor communities. I posit that this is accomplished by a reinterpretation of old ideas, rituals and symbols (such as jāti, or puja rituals) in the context of modern urban life and its attendant social and political structures and ideas.

Chapter five examines the way my informants accomplish this imaginative task by roving to and fro in speech between the past, the present, and the future – liberally selecting ‘traditional’ notions of caste, community, and family, in order to confer both a moral claim to their land – as a particular community in danger of demolition, and as a way of forging discursive connections to society at larger, which they view as being largely indifferent to their plight.

The final chapter tries to ethnographically demonstrate how the discursive is put into action. Here I use the annual Durga Puja festival, a very popular religious festival

throughout West Bengal, to show how the ideas held by my informants concretize themselves via the formation of festival committees, the division of ritual tasks, collective consumption, and the promiscuous intermingling of castes and classes during the festivities. I hope to demonstrate how festivals like the Durga Puja reflexively reinforce the more abstract notions of community outlined in previous chapters.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Historical Wanderings.**

It's hardly a secret that the very name Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) evokes squalid images of wraith-like beggars, grime, and hopeless destitution. Yet it has not always been so. In this chapter I survey how a city that was once known as the "Jewel of the Raj" eventually became synonymous with the most lurid aspects of urban poverty. While there is no contested narrative vis-à-vis this topic, I hope that by briefly outlining some salient historical events of Kolkata's past, the reader might profit by being better equipped to 'contextualize subsequent chapters.

#### **2.1. Kolkata Then and Now.**

On a sultry August 24, 1690, after thirty-five years of service in the ranks of the British East India Company, the recently minted Governor of Bengal, Job Charnok, landed with thirty British soldiers on the steamy banks of the Hooghly River at the small village of Kalikata. Records from this period are sparse, yet another early British military man, Captain Alexander Hamilton, left us his opinion on the new British trading post that would become the capital of British India. "The site", Hamilton wrote, "was selected..."

"...for the sake of a large shady tree...he (Chanok) could not have chosen a more unhealthful place in all the river; for three miles north-eastward is a saltwater lake that overflows in September and October, and then prodigious numbers of fish resort thither, but in November and December, when the floods are dissipated, those fish are left to dry and with them putrefaction affects the air with thick stinking vapours which the north wind bring with them to Fort William, that they cause our yearly mortality" (Moorehouse 1971: 33).

From these humble beginning the port of Calcutta grew rapidly, as British trade in goods such as jute, opium, tea and textiles expanded. By 1702, the British had completed the construction of Fort William, which housed soldiers, and served as a regional headquarters. During these early years British traders penetrated the Bengali countryside with increasing savvy and ruthlessness, giving rise to regional skirmishes between the Company and local leaders. The most famous of these was the uprising of the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-Ud-Daulah, leading to the capture of Fort William, and the famous “Black Hole” incident, where British prisoners were held in an underground pit – much to the outrage of Victorian sensibilities.

For most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the East India Company was content to confine its activities to the economic sphere. But by the close of that century, the first, and perhaps the most enduring piece of colonial legislation, the Permanent Settlement Act, was passed by the British Parliament, and imposed by the East India Company. Like previous Mughal rulers, the British authorities quickly realized that the most stable source of revenue up for grabs was through rents on land use and cultivation (Brown 1994: 64). However, the complex social structure(s) of Bengali rural society, with its obscure hierarchies and shifting alliances between jāti and caste groups, made the imposition and implementation of a “rational” revenue collecting system difficult. The Permanent Settlement Act sought to rationalize revenue collection by carving up the whole of Bengal into a fixed number of estates, over which a chosen individual (usually local elites) would exercise ownership rights. This individual, or *Zamindar*, was responsible for collecting taxes to remit to the British authorities. Failure to do so often resulted in the loss of both land and privilege.



Thus, the essential logic of the *Zamindari* system was based on a certain model of British feudalism, where landlords were meant to manage their estates, dispense patronage, and reinvest surpluses in material improvements (Ruud 2003: 24). However, a number of problems plagued this system. First of all, many estates were far too large to be effectively managed; leading many *Zamindar*'s to carve them up into smaller and smaller units in the hopes of facilitating rent collection. With this new development a new class of middle managers, called a *Patnidar*, emerged, who also dispensed patronage, and was responsible for providing an annual fixed sum to the *Zamindar*. Soon it was the *Patinadar*'s who began subdividing their lands to the *Depatinadar*'s, who in turn parceled out their lands, and so on. According to Partha Chatterjee, by the 1930's the Burdwan *Zamindari* (the largest in Bengal) had no less than five-thousand intermediaries between the lowliest share-cropper and the *Zamindar*, each paying a *fixed* tribute to their superiors (Chatterjee 1982: 129).

The exaction of a fixed tribute caused great hardship for the Bengali peasantry, who were hardest hit during times of scarcity, or crop failure. By ignoring seasonal variations in production, the chain of middlemen always demanded (indeed their jobs depended on it) the same amount of rice, tea, jute and so on. The class responsible for collecting directly from the peasants, known in Bengali as the *jotdar*, or village landlord, who used their intimate knowledge of local networks of caste and kin, combined with the legally sanctioned use of force, to efficiently extract the required largess from the peasantry. It would be this class of landlord who would feel the brunt of peasant agitation during the later half of the twentieth century.

As all this was occurring in the countryside, 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian cities were also undergoing rapid changes. This was the heyday of the industrial revolution in England, and demand for raw materials, like jute were on the rise. These economic development also lead to the development of new infrastructure in communications – telegraph and railway lines, as well as new investments in factories and new productive technologies. In India, the increasing complexity of economic, political and social life lead to the rise of a new, urbane, class of upper-class Indians who served as bureaucrats and professionals in the British administration – the *Babu* class in Bengal. The historical development of this class is crucial in our story, so I will move to a more detailed discussion of this important group.

## 2.2. Distinctively Urban: Bengals Middle Class.

Understanding the attributes of any class in any society seems to me impossible without also trying to understand the attributes of other classes against which they frame their class existence, and with whom they interact economically, socially, and sometimes politically. To get a sense of India's poorer classes, about whom this study focuses, it will be necessary to delve into the rise of India's middle class, however cursory. For it is this demographic of educated, upwardly mobile people who both desire, and can increasingly afford suburban lifestyles that create both hardships and opportunities for present day squatters throughout the sub-continent. Before jumping into present-day issues, I would like to briefly recount some of the most basic historical features of Kolkata's middle, or *Bhadrolok*, class.

Anyone investigating the historical genesis of India's middle class would do well to consider Macaulay's oft-quoted lines from his "Minute in Indian Education" (1835):

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population" (Quoted by Spivak 1985: 282).

While this creation of an interpreting class occurred throughout India, it was first put into practice in Kolkata. As Macaulay's quote demonstrates so clearly, the history of the *Bhadrolok* class had its roots in the administrative requirements of the British Raj. Calcutta, the capital of India from 1772 to 1911, grew an impressive bureaucratic apparatus that was filled with predominantly upper class rural elites. This class became culturally distinguished by "many aspects of their behavior – their deportment, their style of speech, their occupations, and their associations – and quite as fundamentally, by their cultural values and sense of social propriety" (Broomfield 1968: 5-6). But above all else it was British-style education that set the *Bhadrolok* apart from other social groups. "Education", Broomfield writes, "is the hallmark of *Bhadrolok* status – both as a defining and excluding factor" (Broomfield 1968: 8)

Since education was such a constitutive feature of the *Bhadrolok* class, it is not surprising that intellectual life became to be increasingly considered to be both prestigious and desirable. Over time, the combination of the prestige associated with a life of the intellect, and nascent resentment towards British colonialism, led to what we now call the Bengali Renaissance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is difficult to characterize this episode of Bengali history, as contributions came from many fields –

literature, poetry, music, social reform movements, philosophy and religion. Furthermore, no neat doctrine adequately captures all the cross-currents of thought and action that were flowing during this period. Some, like the reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) enthusiastically embraced western ideas of rights and citizenship in his struggles to abolish the practice of sati (the burning of the wife on her husbands funeral pyre), and to improve the lot of Bengali widows. Others, like novelist and polemicist Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1863-1902), argued that the path to self determination would only be achieved through a reaffirmation of distinctively Bengali ideas and practices that would serve a counter to the inundation of British influences (despite his use of the novel – an arguably Western form, to make these arguments) . I feel it important to add at this point, that these debates, in India, and elsewhere, haven't really gone away, and constitute major fault lines in Indian politics today. After the first world war, as the poverty found in the countryside and the city, coupled with periodic famines became harder and harder to ignore, many Bengali intellectuals, notably Subhas Bose, adopted socialist ideas – which have played a large role in Bengali politics ever since.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the creation of a massive state administrative apparatus in the city, created a situation whereby the economic and intellectual elites of Bengali society became increasingly divested of any direct interest in agrarian issues. This lack of economic interest in agrarian issues, due mostly to the rupture created by investments in the urban economy, makes Bengali politics rather unique in India. In this context political interventions in the agrarian economy were made by a class of people who viewed agriculture from the perspective of urban consumers, as opposed to the perspective of rural land-owners, as was the case in many other regions of the country.

According to many observers (Chatterjee 1998), this dynamic helps to explain the weakness of caste antagonisms in state politics, since conflict over agrarian issues (land rights, rents, cultivation practices, agricultural-industrial trade, and so on) in Bengal have not been directed against urban upper classes (in fact, as we shall see, conflicts were often started by urban upper classes, against local *Jotdars*). While other Indian states have seen a brand of politically aggressive landlordism emanating from urban centers, little of this has been seen in West Bengal (Chatterjee 1998: 81).

### 2.3. 1900-1948 – Class Conflict.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw large transfers of land due to indebtedness, immiserization, increased commercialization, rising prices of agricultural commodities (especially rice), from the poorer peasants to richer ones (Chatterjee 1998: 54). These pressures led to the emergence of a money lending class of peasants, what Chatterjee referred to as the emergence of a “Kulak-type” (Chatterjee 1998:55) of peasant structure where richer peasants gradually acquired control over land – cultivates by right-less sharecroppers. The initial reaction to these circumstances was a *Jotdar*-led resistance towards the colonial government over taxes and the increasing cultural influence of the British, which was thought to be corroding the autonomy of rural society. This movement, led by well-to-do peasants, is now widely thought (Chatterjee 1998, Chakrabarty 1989) to have disguised deeper cleavages within the rural population; namely the relationship between the *jotdar-mahajan* (landlord-moneylending) class, and the multitude of indebted peasants and sharecroppers. Once independence was achieved, it was this antagonism that would rise to the fore.

The agrarian situation after independence can be characterized as one of continued pressure on the land, and the landless, where the official poverty line was pegged at five acres of land for a family of five, the percentage of household holding 2.5 acres or less increased from 73% in 1955, to 77% by 1971 (Sanyal 1988: 150). In such a situation land-poor, or landless peasants began to supplement their income by hiring themselves out their labour (for women as domestic servants, or cow-herders, and for men as agricultural labourers, and increasingly by moving to urban centers in search of work). It was also during this period that the *Zamindari* system was abolished, leading to the break-up and redistribution of their estates. Although the impact of this break-up is widely debated by scholars (see Gupta 1979, or Kohli 1990), many agree that the disintegration of the *Zamindari* system increased the demand for patronage amongst a increasing disposed peasantry, while diminishing the capacity of the landlords to provide it. It has been argued that the higher numbers of “untied” peasantry, coupled with the demise of traditional patronage networks, led to deep cleavages in rural society, giving rise to “hostility of the lower classes towards their neighbours (Kohli 1990: 377). Indeed, according to Kohli this cleavage, which amounted to a power vacuum in rural areas of West Bengal, explains why the rural poor were so receptive to radical mobilization; a social force that landlords and local power brokers no longer had the influence to suppress.

#### 2.4. Rural and Urban Unite: Naxalbari and Radical Politics.

It is usually at this point in the narrative where scholars posit a linking between the dispossessed peasantry and urban radical political parties, creating the dramatic reorganization of West Bengals politics during the 1960's. In this view all that was

needed was a sufficient impetus that would inspire the peasantry to follow their urban supporter into revolution. Such is the view of Bhabani Sen Gupta, who argues that the Communist Party of India's (Marxist), or the CPI-(M) (as opposed the CPI-(L) – L standing for Leninist) involvement with the food movement in 1966, party leaders realized that their rural support was more widespread than their urban (Sen Gupta 1979: 53). Upon coming to power in 1967 the party leadership called for widespread peasant mobilization, but a mobilization that called for different strategies in different localities due to the unique socio-economic structures of the varying regions of West Bengal (Ruud 2003: 28).

The lynch-pin of this mobilization were young, rural bred, but urban educated, or “political entrepreneurs” (Ruud 2003: 205) - the descendants of Macaulay. At the prompting of the CPI-(M) these young men spread out across the countryside, imbedding themselves in small villages, where they were instructed to garner support for the CPI-(M), and to mobilize peasants and sharecroppers against powerful village landowners. In addition to these tasks, these young idealists were instructed to maintain a kind of “contextual sensitivity” in the communities where they lived and sought support; keeping tabs on the ever shifting terrain of individual and group alliances that characterize rural life. With varied success, these Gramscian organic intellectuals, “employed the tools of village politics, while helping to introduce new institutions that functioned as areas for contest, where the rules were to their advantage” (Ruud 2003: 206). The question as to what kind of impact these organizer had in sowing revolutionary seeds has been contested by scholars, yet there seems to be some agreement (Chatterjee: 1982; Kholi 1987; Ruud: 2003) that the existence of a cadre of political organizers such as these; their

ability to mediate between their urban superior and their co-villagers, was an essential ingredient in the rural agitation that would latter occur.

The pivotal moment in this history came in 1967, around the northern town of Naxalbari in the Darjeeling foothills. Rumors circulating amongst land-owners that the government was planning on redistributing their land to the burgeoning population of sharecroppers, led to a pre-emptive, large-scale eviction of thousands of poor sharecroppers. The outrage these actions inspired, coupled with the provocations of the local Naxalite wing of the CPI-(M) lead the forcible occupation of land by the peasants, and a good deal of violence directed towards local landlords. Inspired by Maoist ideas, or the idea that the path to democratic revolution must pass though a phase of protracted agrarian struggle, radical politicians at the time stoked the fires of rural discontent, which led, many would agree, to vicious cycles of violence and counter-violence, but not much material gain for the peasantry.

Barrels of ink could be spilt on how this unique history has affected the way class and caste identity functions in West Bengal today. For our modest purposes it should be enough to state that forty years of class-based politics has somewhat dampened the salience that other axes of identity, for instance caste-based, or even gender-based, politics plays in West Bengal. While groups like the Shiv Sena, in Mumbai, organize the poor on the basis of Marathi identity, and Hindutva (literally Hindu-ness), there remains a stronger sense of economic determinants in Bengali political life. This isn't to say that other identity markers are unimportant – indeed they are – but as we shall see, their significance remains somewhat different from other regions of India.



### 2.5. Fast Forward: “We Must Have Capitalism!”

The headline of the July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007 edition of the Hindustan Times, one of India’s leading English dailies reads: “I cannot build socialism in one state, I have to follow capitalism”. The speaker in this instance was West Bengal’s Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, leader of the CPI-(M). The article was prompted by the increasing rural unrest – specifically in the villages of Nandigram and Singur, where the government was in the process of appropriating thousands of acres of agricultural land to set up a chemical hub, and a Tata car factory. In both instances the government has been met with stiff local opposition, in spite of the promise of thousands of new potential jobs that these new industries would create. At the time of my fieldwork twenty protesters were killed in clashes with the police, forcing the government to temporarily abandon the chemical hub, although it was still seeking an alternative site.

Says Bhattacharjee, “Without industry how do you progress? This is the general trend of all civilization – from village to city, from agriculture to industry. You cannot stop it, you should not stop it. And for that you need private industry, private capital, you need big business. We need multinationals, we need big investment, we need manufacturing industries; we just cannot say that we do not want FDI (Foreign Direct investment)” (Hindustan Times, July 19, 2007)

This is not a history of the political economy of greater India, or of West Bengal. The movement from the rural Maoist insurrections that gripped the State during the 1960’s and 1970’s, to the same Marxist party lauding the virtues of capitalist development, strays too far away from our subject to dedicate much space to it here. I hope it will suffice to say that this change in the political philosophy of West Bengal’s

political classes mirrors, to a certain extent, the same kinds of changes that we have seen in India, and indeed the rest of the world since the 1980's, the fall of the Soviet block, and the latest round of what we now know as globalization. The economic successes of places like Bangalore, Hyderabad, and other southern cities, have compelled other state governments to try and follow suit. While Naxalism, or rural communism still has a constituency in some rural areas of West Bengal, and neighbouring states, it is increasingly viewed as an obstacle, as opposed to a catalyst, to economic growth – particularly by India's growing middle classes. Yet this new imperative to attract investment and industry to West Bengal has put new pressures on both the urban and rural poor. In the countryside, peasants face the loss of more land, as governments and private industry try to acquire more and more land to put to industrial uses. This brings an increasing number of landless peasants into the cities, competing for the same scarce urban resources with the already existing population of the city. The government hopes that by creating new industries in rural areas the pressures on the urban infrastructure might be lessened as urban workers seek out job opportunities in these new industries. However, at the time of writing this was not in evidence, and none of my informants once held this as a possible future for them and their families. Rather, most of the squatters I spoke to held onto the hope that they would be granted some kind of right to the land they had settled on, and were more concerned about political and middle class pressures to evict them, than they were about the possibility of hypothetical jobs that may or may not be created in the countryside. This pressure on scarce urban land is the topic of the next section.

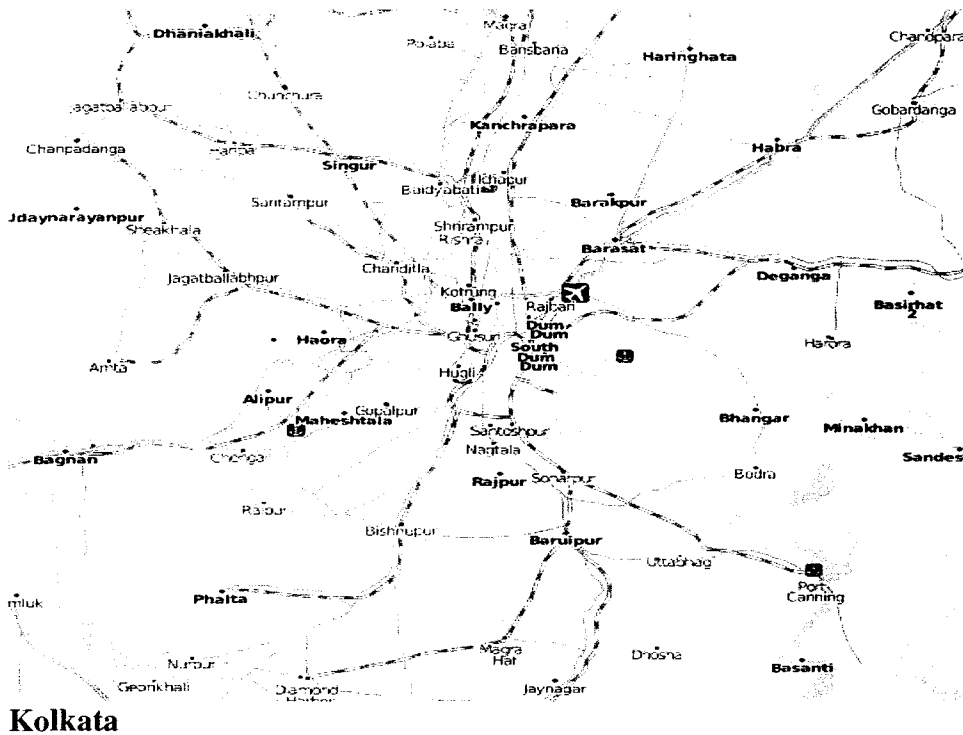
## 2.6. Kolkata: A City of Constant Change.

Dr. Surajit Mukhopadhyay, a local sociologist who has dedicated his career to the study of urban poverty, sits in front of his disparately assembled computer in his office at the CSSSC (Center for the Study of Social Science, Calcutta) in Patuli Township on the south-eastern outskirts of the city. I had come to the center to speak to him about my project in nearby Kasba, and more generally, to pick his brain about poverty in Kolkata:

“You have to realize that where you are now (Kasba) was not really a part of the city until only recently. I would say that it has only been around ten years since the city reached that area. The people living there, as you know, were refugees from Bangladesh who came in '47, and again during the war of independence in 1971. Also, one finds many rural Bengalis from around the state who seek employment, but have had to settle illegally on the outskirts, due mainly to overcrowding in the more central districts. Initially, during the 1970's and 80's, their livelihood was a sort of seasonal mix between agricultural work in the home village, and urban occupations. Now, however, the expansion of the city, with the new construction that is occurring, combined with an overpopulated countryside, many of them form a large pool of casual labour in various sectors of the urban economy – construction and service jobs being dominant.”

During my stay in the Kasba district of Kolkata, I took many opportunities to wander through the various streets and alleyways, and it was during these wanderings that Dr. Mukhopadhyay's words solidified in my mind. To adequately imagine Kolkata's eastern periphery, a little basic geography would be a good place to start. The organization of space in Kolkata has, from its very inception, been governed by its physical framework. To the west lies the Hooghly River, an offshoot of the holy Ganga that snakes down from the hot plains to empty into the Bay of Bengal. To the east one finds a low-lying network of wetland, rivers, and canals that have traditionally (up until the 1980's) served as a natural drain for the city – carrying off its waste and monsoon

waters. Thus the development of settlements in Kolkata has followed the flood safe levies of the Hooghly, spreading in a north-south direction.



Eastward urban expansion did not occur until the middle of the 1980's with the construction of the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass that runs from the Salt-Lake Township in the north-east, to Baisnabghata-Patuli Township in the south-east. Initially conceived as an alternate traffic artery to ease congestion in the central districts of the city, the Bypass made the development of wide swaths of former agricultural and wetlands feasible and profitable, starting a slew of residential and commercial development that continues to this day. By 1990, Salt Lake City (*Bidhan Nagar* in Bengali) marked the first serious foray into the environmentally sensitive eastern wetlands by city planners and private developers. Originally planned as a housing development for low and middle income families, Salt Lake City blossomed into a “city of palaces” (Dasgupta 2007: 326), and is now home to over 250,000 inhabitants (CDMA 117, 1997: 43), boasting several

state of the art office and shopping complexes, schools, playgrounds, and what residents claim to be the largest football stadium in all of Asia.

Since that time, further drastic changes have altered the eastern region of Kolkata. One only has to drive along the EMB (Eastern Metropolitan Bypass) to see this change in progress. I used to marvel at the contrasts. Billboards the size of hockey rinks depicting images of gleaming glass and steel towers, or fantasy kitchens were perched aloft the dilapidated remnants of forlorn-looking mud-pucca dwellings. A minute latter the massive new Science Center of Kolkata comes into view – families spill out of their packed cars onto the Center’s vast sheet of concrete meant for parking, as skinny men sow the monsoon paddy in the small field beside. New apartment blocks sprout like monsoon fungus, as more skinny men scramble around with bricks perched atop their heads, while their children played by the roadside. These families would live where they worked, moving wherever the work took them. Throughout this seeming chaos of new and old one found small pockets of shanties, there for perhaps decades, but now becoming increasingly encircled – like doomed chess pieces.

I had settled down in a district called Kasba, around one kilometer west of the EMB, towards its southern end. While the contrasts were less drastic, the kind of development I have been describing was in full swing. The name of my particular neighbourhood in Kasba was Chakrabarty Para (*Para* meaning neighbourhood, and Chakrabarty being a very common Bengali surname), and it was tucked away off Gariahat Road, which ran from Gariahat Bazaar to the west, to the Bypass to the east. Like many other neighborhoods’ along the Bypass, Chakrabarty Para is home to a growing middle class, consisting of doctors, computer technicians, engineers, business

professionals and so on. These people comprise a growing number of successful professionals who are choosing to leave the congested city in search of open spaces, and a quieter, safer, environment. Pandit Ramjandra Jha, my landlord during my stay in Kolkata put his decision to move this way:

“You know that I come from a small village near Patna (in the neighbouring state of Bihar). When we came from there, we lived up near Park Circus. We lived there for almost twenty years, but I began to have trouble breathing – sometimes I had to go to the hospital for oxygen and medicine to help me breathe. My doctor told me that that it would be better to move outside the city where the pollution is less severe. That was seven years ago. Now we have some quiet, and I can go for a walk in the evening to take some fresh air. It’s like living in a small village, only we’re in a very large city.”

### **Chapter 3:** **Doing Fieldwork.**

Strolling through my neighbourhood, it was easy to see why so many urbanites were in the process of making the move to the outskirts of the city. Nestled well away from any major arterial roads, an air of tranquility pervaded the place. Indeed, it was hard to believe that I was living in one of the largest, most congested, cities in the world, as I meandered amidst the flowering hibiscus and bougainvilleas that lined the Chakrobarty Para's narrow streets. As one enters the neighbourhood from the main Gariahat road, one is immediately in a small market that serves the general needs of the neighbourhood. Here one finds vegetable sellers, fishmongers (Bengalis love their fish) and other purveyors of meat – chicken and pork, along with small restaurant stalls, tobacconist, etc. the bazaar, like any other neighbourhood in India, constitutes the epicenter of social life. From small economic transactions, to social networking, neighbourly chit-chat, and local politicking – the market is a veritable Mecca for anthropological observation.

To the left of the outdoor bazaar is a large blue building that one might call the local shopping mall. Here one can buy clothing (saris, panjabis, dhotis, etc.), kitchen appliances, cell phones, textiles, and other assorted bric-a-brac. Beside the 'mall' is a small thatched hut with a tattered red hammer and sickled flag drooping overhead. Bored looking men sit on stools outside, languishing in the summer heat. This is the local CPI-(M) headquarters.

Having passed through the bazaar, one enters the residential area. To the right are four large apartment blocks that are under construction, with their attendant skinny-brick-burdened-scrabblers labouring in the hot sun. How many people this development will add to the community is hard to say – I would estimate at least one thousand. The

neighbourhood is laid out in square blocks, with the exception of places where natural obstacles (canals, ponds, etc.) are in the way. Some of the houses are large, and occupied by single families, while others are divided into smaller units and rented to small families and younger professionals.

The housing blocks have not all been developed to the same extent. There still remained a number of empty plots of land, although a number had come under development during my short stay. Throughout the residential areas, a number of new businesses had sprung up. According to Ranjitia, the daughter of my landlord, many of these retail businesses were of relatively new vintage. These include a furniture shop, an internet café, small kathi roll (a popular Kolkata snack) outlets, and a fitness center. Green spaces were still in abundance – soccer fields, gardens, groves of palm and banyan trees – all conspired to create an illusion of tranquility.

Such were my impressions upon moving into the neighbourhood. After a few weeks of residence, while making my way to the main Kasba road, I saw hidden behind the green foliage, a row of small ramshackle shacks strung out alongside a small, greenish stream. Surprised at not having seen this small smattering of humble dwellings I proceeded around to the laneway on the other side of the canal, via a small muddy path that darted through the overgrown branches, still wet from the morning rain.





**Kuttcha Dwellings in CP (October 2007).**

The Mexican poet, Octavio Paz once wrote that India was a “place that overwhelms the senses, before sense can be made of it” (Paz 1995: 13). The task of

capturing the rich and complex phenomenal world of Indian slums through mere words seems to me, now sitting at my desk in Montreal, to be well-nigh impossible. Rewinding through my memories of that time, I remember well the inescapable heat that seemed to emanate from every object, like radiation. Not just mere heat, but a certain kind of sultry, overwhelming humidity that might be conveyed by asking the reader to imagine the feeling of forcing their head into their cloths dryer halfway through its cycle.

Sheltered by foliage on one side, and a line of new concrete apartments on the other, Rajdanga Para- the name of this particular block of shanties – felt on that morning, like a convection oven. The languid movements of the men and women – slow yet deliberate – gave evidence to the stifling torpor that pervaded that city during the sweltering summer months.



**Rajdanga Para - Canal-side**

To speak of this heat is no mere literary sleight-of hand, for its invisible presence works on all objects, altering our perceptions and reactions to all that surrounds us. A pile of garbage on a cool day lies inert – an eye-sore (for me at least) to be sure, but one that can be remedied by focusing on something else. With the addition of heat, however, a multitude of hidden signatures are released, plunging one into an inescapable olfactory assault that re-wires normal connections between the world of objects and subjective experience. Not just piles of rubbish, but actual interpersonal relations change course, we slid into different registers of address and reaction. On this particular July afternoon, coated in sweat, and walking down the muddy, trash-strewn laneway of Rajdanga Para, I was surprised to note that my presence caused little stir. A young man stretched out on a tattered *charpoy* (a simple string bed) smiled faintly at me, and muttered a polite *nomoshkar* (formal greeting) as I walked past. Further along, a group of small children played halfheartedly under the shade of a large *peepul* tree, constructing toys out of discarded plastic bottles and sticks. From the other side of the shanties I could hear the muted chatter of young women, and the slap-slap of wet cloths being beaten against the smoothed rocks by the side of the canal.

Walking further along, I came across a frail looking old man squatting on his thin haunches in front of his hut. He proceeded to beckon me by waving his hand, as if he was shooing away a fly. I returned his gesture by pressing my hands together, smiling, and giving him a polite *nomoshkar*. After the usual pleasantries (where are you from; what is your job, are you married, etc.), and the important discovery that this man spoke some English, he asked me what I was doing away from my country. I tried to explain to him

that I was visiting Kolkata to study; that I was interested in the lives of poor people in the city, and how they understand their situation and attempt to make it more tolerable. Pulling out a *bidi* (a small, hand-made, cigarette), and offering me one, Bakuram proceeded to tell me what he was thinking:

**Bakuram Kayal:** Here you can see that things are very difficult. I came Here 22 years ago. I am a carpenter, which I learned in my home village. Then there was no work in the village, so I came here because I thought there must be many rich people I could work for. But now you can see that there is not much work for me (it was early afternoon on a workday).

**Me:** But why isn't there any work for you? There seems to be a lot of Building going on in this neighbourhood?

**Bakuram Kayal:** Yes, but I am a furniture maker – it's my specialty. Before there was work, but now there are some new factories for making furniture. They make it cheaper than I can, so I only get work once in a while. Sometimes a friend gives me work cutting trees, but today I have nothing, so I just sit here."

**Me:** Do you prefer it here to your village?

**Bakuram Kayal:** My village is very beautiful, but there is no work there. Here, at least my wife has a job, but now is a hard time.

**Me:** What do you mean?

**Bakuram Kayal:** Monsoon is a difficult time for us. It's too hot, and many people here get sick. I have to spend Rs.500 (around \$15.00 CDN) on medicine and doctors for my daughter. It's like that for many of us living here – the government doesn't help – we just have ourselves.

The conversation continued along this vein for some time. Bakuram was a very old looking sixty-five years old, and had lived in Kolkata for 22 years. During the agrarian upheavals of the 1970's and 1980's, Bakuram began to apprentice with his uncle, a local furniture maker, because agricultural work was becoming scarce. Although he self-identified as a furniture maker, in truth, Bakuram had held many different jobs –

casual construction, shop assistant, and more recently removing the always encroaching vegetation from the yards of his wealthier neighbours.

Starting to feel faint from the heat, I rose to take my leave, but before doing so I asked if it would be okay if I came back to speak more about his life and experiences in Rajdanga Para. Shaking his head side to side in the affirmative, and flashing me a betel-red stained smile, Bakuram said that he would be happy to talk anytime:

“Please come again – in the evenings when it is cooler, and my wife is here to Prepare some food.”

Wandering back from this initial encounter, I admit that I was feeling pretty happy at perhaps having found a good field-site to carry out my research. Besides my personal goals, I began to think about what I wanted my project to say. Most of the literature on slums, or poverty, masks the experience of it behind a slew of facts and figures; life expectancy, mortality rates, toxicity of potable water, access to services, average wages, and so on. I don't mean to deny the importance of such research, however, I wanted to focus less on mind-numbing statistics, and more on the ways in which people subjectivize these externalities to create meaningful lives. Living in a slum, like living anywhere else, overflows the boundaries that experts set up to compartmentalize and understand social life. Dirt, heat, anxiety, love, resentment, attachment, loss, gain, want, and indifference – how can these realities be made to adhere and coalesce into some coherent model that both explains, and offers a clear path forward? I knew that I wanted to delve into this murky world of real lives, but I also knew how much easier it would be to hide behind charts, statistics, and accepted categories like class, caste, gender, or ethnicity. It wasn't until well into my research that

I became aware of a way forward, and this way was provided to me by all of my informants. In formal and informal interviews and conversations, many used the concepts of the family (*Shongshar*), and the Nation (*Desh/Jāti*) in ways that signified something different than what we might normally associate with them. Given the limitations of my project I decided to use these two terms to delve into – both descriptively and conceptually – the complex process of meaning making, and of how this process informs more concrete forms of action. More of this will be threshed out in the next chapter, but for now I will be to say a word or two about my methodology.

### 3.1. Methodology.

I would like to begin with a somewhat dated quote from Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. I have chosen it somewhat randomly, being well aware that there probably exist different, yet equally suitable starting points. Yet Malinowski captures a crucial difficulty faced, I imagine, by most ethnographers:

“In working out the rules and regularities of native custom, and in obtaining A precise formula for them from the collection of data and native statements, we find that this very precision is foreign to real life, which never adheres rigidly to any rules. It must be supplemented by the observation of the manner in which a given custom is carried out, of the behavior of the natives in obeying the rules so exactly formulated by the ethnographer, of the very exceptions which in sociological phenomena almost always occur” (Malinowski 1961:21).

The main point here – the classic formula – is that there is nearly always a divergence between what people say about their actions, and their actual actions. Rules and laws certainly exist, but they are bent in all sorts of ways, and are oftentimes broken outright. All of this takes places in the general context of culturally influenced ways of thinking about such divergences (in that a divergence to the anthropological observer

may have a different significance than it would for the persons observed). The goal of all this is “to grasp the natives point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (Kuper 1973: 15). It isn’t clear to me if this is actually possible, or if there are many people left who really think it possible – but I do think that ethnography, in a broad sense, does constitute our best hope for teasing out such understandings, at least in the context of scholarly efforts.

The paths to such a deep understanding of local culture are diverse and contested, but it seems clear to me that the method employed in any given project should correspond to the question the ethnographer seeks to answer. Yet even before this can occur, a general understanding of the culture in question is essential, for pertinent, questions (academic or otherwise) about social life can only be formulated once the symbolic edifice of a culture order is comprehended – at least in their most essential aspects. It is for this reason that most first-time ethnographers formulate their research questions well into the research process. That, at any rate, was how it worked for me.

Prior to my actual field-work, I had planned on looking into the ways in which male squatters utilize local political networks as a general survival strategy. More precisely, I wanted to understand the ways in which democratic imperatives (in this case the phenomenon of patronage networks) insinuated themselves into the lives of the poorest citizens, and how these same citizens were responding and using these networks to their advantage – or otherwise.

Yet I soon discovered that explicit ‘political talk’ amongst squatters on the verge of eviction was a dicey subject, and that the trust required to pursue such a line of

research would take longer than my allotted three month research time. Moreover, such research would have required establishing rapport with local political operatives and representatives, which again, seemed too ambitious for the time frame I was working within.

The first problem I encountered was my linguistic ineptitude. I do speak some Hindi; however the first language spoken in Rajdanga Para was Bengali – a language with which I am only vaguely familiar. Despite bi-weekly lessons, I was obliged to hire a translator to help with conducting and transcribing the bulk of my interviews. The process of working with a translator, it is no exaggeration to say, fundamentally shaped the direction of my project, in that it forced me into a collaborative effort in both transcribing the interviews, and in ascribing a certain significance to what was said. In addition, Sabya (my translator) proved invaluable in helping me to understand not only the content of the interviews, but also many subtleties (for example the particular genealogy of a household deity, or contextual information regarding some of the regions from whence these squatters came) that I would have missed on my own.

Once I had realized that my initial research question was too broad for me to answer, I became intrigued by the ways these people understood their own situation (which from an outside perspective appears rather hopeless). To my Canadian eyes, the lack of any kind of social safety net, the symbolic and material placement of squatters on the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, the exploitation (economic, and social) experienced by most squatters, and their past experiences of displacement, made me wonder how all these experiences generated a world view? What were the main ingredients that fed and produced vernacular understandings of community belonging,



and what compelled people to try to protect and grow such a haphazard collection of shacks to begin with?

What became quite obvious to me was the gulf between my own intellectual and visceral reactions to the situation of these squatters, and the ways in which they themselves construed and spoke about the situation. This led me to want to understand, and perhaps speculate on, some of the processes by which communities are constructed and ascribed meaning.

To do this in a short period of time forced me to choose a number of methods that would help me reach that goal. Like most student anthropologist, my primary method was interviews, both formal and informal – often, it turned out, in the presence of entire families and neighbours. The topic for discussion ranged from typical quantitative stuff (like income, expenses, ages, family size, occupation, etc.) to qualitative interview, where I asked my informants about their biographical history, their hopes for the future, their relative attachments to their home villages and their new community. In this attempt to pin down vernacular constructions of a squatters community I decided it would be easiest to isolate discursive themes provided in the answers of my informants as they attempted to describe their relationships and commitments to their settlement.

Yet an attempt to unravel the ways in which people ascribe meaning to their lives and communities would be in vain without the theoretical tools with which to make sense of the manifold phenomena that *might possibly* play a role in these constructions. Now the social will typically look to social phenomenon for his or her explanations, and as

such I have tried to provide what I consider to be the most salient historical and cultural details to achieve that end.

Yet I remained unsatisfied with such facile explanations, and wanted to introduce, or re-introduce, some kind of reflection on what we might call the ethnographic brain. It is my contention that the parameters of human perception, consciousness, and general sense making, suffers from a social constructivist malaise. Up to a point the notion that categories of understanding are culturally constructed is perfectly true, but our myopic focusing on this point tends to blur the interesting comparative point; namely that *categorical orders as a defining feature of all cultures*, has been neglected. Despite these musings I found myself, during my field work, lacking adequate theoretical and methodological tools to explore and concretize these ideas.

As a result, I found myself eventually turning to philosophy to help guide me through these questions – and became increasingly interested in the role our imagination plays in our social lives. It seemed to me then, as indeed it does now, that the way we piece together our “cognitive maps” (Jameson 1985: 211), of both social and inner reality (and the relation between the two), should be of great interest to anthropologists. Claude Levi-Strauss is of course one anthropologist who took this task most seriously. My goal is to try to reintroduce, at least a reflection, open to criticism of course, on this topic without getting trapped in deterministic modes of thought. I will state the proposition that scientific understandings of the brain, that posit the inherent plasticity of cerebral functions make former charges of cognitive determinism obsolete – that within the parameters demanded by the process of constructing symbolic social worlds – we have,

as homo sapiens sapiens, an astounding capacity to construct varying cultural orders. I will, however, do some focusing on those parameters in the next chapter.

Such a broad set of ideas – a concern with the workings of human consciousness – are obviously impossible to operationalize in the kind of field work setting that I found myself in. Therefore, I spent a great deal of time reviewing the literature regarding various conceptions of consciousness, and the role of the imagination in particular. This will also be addressed in the next chapter.

With the idea of trying to discern the vernacular categories of community consciousness, I was led to conducting my interviews in a particular way. Before getting into that topic I should go into a few specifics regarding sampling, and then more into a discussion of my interview techniques.

Rajdanga Para is comprised of 31 households. Before conducting interviews I conducted, with the help of Sabya, a general socio-economic survey of each household to determine the number of members in each, their average monthly income and expenses, access to municipal services, and the kind of occupation that people had. The purpose of that survey was twofold. On the one hand, I wanted to get a general impression, as far as one can by way of numbers, of the socio-economic situation in the community. On the other hand, I used this brief survey as a way of meeting the local residents, and of finding roughly 15-20 people willing to be interview in a more thorough way. In addition, being armed with basic information on household size, composition, caste affiliations, and earnings, I was better equipped to judiciously choose which household and individuals to interview. I made those choices based on my desire for heterogeneity (e.g. caste, gender,

family, size, length of residence) in the sample. In four cases, competency in English (for obvious reasons) was factored into my decision to interview a person. The results of my initial survey demonstrated the heterogeneous make up of Rajdanga Para. Of the thirty-one households there was one Brahmin family (Priestly caste), four Kshatriya (warrior caste) families, ten Vaishya (trader and agriculturalist caste) families, twelve Shudra (service caste) families, and four scheduled or “Untouchable” caste families. Geographically, the families making up Rajdanga Para hailed from differing regions. Of the thirty-one families ten hailed from South-24 Parnagas south of Kolkata. Another ten families had migrated from the northern regions of West Bengal, while six families hailed from the State of Bihar (West Bengal’s western neighbour). Finally, five families had moved from the state of Orissa to the immediate south of West Bengal. This heterogeneity, the ad-mixture of castes combined with cultural differences rooted in differing geographical traditions was what first sensitized me to the fact that this was a community in the process of constituting itself *qua* community, and therefore began to drive my research in a more focused direction.

Throughout my field work, I recorded conversations – even casual ones) with a small MP3 recorder. Since nobody could read English (or Bengali for that matter), permission to record was attained verbally – and was itself recorded. After some time, with certain informants that I got to know more personally, the MP3 was constantly on in my breast pocket, and I would remind my interlocutors’ of that fact. I also used the recorder to make notes – a dictophone-ish way of saving a particular idea without have to rummage around for my notebook.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured – that is, I arrived with number of questions, but their point was to kick off an engaging conversation, as opposed to a straight question and answer period. The arch that these conversations took moved through individual life histories, typically starting with a story of rural beginnings, the story of moving to the city, to an appraisal of their experiences of the city, their difficulties in the present, and hopes for the future. My choice to try to illicit life histories from my informants was driven by my main question to understand the vernacular categories by which squatters understand their own community, and by extension, its place within the larger constellation of communities that make up India.

Admittedly, the process of conducting interviews was hampered by conditions beyond my control, which affected my sample. First of all, it was difficult to organize appointments with my informants, as they could be called away last-minute for work or other obligations. Secondly, the frequent monsoon flooding scuttled many attempts to conduct interviews. Since I relied on both my informants and my translator to carry out my interviews, the frequent stoppage in bus and taxi service as the city was under two feet of water made it extremely difficult to maintain a rigorous interview schedule. Because of these difficulties I would sometimes end up interviewing people I hadn't initially planned on interviewing due the simple fact that they were there, and willing to be interviewed. Finally, the cultural bias's of my informants, specifically regarding age and gender<sup>1</sup> made it difficult to obtain an adequate representation of different generations and of different genders. Because of these factors, combined with the relative brevity of

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<sup>1</sup> In each household it was assumed that the male head had all the information I would need. Often when I asked to speak with wives and children I would get a puzzled look and the question "Why do you want to speak to them when I can tell you all you need to know?"

my fieldwork, the final sample informants is decidedly skewed towards middle aged male heads of households.

Thus, a lot of leg work went into translating and transcribing these interviews. Since my primary interest lied in “local understanding”, the analysis of my transcriptions was focused on identifying recurring metaphors, tropes, and analogies used by my informants in their characterizations of their community and their place within larger Indian society. These statements, I claim, can offer us insights into the categorical organization that people use to understand the past, ascribe meaning to the present, and to chart out future projects. Admittedly, this project barely scratches the surface of this vast topic, yet it is my hope that it is fruitful and interesting enough to warrant future research along similar lines.

Finally, I tried, indeed am compelled, to pay due attention to all the bits and pieces of experience that inform the manner by which people build their own constructions of local reality and larger social structures. I have tried to divide these experiences, or parcels of discourse (my own and my informants) into some kind of categorization (ranging from our general history of urban poverty, considering life-histories, descriptive phenomenologies of the city and the slums, and so on) more for the sake of narrative coherence than for any kind of representational accuracy. In each of “narrative chunks” the methods used followed their own logic. For my historical section I relied primarily on library research at the CSSSC (Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta) in nearby Patuli Township. I am grateful to Professors Surajit Mukhopadhyay and Partha Chatterjee for their assistance in this regard. The descriptive passages found in these pages are of course intentional, and may be considered to be an attempt to draw

attention to how subjective modes of experience – like the experience of heat, or of ritual), relate to the process of “cognitive mapping”. These aspects of the project were drawn from my own observations, and were doubtlessly driven by more abstract theoretical considerations that will be considered shortly. It is my hope, at the very least, that these passages may help my readers to form their own mental picture of Rajdanga Para – an important component of any ethnographic account, in my view.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Considering Theory.**

A brief confession: I really enjoy considering theory, although I often question it's applicability to real life situations. That said, I often find myself pondering over theoretical questions in the most unlikely of places: metros, toilets, treadmills, and so forth. Despite my personal interest in theory, I believe that there is no final place, save perhaps death, where theoretical problems arrive and are resolved. Each solution opens up a slew of new problems and perspectives that seem literally endless. Therefore I would advise my readers to view this chapter as a series of provisional theoretical problems that will hopefully serve as a guide to conceptualizing our problem, as opposed to providing concrete answers to it.

This chapter was parsed from around 75 pages of theory that I wrote during the summer of 2008 as I reflected on my project and the problems it was posing. To remind the reader, I will re-state my main question:

*How do the slum-dwellers living in Rajdanga Para both discursively and imaginatively construct their community within the context of the development state, and what have been the outcomes of this encounter?*

The first section of this chapter deals with the imagination and its role – from a variety of theoretical perspectives – in social understanding. The second section will deal with competing notions of community as it has evolved alongside a State that increasingly seeks to play a larger role in the lives of its citizens.

#### **4.1. Imaginative Wiles.**

“Generally speaking, imagination is the medium of the process of infinitizing; it is not one faculty on par with others, but, if one would so speak, it is the faculty *instar omnium* (for all faculties)”.

- Soren Kierkegaard



To “imaginatively construct”? What significance for anthropology can such a vague and perhaps contested term possibly have? To try and answer this question, I would like to briefly survey some of the various ideas surrounding this term from the western tradition.

The caution with which philosophers have approached the imagination is well known, and succinctly captured by John Sallis:

Ever again philosophy attests that imagination has a double effect, a double directionality, bringing about illumination and elevation, on the one hand, and deception and corruption, on the other. It brings them about in such close proximity that neither can, with complete assurance, be decisively separated from the other” (Sallis 2000: 46).

This “double effect” has deep roots in the Western metaphysical tradition. On the one hand, the imaginative faculty takes sensory imprints from the outer world and transforms them into an image. This allows the subject of experience to contemplate the absent original. On the other hand, the imagination can be seen to generate images that have little correspondence to external reality, thereby luring the subject into false understandings or beliefs regarding the world, or his place in it.

The classical view that cognition must conform to the qualities of external objects – i.e. that particular objects are originary and constitutive was pushed to its furthest limit by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Hume:

“There is no such thing as abstract or general ideas, properly speaking; but...all general ideas are, in reality, particular ones, attached to a general term, which circumstances, the idea, present to the mind” (Hume 1993: 138)

Attachment, resemblance, and the presence of the particular, are the forces which Hume called “the empire of imagination” (Ibid). This empire, according to Hume, serves

as both a mediator between the particular and the general, and - more devilishly – creates the illusion of the general itself. This illusion of the general was what compelled Hume to attack some of the more entrenched metaphysical categories (famously the category of causality) of his time. Yet due to his belief that, inherited from classical philosophy, that particular cognitions must conform to particular objects, Hume could only conclude that the wiles of the imagination must always trump rational cognition, and lead it astray. This was to be one of Hume's conclusions that would wake the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, from his "dogmatic slumbers".

Hume had attacked causality on the basis that it could be neither seen directly, nor intuited. Kant agreed with this premise, yet argued that while this may be true, causality or abstract forces could be known through their effects. This change of emphasis led Kant to reverse Hume's basic metaphysical premise, namely that cognition must conform to objects; instead positing that objects must conform to cognition. But if objects are to conform to cognition, what forces lie within us that produce objects *as objects of human experience*?

The invisible force, the force that Kant could only discover through its products, was the imagination – *Einbildungskraft*, or "force of imagination" (Axel 2003: 116). The key difference between Kant and Hume's notion of the imagination was that, for Hume, the imagination was responsible for making *particular* objects present, while for Kant, it was responsible for *all* objects coming to presence (Axel 2003: 116). Kant, like Hume, proposed that the imagination played a mediating role between sensibility (particular objects), and understanding (rules, concepts, categories, etc.). However, for Kant, the imagination was a force of synthesis, and this synthesis itself being a product of it,

“without which we could have no cognition whatsoever, but of which we are conscious only rarely” (Kant 1993: 130) Like light from the sun that illuminates everything without our being able to directly perceive it, the imagination makes all human experience possible. Hence:

“...we have a pure imagination, as a basic power of the human soul which underlies a priori all cognition. By means of pure imagination we link the manifold of intuition, on the one hand, with the condition of the necessary unity of apperception, on the other. By means of this transcendental function of the imagination the two extremes, viz., sensibility must necessarily cohere; for otherwise sensibility would indeed yield appearances, but would yield no objects of empirical cognition, and hence no experience” (Kant 1993: 171).

Kant’s elevation of the imagination – its construction as a sort of cognitive schemata that “temporalizes appearances to the subject in forms of relations of succession, of simultaneity, and of what is simultaneous with succession” (Kant 1993: 100), veers closer to a definition that I will use.

Karl Marx, in a well known passage from his Capital volume 1, succinctly differentiates a crucial difference between humans and their animal counterparts:

“A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in his mind before he erects it in reality” (Marx 2003: 178).

For Marx then, what separated human cognition from all other that we know of was not reason per se, but rather the imagination. Of course the wider context from which the above quote was parsed dealt specifically with human productive labour, yet there is no reason to think that we could not apply this idea to other kinds of human productions. If we try to read this passage a little closer, we might conclude that Marx is pointing

towards the human capacity to create imaginative totalities in the absence of any actually existing ones.

The idea of totality, and the vast array of objects or processes that it is meant to signify, has fallen on hard times of late – at least in esoteric academic theorizing. Indeed, there seems no easier way to best one's graduate seminar opponent than to pluck some specific exception, and to proceed to label said opponent as a “totalizer.” This kind of argument is political, and typically sets itself in opposition to identity labels like “the nation” or “the working class” that seek to categorize people under a single rubric. We can admit that social and political pitfalls lurk behind such simplistic categorizations, and we can also admit that without imagining such groups, they probably wouldn't exist – in discourse or in reality. However, we might ask whether it is profitable to theoretically abandon pan-cultural phenomenon, such as the imagination, simply because we don't always like the effect? In this sense, I am led to the conclusion that certain aspects of post-structuralism – specifically those obsessive anti-totalizing screeds overstate their case. Like some ecologists who feel that things can only improve if humanity could somehow devolve back to instinctual apes, the too often off-handed dismissal of what could be argued to be a fundamental human capacity; an ability to imagine something approaching a totality (be they couched in metaphysical, sacred, or secular terms), smacks of the kind of academic vanguardism that has probably had more deleterious social effects than people trying to imagine something better for themselves. Besides, total heterogeneity is still total.

Here I should refine my use of the term imagination. I am not speaking of all types of imaginative acts. I can well imagine a parrot with the head of a poodle and the

feet of a kangaroo, but while this imaginative operation may be well-suited for children's literature, it has little bearing on this study. The kind of imagination I will be trying to thresh out has more to do with intentionality: that is, the mental construction of the empirically unreal, which serves the purpose of guiding real action. This is what I think Frederic Jameson had in mind in his use of the term cognitive map. Before we act we imagine. Our imaginative life may be culturally shaped, it may be informed by religious doctrines, or by post-modern play, but the point is we all engage in it.

Be that as it may, it is also true that when it comes to complex social processes in a dizzyingly complicated 'globalized, world, our imagined totalities are far from being total, in "reality". An individual shut off from others, like Herzog's Kasper Hauser, will lack the essential symbolic coordinates to imagine and act in any recognizably human way. In this sense we might say that the imagination and intentionality are *both* natural (in that they exist as potential) and cultural (in that they can only manifest themselves in the context of a particular society). To return to Marx's quote, I would propose that anthropologists might fruitfully expand Marx's ideas of production to include things like the production of social relations, novels, paintings, weavers, communities, etc. In all of these productions the imagination – the creation of mental maps of unseen contexts, form the unperceived backdrop that allows people to think and act in certain ways.

In the context of precariously existing squatter settlements on the outskirts of Kolkata, imagined totalities served the purpose of both social and political legitimization. The responses elicited during interviews, and casual conversations often employed larger social and political categories (jāti, family, nation, etc.) that attempted to forge a discursive connection between the particular community of Rajdanga Para, and more

general socio-political currents swirling around in the wider Indian society. Soudami Dasi, who had been living in the settlement for twenty years since the death of her husband made this appeal:

For the last ten years the government has been trying to evict us because we do not own the land on which we have been living. Perhaps they don't think we are responsible enough – I don't know. But all of us here care for this land; this community. We are Bengalis – of the *Bangla Jāti*, and we care for our land as much as anyone else...Our challenge is to *make them see this* (my emphasis)

In later chapters we shall have the opportunity to look more closely at statements of this kind. For now, let me note a couple of important points. First of all, the problem of forced evictions is understood, not as a result of political collusion with vested market or class interests, but rather as a lack of recognition regarding the *shared attributes* of squatters and other social groups. Secondly. And this flows from the first point, the job of resistance lies not in openly antagonistic exercises, but in the vague, or perhaps more subtle process of “making them see”. In chapter 6, I shall look deeper into what this exactly entails. Finally, I would point out that that the categories used by many squatters (jāti, family, nation, etc.) are for the most part what I would hesitate to call vernacular political categories. No mention of citizenship, human rights, or class positions were to be heard in the squatters discourses. Rather, the verbal construction of community was nearly always couched in terms of local understanding, and the corresponding ethic (like the duty entailed in belonging to a certain jāti) that those notions contained.

All this certainly provides fodder for theoretical speculation. In the conclusion I will point out certain areas of interest that might warrant further study. For now I will move on to the concept of jāti – a notion whose strength lies in its ambiguity, and as such, was the most recurring theme over the course of my interviews.

#### 4.2. Jāti as Community.

Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and its Fragments*, provides five different senses that the term jāti can be said to possess:

- 1) Jāti as origin, such as Mussalaman by birth, Vaisnav by birth, a beggar by birth (*jāitīe, musalmān, jābhikhār*).
- 2) Classes of living species, such as human jāti, animal jāti, bird jāti, etc.
- 3) Varna – following the forms of classification according to the *guna* and *karma*, such as Brahmin, etc.
- 4) *Varnsa, gotra, kula* (lineage clan), such as Arya jāti, Semitic jāti.
- 5) Human collectivities bound by loyalty to a state or organized around the natural and cultural characteristics of a country or province, such as English, French, Bengali, Japanese, Gujarati, etc. (Chatterjee 1993: 221)

Between number one and five, there is an immense range of possible meanings for the term jāti. This semantic slippery-ness has even induced some to wonder (Chatterjee 1993: 222) whether the term has any meaning whatsoever. This ambiguity, moreover, has been understood for and commented upon for more than one hundred years. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Kamalakanta* contains a scene in which this ambiguity is humourously dramatized. The main character, Kamalakanta, is called in to testify as a witness in a case of theft. Before being questioned on the details of the case, Kamalakanta is asked to provide some information about his jāti background, in an effort to fix his identity:

The lawyer then asked him, "What jāti are you?"

K: Am I a jāti?

Lawyer: What jāti do you belong to?

K: To the Hindu jāti.

Lawyer: Oh come now! What Varna?

K: A very very dark varna.

Lawyer: What the hell is going on here! Why did I have to call a witness like this? I say, do you have a jāti?

K: Who can take it from me?

The magistrate saw that the lawyer was getting nowhere. He said, “You know there are many kinds of jāti among the Hindus, such as Brahmin, kayastha, Kaibarta. Which one of the jāti do you belong to?”

K: My lord! All this is the lawyer’s fault! He can see I have the sacred thread around my neck. I have said my name is Chakravarti. How am I to know that he will still not be able to deduce that I am a Brahman?

The magistrate wrote, “Caste Brahman.” (Chattopadhyay 1976: 89)

This fictional encounter humourously demonstrates the divide between the vernacular use of the term jāti, which slides easily between fixed meanings, and the formal way the British colonial authorities understood, and tried to use it – slotting people into what they considered to be well-demarcated categories that followed a certain rationale. It is therefore not surprising that the main character was so easily able to play around with the term jāti, to the chagrin of the sober-minded authorities. The important point, in both Chattopadhyay’s fiction and in our theoretical reflections, is that it is possible to belong to innumerable jāti’s – not simultaneously, but rather contextually.

Thus, the invocation of varying types of collective belonging subsumed under the term jāti can be understood in two slightly different ways. In the above mentioned *Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee defines one of these. “Jāti”, Chatterjee writes, “can point to a kind of collectivity in which membership is not a matter of self-interested



individual choice or contractual agreement, but an immediate inclusion – ordinary as it is by birth” (Chatterjee 1993: 223). In defining *jāti* in this way, Chatterjee is highlighting the political uses to which this term lends itself. More specifically, we see how the term *jāti* can be used by authorities, be they spiritual or political, to fix social collectivities by proclaiming a natural bond that unites all who share the same origin, and who must therefore share the same destiny (Chatterjee 1993: 222). Examples of this kind can be found throughout the writings of innumerable Indian nationalists during the first half of the twentieth century. One such nationalist, the Bengali Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, attempted to paint a picture of a sort of nationalist utopia that he felt would eventually emerge out of India’s conflict ridden past:

“Although India is the true motherland only of those who belong to the Hindu *jāti* and although only they have been born from her womb, the Musalmans are not unrelated to her any longer. She has held them to her breasts and reared them. Musalmans are therefore her adopted children. Can there be no bonds of fraternity between two children of the same mother, one natural child and the other adopted? There certainly can; the laws of every religion admit this. There has now been born a bond of brotherhood between Hindus and Musalmans living in India” (Mukhopadhyay 1923: 97).

It must be mentioned that for Mukhopadhyay Indian nationalism is synonymous with Hindu nationalism. However, Bhudeb’s nationalism is also perfectly modern, stressing solidarity between groups in order to keep colonial powers at bay. Nonetheless, in order to think of a united Indian polity that included Hindus and Muslims, albeit under the leadership of Hindus, Bhudeb always resorted to the language and imagery of kinship.

Yet this evocation of kinship was clearly contextual. Indeed, nationalists of Bhudeb’s ilk would have been horrified, for example, if someone were to appeal to these

affinal ties to make a case for intermarriage between Hindus and Muslims, or for eating the same food. Thus we see again how these solidarities within the language of jāti are contextually defined, albeit a context that attempts to restrict their free flowing use. It is primarily a modern, or western, kind of political discourse which insists that these collectivities have a fixed or definite form, or, if there are several to which one belongs, to demand a priority amongst them. It therefore becomes imperative to ask: “Are you a Muslim first, or a Bengali? Are you a Bengali first, or an Indian?”

Determining the forces that release or prohibit the use of ambiguous identity markers like jāti can be studied in numerous ways. Sudipa Kaviraj has argued that one of the main legacies of colonial politics was the effacement of earlier “fuzzy” notions of community, and its replacement with an idea of community that is fundamentally “enumerable” (Kaviraj 1992: 9). Second, while communities were definable for the practical purposes of social interaction, members were never required to quantify themselves – that is, to inquire as to how many of them there were in the world (Kaviraj 1992: 10). The post-mutiny (1857) colonial power then sought to fashion conceptual instruments of control by enumerating the diverse communities that their categorical imaginations deemed to be a part of the society that they were destined to rule over. Bernard Cohn, in his well known essay, *The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia*, has shown how terms like caste, jāti, or religion became established “sociological keys” to the numerical description of Indian society (Cohn 1987: 230). Importantly, Cohn emphasizes that this classificatory scheme did not reside solely in the colonial imagination, as it increasingly came to shape latter forms of anti-colonial

mobilization that sought political representation and recognition, precisely along the lines of caste, jāti, and religion.

I should state that I believe that the “fuzziness” of community boundaries outlined by Kaviraj is still very much at play in communities across India today. Following Chatterjee, my research bears out the notion that with the...:

...greater reach of the institutions and processes of the state into the interiors of social life, the state itself is being made sense of in terms of that other (fuzzy) discourse, far removed from the conceptual terms of liberal political theory. The notions of representation and the legitimization of authority, for instance, have taken on a set of meaning in the popular domain of Indian politics that would be impossible to describe, let alone justify, in terms of a theory of interest aggregation or of the rationalization of authority.” (Chatterjee 1993: 226)

In other words, unforeseen events like the strange alliances forged between once antagonist ‘identity groups’, the rise of heterogeneous slum communities, the often difficult to understand relationships between popular political leaders and their supporters, can be partially explained by the fact that the assumptions of Western social and political theories cannot fully provide an adequate conceptual framework which we might use to understand, and speak about, the domain of local politics and culture. This will be a crucial point latter on, but for now we will move forward to a couple of other key points.

#### 4.3. Post-Colonialism: Governmentality and the Development State.

“Morality takes different forms at different times, and in out time it takes the form of politics.”

- Mahatma Gandhi (quoted in Nandy 1995: 1)

Situated as we are on this side of post-colonial politics, and post-structural theories, the aforementioned process of enumerating populations appears as almost a quasi-natural things for governments to do. Yet since the emergence of the discrete, categorical conceptual apparatus of modern governance, new dynamics within this process have emerged.

Since this dissertation is not about European political theory, I will try to confine myself here to a distinction made between civil society and populations – the import of which I hope will become clear. Civil society is an idea that is nearly as old as modern political theory itself. In an article published in 1990, Charles Taylor outlines three different senses in which civil society has been defined within the western tradition:

- 1) In a minimal sense, civil society exists where there are free associations, not under the tutelage of state power.
- 2) In a stronger sense, civil society only exists where society as a whole can structure itself and coordinate its actions through such associations which are free of state tutelage.
- 3) As an alternative supplement to the second case, we can speak of civil society wherever the ensemble of associations can significantly determine or deflect the course of state policy (Taylor 1990: 105).

Without going into a detailed analysis as to how these characterizations have historically manifested themselves, let us be content to say that the general idea of civil society and its attendant notion of the citizen, has served as the primary source of

legitimization of state power – in Europe at least – since the French Revolution. The identification between equal rights bearing citizens, the nation, and the state, are today almost universally acknowledged. Even the most undemocratic regimes claim their authority stems from the people they rule over.

If the relationships between citizens, civil society and the state have occupied political philosophers for centuries, an entirely new political distinction has recently risen to the fore: the distinction between citizens and populations. I will once more quote Partha Chatterjee, as he succinctly articulates this distinction:

Citizens inhabit the domain of theory, populations the domain of policy. Unlike the concept of citizen, the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical; it does not carry a normative burden. Populations are identifiable, classifiable, and describable by empirical or behavioral criteria and are amenable to statistical techniques such as censuses and sample surveys. Unlike the concept of the citizen that carries the ethical connotation of participation in the sovereignty of the state, the concept of population makes available to government functionaries a set of rationally manipulable instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as targets of their “policies” – economic policy, administrative policy, law, and even political mobilization... This regime secures legitimacy not by the participation of citizen in matters of the state, but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population. Its mode of reasoning is not deliberative openness but rather an instrumental notion of costs and benefits. Its apparatus is not the republican assembly, but an elaborate network of surveillance through which information is collected on every aspect of the life of the population to be looked after...Moreover, while the political fraternity of citizens has to be constantly affirmed as one an indivisible, there is no one entity of the governed. There is always a multiplicity of population groups that are the objects of governmentality – multiple targets with multiple characteristics, requiring multiple techniques of administration. (Chatterjee 2004: 34)

While this antimony between the republican citizen and the populations group that Chatterjee speaks of does acceptably characterize a number of changes found in western societies, the chronology assumes a different form as we shift our attention to the rise of post-colonial states – particularly India. In India, the rise of what we now call,

following Michel Foucault, governmentality, pre-dates the emergence of India as an independent political entity. For at least 150 years before its independence the procedure of classifying the population as groups targeted for policies relating to public health, land settlement, recruitment into the army, management of famines and droughts, regulation of religious spaces, public morality, crime prevention, etc, was widespread, and occurred during a time when Indians were considered to be subjects, as opposed to citizens. Although the extent to which India's previous Mughal rulers also used a classificatory logic is debated amongst scholars of Indian history, the British colonial system of governance based on classification rooted in group characteristics, was what Nicholas Dirks has called the "ethnographic state." (Dirks 2001: 23)

It was the ideals of the citizen, as a manifestation of popular sovereignty that motivated Indian nationalists, exemplified by the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to seek liberation. Yet soon after this liberation occurred, the imperatives of development, with its promise to end backwardness and poverty through state driven reforms, came to dominate the practice of Indian politics. This change in direction was presaged by Nehru himself, who in his autobiography written years before independence wrote:

We shall need the help of many experts in many departments of public activity, particularly in those which require technical and scientific knowledge. Among those who have served in the I.C.S. (Indian Civil Service) or other imperial services, there will be many Indians and foreigners who will be necessary and welcomed to the new order (Nehru 1936: 445).

Thus, post-independent India came to be governed, with varying degrees of successes and failures, along the lines of developmental imperatives – often guided by international and non-governmental organizations. The pursuit of these goals led to the –

re-adoption of a wide variety of ethnographic categories that survived colonial rule. The new Indian ruling classes found in these categories a convenient way to describe and classify groups of people – transforming them into easy targets for social, legal, electoral, and economic policies. It is at this point where categories such as *jāti*, caste, and religious affiliation win new leases on life, and ensconce themselves as the dominant criteria for effective development and governance.

Having established the broader political imperatives that have shaped the way the state has positioned itself towards its various communities, it is now important to ask how anthropological research might add to our understanding of the state, development, and the construction of community. As I have previously indicated, the undeniable strength of anthropology lies in its ability to juxtapose larger social, economic and cultural forces against the often unruly complexities of everyday life that most of us experience in our homes and communities. I believe that it is by way of the quotidian that an adequate assessment of larger social theories or political philosophies and strategies (such as the ones we have been discussing) can be made, modified, or jettisoned.

In specific regards to the preceding discussion of states, citizens and governmentality, it will suffice here to note that while academic theories of citizenship and statecraft are willing to provide everyone, including the poor, the rights to cast a vote, proponents of these theories are far less willing to allow antagonistic cultural ideas or moralities into this public sphere. Indian academic Ashish Nandy has written, “Very few of these theories offer any space to popular theories of politics and public life” (Nandy 2002: 4).

In the next chapter we shall enter the lives of my informants, but for now a couple of more theoretical point need to be raised. I have been discussing the historical development of the Indian state, but at this point it might be useful to anthropologize the concept of politics itself. I'm sure that some readers will have noticed that I have been forwarding a definition of politics that could be equated with the aggregation of activities and ideas of those players who were, and are, directly involved in the operation of these institutions, like the British colonialists, or the post-independence political classes.

Yet this top down view of politics has been challenged from many quarters. In his 1982 classic, *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, historian Ranajit Guha makes an important distinction between the political elites of the colonial period, and what he called the subaltern classes of peasants, industrial workers, and casual labourers. The distinction allowed Guha to claim that amongst this latter group of subalterns there existed, and indeed still exists, "an autonomous domain of politics of the people that was organized differently from the politics of the elite" (Guha 1982: 23) More specifically, Guha saw subaltern politics as operating along a horizontal axis of "kinship and territoriality" (Guha 1982: 24), as opposed the what he viewed as the vertical implementation of politics via legalistic and parliamentary institutions of the elites.

It is easy to criticize this view as being too dichotomizing, and for failing to distinguish between the various antagonistic groups within this dual constellation of Guha's. However, such a critique would miss the progressive element in Guha's formulation, which was to challenge the standard tendency in Marxist scholarship to view these so-called subalterns as possessing a *backwards consciousness*, or a *pre-political* mode of being. For example, Eric Hobsbawm in his *Primitive Rebels* wrote: "They are



pre-political people who have not yet found, or have only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations in the world” (Hobsbawm 1978: 2). In rejecting the idea that subaltern consciousness was pre-political (and the evolutionary and somewhat Hegelian model that this implied), Guha was able to suggest that subaltern reactions against colonialism or developmentalism led to a new constellation of the political as such. Thus, to ignore the impact of the subaltern on elite political practices would ultimately lead, in Guha’s view, to a Eurocentric Marxism in particular, and to elitist histories in general. As Dipesh Chakrabarty recently put it:

...one would then, not know how to analyze the consciousness of the peasant – the discourse of kinship, caste, religion, and ethnicity through which they expressed themselves in protest – except as backwards consciousness trying to grapple with a changing world whose logic they could never fully comprehend. (Chakrabarty 2002: 9).

In lieu of this position, Guha claimed that subaltern understandings and reactions to the intrusion of European institutions were *coeval* with it, and therefore constituted as correct, albeit vernacular reaction. Guha, the historian examined hundreds of cases of peasant uprisings between 1783 and 1900, and found that these revolts always involved a playful inversion of the symbols and codes (dress, behaviors, speech, etc.) that their superiors used to express their superiority. The inversion of symbols of authority was thus the first act of resistance carried out by subalterns.

Here we return to the idea of *jāti*. As previously noted, the semantic breadth of this word, coupled with its use as a constricting identity marker in the context of both colonialism and state governmentalization, makes it a useful tool to discuss and gauge the ways in which the urban poor invert or re-constitute the symbolic coordinates of their situation in their attempts to either resist or reform top-down developmental policies.

Furthermore, I shall argue that this kind of symbolic inversion not only re-constitutes the fabric of local communities, but also re-calibrates the ways in which political decision makers attempt to define, control and ameliorate the hard conditions under which the lives of countless urban squatters play out.

#### 4.4. A Brief Critique and Questions for the Future.

*Power, power everywhere. And how the signs do shrink.*

*Power, power everywhere, and nothing else to think.*

- Marshal Sahlins (2004: 2)

Having outlined a number of theoretical points and positions, I would like to briefly distance myself from these positions, and clear up some possible misunderstandings that the reader might take from this chapter. Those familiar with recent social theory will recognize that I have been using a theory, the theory of governmentality, of Michel Foucault's, albeit through some of his Indian interpreters. While I find much in this theory to be admired, I am uncomfortable with the broader implications of Foucault's theories, and the ways in which his ideas have been appropriated in much social scientific enquiry of recent vintage. In this section I will briefly critique Foucault's notion of power as an explanatory concept, and his ideas regarding the nexus of power and knowledge. While this critique will be curt, I hope that its inclusion will become clear in the chapters that follow.

Implicit in the theory of governmentality outlined in the preceding section, is a specific idea of power that operates above and beyond any particular individual who may

or may not exercise it – indeed this power, as Foucault would have it, speaks *through* those who wield it. This conception of power, or power relations, as employed in anthropology, has been critiqued in some quarters (Sahlins 2004) as a sort of neo-functionalism. In times past, notions like social solidarity, material advantage (to take a couple of simple examples) served as a conceptual rubric under which a wide variety of social practices or ideas were “explained”. Since those innocent days, some intellectuals have adopted the concept of power to explain a wide variety of social dynamics. “Power”, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins recently wrote, “is the intellectual black hole into which all kinds of cultural contents gets sucked” (Sahlins 2004: 20). In such an intellectual climate any social practice from Iranian poetry, Bengali fashions, or Thai rock n’roll, are often framed as “proving” the existence of some kind of power relation – usually hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. Some reader may note an irony at work here. If, as some post-modern theorists tell us, appearances and essences are nothing more than a false dichotomy, it is strange to see how many scholarly works interpret real-life cultural practices as a mere appearance, or reflex of some power-laden essence that explains them. Having accomplished this, we too often assume that we have transformed, via our explanation, appearances (like Bengali fashions) to truth (it’s really an instance of counter-hegemonic resistance). Even though I have been speaking of resistance to power quite a lot in this chapter, I would like to distance myself from such a procedure.

On a less abstract level, the use of power as an explanatory concept fails to discriminate, in any meaningful way, between the various ways, and various purposes that various types of power are employed. Forcing a child to share his cookie and forcing him into indentured labour are both examples of the exercise of power, yet only the most

dogmatic of theorists would equate the two. The exaggeration of the previous example leads us to another pitfall we face when employing Foucault's idea of power; namely that it is easy to inflate the significance of any odd cultural practice, "translating the apparently trivial into the fatefully political" (Sahlins 2004: 23). One unfortunate result of this tendency is that the value of terms like power, domination, and resistance are cheapened to the point where one sometimes feels that student haiku recitals are as good an example of resistance as factory floor organizing.

This critique of Foucauldian power leads me to want to make a comment on its sister notion – knowledge, or power-knowledge. On this I have less to say, except to echo what anthropologist David Graeber (2001: 143) has already pointed out; namely, that the strict equation between power and knowledge (as if knowledge were a simple reflex of power) is a seriously jaundiced epistemology. To be sure, certain forms of knowledge arise out of unequal power relations (colonialism is a paradigmatic example if this), but even here, the production of knowledge goes hand in hand with the production of a certain kind of ignorance, or non-knowledge. The application of this kind of power would be impossible without an ignorance regarding the sensuous complexity of everyday life. When we see some development official characterizing certain cultural practices as tribal, uninformed, or in need of development, we can be sure that that person is caught in the power-knowledge-ignorance web that is so crucial for development. Take the characterization of the people living in Rajdanga Para by Moni Sanyal, a local CPI-(M) political cadre.

...We need to educate these people. You know many of them remain under the influence of the village way of life...they still practice the caste system and are

victims to all sorts of traditional prejudices. This causes them problems for integrating into our modern society.

In a limited sense, Mr. Sanyal does possess a certain form of knowledge, and his position as one with a certain degree of power and influence does colour that knowledge. Yet in an empirical sense he was absolutely incorrect (or just being horrendously misleading) to say that the caste system is prevalent in that particular squatter settlement. As my research bears out, the caste or jāti demographic in Rajdanga Para was decidedly mixed, and moreover, there was a degree of inter-caste cooperation (for instance, neighbours of one jāti looking after the children of another, Inter-dining, drawing water from the same well, community-wide festival organization and cooperation, etc.) that has nothing to do with the kind of “traditional” caste roles that Mr. Sanyal spoke of. This is not to say that under certain circumstances caste tensions do not arise, but that these conflicts have as much to do with opportunistic politicians trying to win vote banks, or with media inflated hype, than they do with the ignorance of the squatters.

Additionally, and perhaps more fundamentally, the problem of poverty, according to Mr. Sanyal, is rooted in tradition. The poor, as his quote demonstrated, are viewed as victims of their own backward ideas and customs, and the cure is sought in large doses of modernization, technical, educational and so on.

I don't wish to imply that anthropologists are unaware of all this. Indeed, most people involved in the discipline that I know offer implicit critiques of the kind I have just made, and the current uncertainty regarding the validity and representativeness of our work is often lamented. Yet in anthropological writing, at least, there seems to still be an unwillingness to try to fill in these blanks with positive ethnographic content, and theory

is often substituted for explanation. In light of these problems that I share with the rest of the anthropological community, I hope that this work will help to show how older anthropological tools, like ideas about kinship, exchange, modes of cooperation, etc, are still pertinent – indeed crucial to – understanding the complexities of social life, in India or anywhere else.

This discussion is pertinent to my own research insofar as I try to dispel the idea that my informants appeals to traditional values and practices, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, represent a consciousness that is “mired” in an outmoded past. Rather, I will posit that the very meaning of traditional ideas of caste obligations and social roles has undergone a profound change as the structures of Indian society have shifted. By ignoring the context in which particular concepts are employed, or by assuming that old concepts, like *jāti*, are immune from shifts in meaning, we become blinded to the profound changes in social knowledge occurring communities composed of “tradition-bound” groups. In addition, by ignoring these processes it becomes too easy to deny any degree of agency, or social creativity, to marginalized groups, which allows “experts” to view them as vacant receptacles for a variety of social engineering projects. Through an analysis of real cultural practices (like rituals, discourse, webs of social obligations, etc.), I hope to show that my informants contribute, in a concrete way, to the making of a new, distinctive, modern culture – rather than being obstacles to said cultures emergence.

To recap: I have emphasized the human capacity to imagine – totalities, new ways of social interaction etc – as a process by which people understand and help to construct something larger, despite their partial knowledge. Obviously this process takes on a

myriad of guises, yet my focus remains trained on the local deployment of cultural categories in the struggle for legal, moral, and social recognition of a particular community in peril. Yet the deployment of these categories, needless to say, does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, as I hope to have made clear, it takes place within the context of political, historical, and economic forces that individual actors, myself included, can only dimly perceive. How this plays out is the topic of the following chapters.

**Chapter 5:**  
**Resettlements.**

5.1. Bakuram Kayal.

I've come to meet with Bakuram and my translator Sabya, but both are late. The sun is showing its face for the first time in four days, and it is stifling. I am already sweating all over, wishing I could put on a cool pair of shorts. There is plenty of activity at this time; a number of men have already left for work, and more emerge from their homes carrying small metal *tiffins* containing their lunches. Behind the row of shacks more men are bathing in the canal, now swollen from the recent rains – their checkered *lungis* and *gamchas* cling to their frail buttocks like paper maché on chicken wire.

I order a syrupy chai and a few biscuits plucked from a scuffed plastic jar and wait. The chai-wallah looks to be old, but it is always difficult to know for certain. Time seems to mark the human body at greater speeds here. He speaks no English, so I thank him in broken Bengali, and refocus my attention on looking and writing. A number of small boys and collared short-sleeved shirts begin to congregate at the end of the lane. I turn to the old tea server and ask in rough Hindi, “skul?” (meaning, are they going to school?), I ask – embarrassed at my linguistic ineptitude. “Hām”, he replies in the affirmative. We both smile, triumphant at our small act of communication. “Ek Chai” I ask, and return to watching the children. There are several of them, and like many groups of children, they strike me as an unruly bunch. A couple of them are chasing one another around a large tree, while others are digging sludge from the gutter with sticks. They're inspecting the sludge like scientists – like I am inspecting them.



Finally I spy Bakuram exiting his hut. He is wearing a blue lungi and a simple white cotton t-shirt. We both smile in recognition, and I motion for him to join me. He sits down at the table and orders two more glasses of tea. I haven't the heart to tell him that I've already had three glasses, and am feeling queasy from the sugar and caffeine (and the heat...of course), so I accept and offer him a cigarette.

"No work today", he says with a shrug. I shrug in reply, trying not to think of the dire consequences that his unemployment might have for his family. He puffs happily on the tailor made cigarette that I had given him, and looks at it admiringly during his long, drawn out exhale. A small luxury I think, and become more aware of the gulf that separates our two lives.

Sabya arrives a few minutes later and Bakuram asks us if we would like to return to his place for some food that his wife had left for us. Nodding in agreement we get up and make for Bakuram's home. The house is much like most others in Rajdanga Para. It is what Bengalis would call a *semi-pucca* dwelling (semi-solid), which account for roughly 13% of the slum dwellings in the city (Kundu 2001: 5). The outer walls are made of brick covered with mud and cow-dung, and the roof is tiled and patched with plastic sheets to keep the heavy rains at bay. Like all *Khaldar* (canal-side) communities, Rajdanga Para is unauthorized and unrecognized by the municipal government. Water is fetched from a single pump located five minutes from the community. The canal serves as the only receptacle for the disposal of rubbish and human waste – the stench is palpable.

We enter through a low doorway and immediately find ourselves in what I take to be the living room. The floor is a hard packed mixture of mud and dung, and its smooth surface undulates like waves on a muddy pond. To the right lies a single *charpoy* (string bed), and Bakuram gestures at us to be seated. He turns on a rusty old fan that whirs too loudly. “One minute please”, he says disappearing into the back of the hut. As we wait, I begin to grapple with my presence in Bakuram’s humble abode. It was a feeling that would return to me often over the course of my interview, and so in the spirit of reflexive anthropology, I offer this extract from my field notes written later on that day.

*Visited Bakuram today with Sabya – the first time in my life that I have been inside a slum hut like that. There was something unsettling about the experience, for despite my conviction that people back home need anthropologists to do this kind of work, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the whole episode was somehow contrived – as if I were the author of some strange real life fiction with a terribly clichéd dénouement. Sitting in Bakuram’s small hut my scientific pretenses began to peel away, leaving nothing but an empty core of uncertainty. In an instant I recalled my graduate seminar diatribes against subjectivism in anthropology; or my calls for a return to class as the pertinent category for social theory; my hopes for a return to a certain degree of objectivity in social science. As Bakuram prepared our breakfast, softly singing a familiar Bollywood film song, doubts began invade my mind – doubts about anthropological facts, and their ability to speak for themselves – to present themselves clearly. As the tension in my stomach tightened I came to understand that I would control what “facts” were in fact “facts” and this idea left me feeling somewhat adrift in unfamiliar waters – as if all the navigational tools that my education had provided had just fell overboard.*

To be honest, I wasn’t sure what a slum hut would be like inside. Like many Canadians, I had an image of slum dwellers as skinny, hungry people wallowing in dirt and squalor. I was surprised therefore, at the cleanliness of Bakuram’s hut. Aside from the brick, most of the hut was constructed and furnished with found objects. Old newspaper was plastered onto the far wall to cover up the bamboo thatch, and old poster depicting Ma Durga (the local deity), and Shah Rukh Khan (a famous Bollywood star)

hung in profusion. A crude idol of the deity made of what appeared to be either mud or clay, sat opposite the *charpoy*, and was festooned with flowers and lit incense. On the wall to my right hung an assortment of clothing, and I noticed a few folded saris neatly placed underneath the string bed. On the floor beside the door leading to the back laid a pink kitchen sink, waiting for the day, I surmised, when water would be piped into each hut – or perhaps serving as a sort of symbol of modern living and hope for the future.

Bakuram returned with metal plates and bowls filled with vegetables and chapatti, a repast that I knew had been prepared exclusively for my visit. We joined him on the floor for the meal, and I thanked him for his hospitality. As we ate, I wondered how I would explain my project, and what he would think of it. Would he understand? Would he be willing to help? Would his breakfast give me wicked diarrhea?

After eating I began to explain my work to Bakuram, with the help of Sabya. I told him that I was a student interested in finding out more about life in Rajdanga Para, and that I hoped to write something on the community for my university. I explained that I would like to interview him and other people in the community about their struggles to find work and with the government, and asked him if he thought people would be willing to speak with me, and if he thought it would be alright if I “hung about” the community and asked questions. Bakuram thought for a second and replied:

“It is good you have come. I think it will be fine for you to do your work here. We are poor people and life is difficult. I will introduce you to Pandit Pande – he is our priest, and he is also involved with the local government, although he doesn’t speak English. You can ask me any questions you like”.

We all fell into a few seconds of comfortable silence. I was feeling grateful towards Bakuram – impressed at his openness, and his initial acceptance of my strange person into his life. Then, with scarce warning, and no prompting Bakuram launched into his own speech, switching from English to Bengali and addressing myself and Sabya in turn – his face formed grimace as he spoke:

“You are interested our lives here. It is good that the young people are concerned with us, but *we live in the face of the tiger*<sup>2</sup>. The government wants to move us to some buildings near Garia,<sup>3</sup> so they can sell our land. For them we are a problem that they want to remove, but we are a family (jāti) and we will stay in our homes”.

Around fifteen feet from Bakuram’s front door, a group of labourers haul buckets of bricks and cement up to the third story of a partially completed house. The squat, concrete affair mimics the countless other new homes that are popping up like mushrooms throughout Kolkata’s entire eastern fringe. I ask Bakuram why he doesn’t want to move to a new home.

“First of all they are asking an Rs 5000<sup>4</sup> fee to be resettled –more than anyone can afford. Between me, my wife and my son, we earn Rs. 3000 each month, depending on the season. So it’s too much money. Also, most people in our community work nearby, so they would have to use buses to come here for work. Most people don’t understand why they want us to move, but the government is just as greedy as anyone else – they want to profit from our Rs.5000, and then they want to profit from our land.”

I had read in the newspapers of these squatter resettlements; however the story I was getting from Bakuram was less enthusiastic. The newspaper stories had a triumphal,

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<sup>2</sup> An old saying from southern Bengal where tigers and humans had long lived as adversaries – here being used as a metaphor for the ever-present threat of eviction.

<sup>3</sup> Garia is located about 4-5 kilometers south-east of Rajdanga Para – with the exception of an ultra-modern shopping complex, it is still primarily rural.

<sup>4</sup> At the time \$1.00 Canadian could be exchanged for roughly Rs. 40. Thus, Rs. 5000 came to \$125.00 CDN.

middle-class air about them; relieved that the ungainly settlements might be a thing of the past; hopeful that Kolkata's neighbourhoods and thoroughfares would once again regain their former glory from a time that scarcely anyone could remember. I too remember thinking that perhaps it might not be such a bad idea, as my western sensibilities were often offended at the sight of refuse piles that seeped out of the city's slums, or the ripe smell of rot that invaded my nostrils as I tried to enjoy a morning promenade. Yet the governments attempted relocation of the squatters in Rajdanga Para was, I would later discover, nearly universally resented.

Eager to learn more about his commitment to staying in Rajdanga Para, I asked Bakuram to give me some more details about his life, and how he came to settle in the squatter settlement.

"My home village is in the Barasat block of South 24-Parganas. I lived there until I was maybe seventeen or eighteen. Our family owned maybe a half bigha<sup>5</sup> of land; not nearly enough to provide for our family. My father worked as an agricultural labourer, but there was hardly ever any work for me and my brothers... You see in my home district there was only one crop grown each year. This provided my father with about three months of work. For the rest of the time I can only remember hunger - constant hunger. It became so bad that my father began coming to the city for months at a time. We never heard from him when he was away, but he would always return with a bit of money, which we would use to buy some rice and dahl (lentils)... When I was around seventeen my mother died. My father was away at the time, and we had no way of reaching him. I had been married for just over a year, and was apprenticing as a carpenter in a nearby village. We had so little money that I decided to go to Kolkata in search of work, and to look for my father<sup>6</sup>... The first months were very hard. I lived on the railway platform at Javadpur for a number of weeks, and sometimes found work as a *jogar*. It was during that time that I met Rajgopal Pande, a Brahmin priest from the Sundarbans. He told me that there he knew of some unused land just east of the station where people could build, and because I had some skills in carpentry, he said that I might be able to claim a small plot in exchange for doing some work for others. At that time this area was not even considered a part of the city - none of the houses you see here were there. I came with the Pandit, and

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<sup>5</sup> One bigha is roughly 1/3 of an acre.

<sup>6</sup> Sadly Bakuram never did find his father, and suspects that he met with some terrible accident.

thankfully he was right. I helped to build quite a few of the houses on this end of the lane. A few months later my wife came to join me. We have been here ever since.”

I was curious as to how these squatters managed to secure rights to the land they were building on. How did they negotiate the confused politics of land vestments?<sup>7</sup>

“We were often in contact with the CPM. At that time their local office was near Gariahat Bazaar [there is now one just up the road]. They would visit during elections, promising not to evict us, so we always voted for them... In those early days we weren’t given any trouble, but ever since they started build all of these new houses we have had to struggle to stay.”

I asked what he meant exactly by struggle.

“Organize. We’ve had to stand together to keep our homes... We may not own the land, but we are good Hindu’s and Bengali’s – the government needs to see that. They think that because we are poor people from different parts of Bengal that we are weak, but we are now like a family. We help each other and want to be good Indians”.

Bakuram’s musings on his community were echoed, with slight but important variations, throughout subsequent interviews. Of interest at this early stage are the multiple identifications that Bakuram makes in his verbal construction of his community: Hindu, Bengali, Indian, and family. Each of these discursive evocations speaks to a politics of similitude, as opposed to difference. Additionally, the stress on identity blurs the boundary that supposedly separates the social from the individual, and the personal from the political. While political elites play at communal politics – the strategic use of difference in electoral politics - most of the squatters in Rajdanga Para appear to be moving in the opposite direction.

In making this claim, however, I would like to exercise some caution. As we shall see, difference does have a role to play in the construction of moral communities amongst the squatters in Rajdanga Para – and the stress on identity is often countered by distinctions made vis-à-vis the middle class.

### 5.2. Rajgopal Pande

At the end of our interview Bakuram had promised to introduce me to his friend Rajgopal – the only Brahmin living in Rajdanga Para. It would take nearly a week for our meeting to take place. We met on a warm evening, after the rains. I arrived with Sabya, and was surprised to find a large group of men, women and children gathered around a television set, engrossed in a cricket match. Rajgopal sat on the floor in the middle of the throng, wearing a clean powder blue lungi and his Brahmin's thread around his torso. His creased face struck me as kind, and he assured Sabya that we would be able to talk after two more overs. In the meantime, we made ourselves comfortable, and were brought tea by who I presumed to be one of Rajgopal's daughters.

Besides the television, there were other small signs of affluence in Rajgopal's hut. A standing lamp stood in one corner, throwing off a warm glow into the dark night. Instead of a simple string *charpoy*, a large double bed, replete with mattress and mosquito net sat in one corner. Although it was initially difficult to deduce who were Rajgopal's children, and who had merely stopped by to watch the match, I later noticed that his wife and three daughters were dressed in richly woven saris, and his son – who dropped in briefly – wore a western-style collared shirt and trousers.

“I come from the district of Nadia in the Sundarban. My village name is Mohonpur.

My father was a priest, and as a boy he taught me to perform the *pujas*.<sup>8</sup> This training takes a long time to master. One has to memorize the proper vedic verses, and know which verse goes with what ceremony. There is also the matter of mastering the proper rituals for each occasion. However, there were too many young priests in our village, and it was difficult to find enough work. Once I was married, I made the decision to move to Kolkata. One of my cousins had moved a year before me – he was working as an assistant shopkeeper at Gariahat Bazaar. It was he who helped us out when we arrived... Thankfully, we were allowed to make our small home here... Since that time we have had five children – two sons and three daughters.”

Rajgopal now serves as Rajdanga Para’s local Priest, earning roughly Rs. 2000 per month, while both his wife and eldest son contribute to the family pool. After a time, I asked if he felt confident in the future of his bustee:

“We all hope for the best, but we are looked down upon by our neighbours and politicians. For them, we seem uneducated, and blinded by tradition.

### 5.3. Moni Sanyal

One damp evening in August, Rajgopal Pande had introduced me to his friend Moni Sanyal, a local CPI (M) councilor, who was a minor player in the move to relocate squatter settlements throughout Kasba. Moni agreed to an interview, and we met a few days later on a sunny afternoon outside the thatched Party headquarters at the Chakrobarty Pari marketplace. At this time the market had closed for the hot afternoon, and only a few cycle-rickshaw drivers were stretched out for an afternoon nap in the shade. We chose a quiet spot underneath the thatched awning of the party office, and I proceeded to ask, in English, Mr. Sanyal what the government was doing, or planning to do, to help the squatters of Chakrobarty Para:

As I’m sure you are aware the problem of illegal housing is a problem, not just for this area, or even Kolkata, but is India wide. It is my view that the problem of squatting is secondary to the problem of economic opportunity... We in Kolkata, as elsewhere, have seen many people moving from the countryside in search of

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<sup>8</sup> Ritual ceremonies.



work here in the city. The problem is the lack of decent jobs; jobs that allow people to join the mainstream economy so that they can afford better housing.

Interested in his 'economic' perspective, and succumbing to my own penchant for challenging authority, I asked whether or not the government was taking measures to improve the conditions in Kolkata's informal economy:

**Jeremy:** I do agree with your point about the lack of decent jobs, but as I am sure you are aware, many of the people living in these squatter settlements are somewhat stuck in low paying, unreliable or casual jobs. For example, I've met a number of *jogars* (casual construction workers) who are only hired on a daily basis, and who receive no benefits or protections against extended lay-offs, long hours or unsafe conditions, etc. Is the government taking some kind of steps to address this issue of casual employment?

**Moni Sanyal:** This is an important issue that you raise, but it is very complicated. You see the line between the public and the private is not always clear. In the example of construction, we have – perhaps unfortunately – a situation where the interests of some politicians and construction contractors are too close.<sup>9</sup> However, we have been taking steps to create new jobs throughout the state that we hope will ease the housing pressure in the city.

**Jeremy:** You are speaking of projects like Nandigram, Halda, or the proposed Tata factory?

**Moni Sanyal:** Yes. These are important projects for West Bengal, and it is critical for our prosperity that they go ahead.

**Jeremy:** But how do you think these developments will improve the lot of these squatter over there [gesturing with my hand in the direction of Rajdanga Para].

**Moni Sanyal:** Of course it is impossible to predict exactly who will benefit from these developments and their spin-offs, but we believe that attracting industry to the State is the best way to start.

In light of Mr. Sanyal's faith in the future benefits of liberalizing the economy of West Bengal, I wondered why the government was attempting to clear the squatter

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<sup>9</sup> While I admired Mr. Sanyal's frankness, this was putting it mildly – In fact, it is often the case where the interests of the politician and the private contractor perfectly coincide, simply due to the fact that they are one and the same person!

settlements in Chakrobarty Para further south-east – to the middle of prime agricultural lands.

We are trying to look forward, or anticipate the way the city will develop. The area where we are encouraging the squatters to move is a part of the city that the government feels will develop quickly – perhaps over the next 10-20 years. As this occurs we expect an increase in job opportunities, which we hope will provide more of a sense of dignity and belonging to these people.

Sitting under the Banyan tree on that hot day, it became clear to me that Mr. Sanyal was convinced of the correctness of what he was saying. I too, for a time, became swayed by his logic of economic development – and his hopes for more secure jobs that would pay a livable wage. I was also intrigued by what he meant by the terms ‘dignity’ and ‘belonging’, which he used to signify the goal, as it were, of state-led development; I pressed him further:

Yes, these terms are hard to define, but I think that many of the poor living in Kolkata feel outside, or excluded from the direction that our society and our city is evolving. We are trying to become more modern, and for that we really need to push for more education and training. Only by providing the opportunity to learn new skills and by creating new jobs, will our poorest be able to live decently...So this is what I meant: people need to feel like they are participating in a project that is greater than themselves – something that contributes to the larger society. Right now many of the poor people in the city are stuck with traditional, manual labour kind of skills, and traditional values. This prevents them from understanding the kind of city and country that they are living in, and from actively participating in our democracy. Only once these obstacles are overcome, through education and job creation, will our poor citizens be able to live with what I said: dignity and belonging.

Before commenting on the views expressed by Mr. Sanyal, I would like to briefly point out that I am engaging with an aspect of the situation that begs for more research. Methodologically speaking, there is no question that a single interview is in anyway representative of the government of West Bengal’s position on urban poverty. Yet due to time constraints – and my own priorities, by which I chose to concentrate my research

efforts on the squatters themselves – I was unable to pursue this line of inquiry (i.e. the government angle) to my own satisfaction. Despite this obvious shortcoming, I will treat, for the sake of symmetry and as a pointer towards further lines of research, Mr. Sanyal's discourse *as if* it were representative of a certain kind of 'developmentalist' position. In fact, many of the casual conversations I had with my middle class neighbours on the topic of urban poverty echoed the sentiments expressed by Mr. Sanyal. I recall, specifically, I conversation I had with Ranjita Jha – an MBA student and my landlord's daughter, about life in her native village in Bihar:<sup>10</sup>

I could never live there. Everything is done according to old ideas that are responsible for holding us back...Girls have to get married when they are very young, so they never get a chance to do anything with their lives...There is no way for people to learn and understand the world that they are living in, so it is almost impossible for them to improve their lives. That's why they come to the city, because they think that they will succeed and get rich. But once they get here they become overwhelmed, and they find that they have no skills to get a good job.

Throughout my interviews, and regardless of class, caste, or gender, the village loomed large as a symbolic backdrop that helped to direct peoples understanding of urban life and development. As we shall see in the next chapter, this view of the village, as being mired in development-constraining tradition, was not exactly shared by many of the squatters I interviewed, who felt that a certain fidelity to village mores would confer an ethical legitimacy to their settlement – an idea put into practice during festival season.

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<sup>10</sup> The gist of which I recorded in my field notes later that day.

#### 5.4. Sanatan & Sumitra Hazra

I met Sanatan Hazra a couple weeks later. Sanatan is a scheduled caste Hindu who works as an assistant conductor on a bus that runs from the nearby Ruby Hospital, north to Dum Dum – near the airport. Sanatan has lived in Rajdanga Para for nearly twenty-five years, and shares his five-hundred square foot hut with his wife, six children, and seventy-nine year old widowed mother-in-law. Sanatan comes from a poor landless family in the Mathurapur block of South 24-Parganas. His father was a sharecropper, but in 1983, lost his claims when the land he once cultivated was confiscated from the landowner by the state. The loss of his claim, coupled with a scarcity of agricultural work, forced Sanatan's father to move the family to Kolkata. Since that time both Sanatan's parents have died and his two brothers have moved further away to Mumbai. We had met through Bakuram, who had explained who I was, and what I was doing. We met in the evening, after his usual ten hour shift on the bus. His younger children kept trying to climb up onto my lap, while the older ones just stood and stared in amazement. As 'befitting' a Bengali widow, Sanatan's mother-in-law sat on her haunches in the corner, donned in a white borderless sari and a closely cropped head of hair. Sanatan himself wore a white and brown checkered lungi, and his frail torso was bared. His long nose, and sunken eyes gave him an avian like quality; the grey wisps shooting up from above his ears added to the likeliness. Slowly sipping his hot tea from a shallow saucer, he spoke of the resettlement:

“What they [the government] want is unreasonable. I went to see the new building where they want us to move. It is much farther from our work than here, and the apartments are small, and some have no windows. There are nine people in our household. At least here some of us can sleep outside, but there it is just a narrow hallway. How do they expect nine people to live in such a place?”

I ask him if he would move if the accommodations were better, and if there were no fees attached.

“I don’t know for sure, but we don’t want to move. We have a right to be here – all of us are poor *Bangla Jāti*, so we don’t understand why the government bothers us”.

After Sabya had translated Sanatan’s response, I asked him to elaborate on why he felt it so important for the community to remain where it is.

“It is important because we have become rooted here. All of my children have grown up here – they know the area, and it is a safe area compared to other *Bustee*’s... Also, we have grown close to our neighbours – they keep an eye on our children while me and Sumitra are out working, and we all try to help other families when times are hard. We are hoping that the government will recognize that we are not criminals trying to steal land for ourselves. We just want the same things as anyone else, but our problem is we are poor.”

Suddenly, and coming as a bit of a shock to my India-as-patriarchy preconceptions, Sanatan’s wife Sumitra, a portly woman, garbed in a loud pink and neon-green sari, burst forth with a torrent of discourse, heaping abuse (although I would only learn this after the translation) on all and sundry<sup>11</sup>:

“No one gives a damn about us here. It was the governments fault (looking at her husband) that we lost the land we worked in Mathurapur. They said it was a policy to help the poor farmers, but those fuckers [here I assume she was speaking of the government – or *panchayat*<sup>12</sup> leaders] are the ones who gained! Our sons have to work as *jogars* [casual day labourers that work construction – usually hired on a daily basis by a *Sardar* (foremen)], raising castles that will one day be our ruin. I have no faith in help from the government – they wipe the dust off our feet when they hold their elections, but when we ask for a sweeper to clean our garbage, they are nowhere to be seen... And these *Bhaldarok* [and old word literally meaning ‘respectable people’ – now designates the middle class] just care about themselves. I bet it’s them who push the government to get rid of us, but

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<sup>8</sup> Obscenities are hard to translate. To keep the effect we decided to use the rough English equivalents.

<sup>12</sup> Village council.

they'll be the ones in trouble once there's nobody here to look after their spoiled children!"

Afterwards there was silence. Sanatan looked down at the floor, as if embarrassed at the impropriety of his wife's outbursts. Sabya's eyes had widened, and an amused grin had spread across his face. For the first time that evening, Sanatan's mother-in-law had come alive, and it seemed to me that her small sunken eyes were beaming with pleasure at the forthright manner in which her daughter had just spoken.

I later learned something of Sumitra's story. She had married Sanatan shortly before their move to Kolkata. The marriage had been arranged, and she was in fact the daughter of one of Sanatan's mother's brother – a matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. Sumitra had given birth a total of nine times. The first child, a girl, died of an undisclosed illness before her first birthday, and the second died during childbirth. After these unsuccessful attempts Sumitra had two boys, a girl, another boy, and two more girls. Her most recent child, another boy, died of a fever at the age of two. Since her two eldest sons have married and started their own families<sup>13</sup>, Sumitra has been working as domestic help in two different households for the last five years:

"I work a total of 11 hours a day, in two shifts. I start at the first house at 6:00 am. until 2:00 pm. After that I have to rush home to prepare supper for the family, and be at work by 4:00 pm until 7:00 pm. In homes I mop, sweep, clean cloths, and wash dishes...I am expected to be at work seven days a week. For this I earn Rs. 600<sup>14</sup> per month, including a snack of tea and biscuits... When I am sick I try to send my eldest daughter [14 years old] so I don't lose the wages".

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<sup>13</sup> This is another interesting phenomenon. Traditionally males remain in their natal homes after marriage, however the lack of space and opportunity in many squatter settlements is transforming households from being extended to nuclear.

<sup>14</sup> \$15.00

The difference between Sanatan and Sumitra's position is striking. Sanatan, much like Bakuram, speaks in an idiom of equivalence – using words like *jāti*, *Bangla*, and rooted-ness. While remaining skeptical of the government's intentions towards his community, he nonetheless frames the problem in terms of recognition, or a lack thereof. His appeal thus takes on moral hues, stressing the value of mutual help, the importance of neighbours, and the safety of his children. Conversely, Sumitra seemed to draw a sharper distinction between her community, and the larger outside world of middle class households, and government programs. She points out that despite the rhetoric coming from the CPM, their policies have done little good – and often much harm (as in the case of the requisitioned land in their home village). Her experience working in middle class homes has hardened her attitude towards the possibility of finding common ground with them.

With these examples have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which poor squatters in Rajdanga Para understand and respond to the various political and economic pressures they face. A part of this response is rooted in how notions of community are imaginatively constructed. In this chapter I have tried to show that behind seemingly benign statements regarding community, there lies an essential imaginative backdrop that is an essential component used to ascribe meaning to particular instances or situations. Yet it is also true that consensus amongst that squatters, specifically regarding the communities relationship with the wider world outside, was lacking – indicating that the imagination we are dealing with is more of a open-ended structuring process, than it is a deterministic one. More specifically, we have seen the squatter settlement characterized as, 1) *jāti*, meaning family, or what anthropologists would call a system of fictive kinship,

2) *desh*, or nation, signifying commonalities, or connections between the specific community and the larger social body, 3) a notion of community as bounded via class prejudice – exemplified by the government imitative of resettlement.

In the next chapter, I will try to show how this open-ended process of community imagining manifests itself in concrete action, as I observed it during the preparations for, and during the time of, the Durga *puja*. By attempting to demonstrate the intersection(s) between ideality and action, I hope to add nuance to our discussion in the previous paragraph, and to try to assess the political outcomes of this social process, as stated in the main question.



Chapter 6:  
Making Them See: Ma Durga.



Typical Pandel

I would like to re-state a quote of Soudamini Dasi's from Chapter three, so that we may look a little deeper into its significance for our study:

“For the past 10 years the government has been trying to evict us, because we do not own the land on which we have been living. Perhaps they don't think we are responsible enough – I don't know...But all of us here care for this land; this community. We are Bengalis – of the *Bangla jāti* [Bengali Jāti] – and we care for our land as much as anyone else...Our challenge is to make them *see* this.”  
(my emphasis)

Two things strike us. First of all, as has been previously stated, we see the word *jāti* as being employed *centrifugally*; pulling together disparate particulars, in this case the various caste, class, and other social grouping of Bengal, towards a common center: *Bangla*. Secondly, this projection of the imagination is then given the task of *making itself visible* for the purpose of staking rights in the form of political recognition, and redistribution. Finally, I will hypothesize that this program of giving visibility to imagined values also serves a reflexive purpose, in the sense that the ethical imperative of recognition also *doubles back* on the community itself through ritual repetition. I will explore these dynamics in this chapter using the Durga Puja as an example.

The Durga Puja is perhaps the most popular festival amongst Bengali Hindus. Observed at the end of the monsoon season during the month of *Aswin* (mid-September to mid-October) the Durga Puja stirs up a festive atmosphere throughout West Bengal, but particularly in Kolkata. Throughout the city thousands of *pandals* (makeshift bamboo and cloth shelters) are erected, which will be home to the sculpted deities (typically of Ma Durga and her mythical brood) during the four day festival, and will take on all the attributes of a sacred space. Brahmin priests regularly perform the sacred rites during the puja, and revelers spend each evening ‘pandal-viewing’ throughout the various neighbourhoods of the city. During the festival the public space: roads, intersections, parks, vacant lots and so forth, are overtaken with *pandals*, “transforming public space into ceremonial space” (Ghosh 2000: 289). The festival culminates on the fourth day when all of the pandals are taken in procession and ceremonially immersed in the river.

The goddess Durga is considered powerful, consort of lord Shiva, and often depicted and worshipped in the form of *Chandi* (her warlike mode), slaying a buffalo demon while straddling her lion – hence her other name *Mahishasuramardini*, ‘the slayer of the buffalo demon’ (Ghosh 2000: 294). While Durga is worshipped in other parts of India, in Bengal she is almost always depicted with her four children, Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), Saraswati (goddess of learning), Kartik (the army general), and Ganesh (god of prosperity). She is therefore viewed, in the eyes of many Bengalis, as a mother figure, who returns once a year with her children for four days to visit her parental home.<sup>15</sup> Yet, like so many Hindu gods and goddesses, Durga has more than one side. If she can be seen as a benevolent mother, she is also known as a fierce protector – a personality trait rooted in myth:

“Once a fierce battle raged between the gods and the demons, lasting nearly a thousand years. The main adversary of the gods was Mahishasura, buffalo demon, who nearly wiped out the divine army. At last he managed to defeat all the gods.

Driven out of their heavenly abode the divine personages went to Brahma and sought protection. Brahma emitted a dazzling effulgence from his many limbs which assumed the form of a woman. She looked awesome and powerful and when the gods saw her they took heart. Then each of them created replicas of their own special weapons with which they equipped her (Bhattacharji 1995: 32-33)

In the ensuing battle between the goddess and the buffalo demon she levels his forces and confronts him:

“When she charged, he gave up the shape of a buffalo and turned into a lion. The goddess struck off its head but immediately a man came out of the decapitated lion, sword in hand. The goddess slew him in no time but then again an elephant appeared in his place. She chopped off its trunk at which it resumed the shape of a buffalo and stampeded over all creation in great fury.

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<sup>15</sup> Ghosh points out that this aspect of Durga is probably rooted in young Bengali brides yearnings for a return to their natal homes – to be freed from the confines, and oftentimes tyranny, of their affinal situations.

Now, the thirsty goddess drank her fill of wine and smiled with eyes reddened in intoxication. The buffalo demon was uprooting hills and mountains and hurling them at her. She pierced and smashed them with her arrows and said, 'You fool, roar and yell as long as I drink. When I destroy you the gods will roar and shout.' With this she leaped upon the demon, pierced him with her spike, and struck off his head." (Ibid)

With its beginnings in pre-British rural Bengal, the *puja* represented both an appeal for protection and benevolence from the mother goddess, and was also tied into the annual harvest – thus providing occasion for gratitude and worship. In addition, the *puja* has also been interpreted as “a mode of vertical integration” (Ghosh 2000: 295) in village life, where landowners would organize the celebrations with help from a wide selection of ‘service castes’. Village feasts were put on, and everyone could participate in the festival by having *Darsana* (seeing) of the deity. This seeing, or *Darsana*, has a unique meaning in Hinduism. As the devotee gazes upon the deity it is believed that the deity reciprocates the gaze – giving rise to an “exchange of vision” (Fuller 1992: 60). Since it was/is believed that the goddess resides in the image, “*Darsana* enables the devotee to absorb the power (*shakti*) that flows from her unblinking gaze” (Ibid).

Today, the Durga *Puja* is more than a religious festival. Indeed the *puja* touches nearly every aspect of Bengali life, modern or otherwise. A few weeks prior the *puja* nearly every shop in the city offers discounts, and it has thus become a consumer festival as well as a religious one. Nearly everyone, from rich to poor, buy their cloths and other consumer items during the *puja* season<sup>16</sup>, making it the most robust season for business transactions. Kolkata’s culture industry also kicks into high gear during the *puja* as

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<sup>16</sup> This was confirmed in all of my interview and surveys. When asked the amount of money spent on cloths and other household items (on a monthly basis) , every respondent could not come up with an answer. The reason for this, I discovered, was that all of these items were bought once a year during the weeks leading up to the *puja*.

singers release their newest albums, playwrights their latest plays, television channels air their *puja* specials, and newspapers publish their annual astrological forecasts. Many of the *pandals* themselves now have their corporate sponsors. What was once (and still is in poorer neighbourhoods) a community effort, has now turned into an inter-district competition to attract wealthy patrons to build the most extravagant *pandel*. As Bose (1997) marveled:

“Calcutta becomes a wonderland during the days of the Durga *puja*, as communities design their *pandals* in the form of the Mysore Maharajah’s Palace, as a Paris cathedral, or as a famous Hindu temple from South India. These wondrous constructions transform Calcutta during the *pujas* into a heterotopic space. The juxtaposing of incongruous objects and symbols creates a mystique, which may have more to do with desire than with the occasion at hand. Durga *puja* allows all this to be expressed in public. It is a time when incongruity is permissible and enables the masses to appropriate public space to *give vent to their imagination* (Bose 1997: 2 – *my italics*)

Preparations for the Puja were underway when I arrived in early June. Local artisans were already molding and sculpting the deities that would inhabit the pandal in five months time. Nearly every community, including the squatters of Rajdanga Para, erects their own pandal, and the quality and extravagance of the pandal is indeed a source of friendly competition and community pride: awards are given to the best pandal.

In Rajdanga Para the Durga Puja is *the* event of the year. As I said, preparations for the puja begin nearly six months in advance, and the community had formed its own committee to oversee all of the preparations for the big event. I should add that Durga Puja committee was the only organized body, despite the myriad of other pressing issues that the community had formed. While not everyone participated in the preparation, I counted twenty four, out of a total of 31, households with at least one member involved.

I have already noted that while there are a number of castes represented in the population of Rajdanga Para, most people engage in occupations different from their ‘traditional’ caste ones. However, during the puja preparations, the division of organizational labour, in many cases, reverted back to traditional ‘caste prescribed’ roles. Bakuram, the former carpenter, was responsible for the erection of the Bamboo frame for the *pandal*. Rajgopal, the community priest was responsible for performing the sacred rites in preparation for, and during the *puja*.

#### 6.1 Tarapada Dey

I met Tarapada Dey one morning in mid-September as I was going for tea with Sabya. I had seen him before in the neighbourhood, going from house to house selling cheap looking feather dusters to middle class housewives. (see photo below). I learned that day that Tarapada originally hailed from the district of South 24 Parganas, was born into the weaver caste (*tanti*), yet hadn’t actually practiced the art of weaving since late childhood. On this particular day, we found Tarapada toting a clear large plastic bag filled with what appeared to be scraps of cloth. He explained that he was responsible for the cloth work, and had been out collecting scraps of fabric that he and his family would sew together for the communities *pandel*. I asked him why he was chosen for this task.



*Tarapada Dey plying his trade.*

**Tarapada:** We all have something to contribute, and I have experience working with cloth – it's my families jāti.

I asked him what his jāti meant to him in the context of the city, and his new community:

**Tarapada:** In the city most of us don't practice our old jāti occupations since we have to find work wherever we can. But for this festival we can come together as a community to accomplish something...something that will show that we belong here, that we too have rights, and that we are good Hindus like our neighbours.

I wanted to press the issue. I said that I had noticed that many people were reverting to their traditional jāti occupations for the *puja* preparations, and I wanted to know why that was.

**Tarapada:** Because that's how we all did it when we were children in our villages. The *puja* was the only event where everyone, from each part of the village, did his part. I remember helping my father spin and weave cotton to

decorate the goddess – it was an important job – a sacred job. Now (laughs) I don't spin or weave, but I can go and collect old cloth, and many families in the community (*Bustee*) donate old fabric for the *pandel*...In this way I can keep true to my *dharma* (duty), and help make our community strong.

This little exchange is interesting for a couple of reasons. First of all, even though, according to Tarapada, most squatters don't practice their traditional *jāti* occupations, the concept of *jāti* still holds a legitimizing force. When used in one context (like we are *Bangla jāti*), it is similar to a logical concept, in that it brings unique particulars under the umbrella of a more universal concept. Yet, on the level of Tarapada's discourse, *jāti* reinstates the particular, positing strength by "each one doing his part" and "keeping true to ones [particular] *dharma* (duty)". This tension, between the first, universal, definition of *jāti*, and the second, stressing particular roles and duties, is typical of 'community talk' in many parts of India, and comes close to being analogous to our distinction between citizens (as universal bearers of rights) and population groups (as specific groups with distinct attributes). Secondly, we note the vital role of intentional action in reinforcing, if only at certain times of the year, idealized notions of community solidarity. While the four days of the *puja* certainly represent the climax for most people, in Rajdanga Para, perhaps due to the paucity of resources, the weeks and months leading up the *puja* occasioned much activity, planning, and work. While middle class neighbourhoods tend to hire outside artisans to construct their *pandels* (often with the proceeds from corporate sponsors), the *pandel* and subsequent *Darsana* were, for the squatters, a real community effort – as, according to Ghosh (2000) and others, it once was throughout the Bengali countryside.



## 6.2 Raghunath Bsak

Raghunath Bsak was a local construction worker whom I met in late September of 2007. Raghunath was 34 years old, and had fathered five children by his wife Soudamini – three girls and two boys, all under twelve at the time. They lived together in a typical Rajdanga hut of two small rooms, which were only full when everyone was sleeping. Depending on the availability of work, Ragunath brought home around Rs.1500 to 2000 (or \$40-50) per month, and Soudamini would sometimes find domestic work through a local agency when times were lean.

As far as *bustte*'s go, we are not so bad off, but our problem is that nobody knows if we will be allowed to stay. Also, if we are allowed to stay we might have to pay *baksish* (a bribe), or high rents that we couldn't afford.

Like Bakuram, Ragunath was a carpenter by trade, and I met him as he was sipping tea with Bakuram beside a large pile of bamboo poles at the entranceway of the small lane leading into the settlement. Though only two years older than me, Ragunath's hair was streaked with grey, and his calloused hands and feet provided ample evidence of years of manual work.

Bakuram explained that they were tasked with building the bamboo frame that would house the deity during the *puja*. He also explained that, for the first time, the settlement was going to erect its *pandel* right at the entranceway to their lane, so that "all the *babus*<sup>17</sup> can come for *Darsana*. I was interested in this, and asked them both to explain why it was so important to have the *pandel* out near the main road. Bakuram translated my message for Ragunath, who replied:

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<sup>17</sup> Babu is a name for educated, middle class Indians. The term, in West Bengal, designated those civil servant in the British Raj explained in chapter 2.

For years we've put our *pandel* next to Rajgopal's house [within the confines of the settlement], as we couldn't get permission to put it in a more public place. Last year Rajgopal got permission from the party [Communist Party of India – Marxist], because he argued that it might help us to mix with our neighbours<sup>18</sup> ...So this year everyone is more excited than usual. We see it as an opportunity to prove that we are good people, and that *Darsana* with our goddess gives the same power [*shakti*] as any other.

Bakuram added to this:

We hope this will help us win recognition in the community, and make it easier to stay here. We need to arrive at *pālātī*<sup>19</sup> with the larger community to strengthen ourselves – both materially and morally.

The effort expended during the weeks leading up to the puja was impressive, and a palpable air of excitement hung over the community like a heavy monsoon cloud – ready to burst. While many other communities hired outside contractors to erect their pandals, the residents of Rajdanga Para contributed what they could to the effort. Oftentimes work was done late in the evening. After the day's work the men would stand around the *panda* site, smoking bidi's and conversing. The oppressive monsoon heat and humidity starting to lift, there was an atmosphere of relief amongst the workers, and one could hear their enthusiastic shouts and hearty laughs from a long way off.

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting aside here. I asked Rajgopal about the re-placement, and he told me that permission was granted because the drainage of old spot was terrible, and if it rained, the ground would flood. Thus permission was granted to move the *pandel* to the higher and drier ground near the main road, and not, from the government perspective anyway, to integrate the squatter settlement into the neighbourhood, which would clearly run counter to their resettlement program.

<sup>19</sup> A Bengali kinship term signifying two families on equal social footing with one another – thereby making matrimonial alliances possible.

October 2007

6.3. From Field Notes...

*Today is the first day of the Durga Puja. I woke up early this morning to go to see the preparations. For the first time in months the crippling heat has subsided, and a relatively cool breeze blows white puffy clouds across the sky. At 7:30 in the morning the neighbourhood is bustling. Children dressed in their finest dart in and out of the alleyways, as parents prepare a breakfast of rice, okra, and chapatti. The pandal at the head of Rajdanga Para was completed only two days ago, and Rajgopal sits at the foot of the idols chanting Sanskrit verses, and making offerings to the gods.*

*Everywhere is bustling. Women dressed in fine silk sari's speed by, perched atop cycle rickshaws, like colourful kites zipping over the land. Cars stuffed to the brim with passengers zoom this way and that, while other families stroll leisurely towards the market. The excitement in the air is palpable.*

*The scene at the squatter's pandal is gearing up. People are spilling out of the laneway onto the main road, exuberantly blocking traffic, while popular Bengali and Hindi pop songs have started blaring out of an old stereo. Children are streaking through the crowd of adults, deftly deking their elders like slalom poles. Amidst this chaos, I ran into Mr. Moni Sayal, the local communist official (see chapter 4), and I asked him what he thought of the celebrations. He paused for a moment, and then went on to say that he was pleased that the poorer members of the community were obviously having such a good time, and that it was probably a positive thing for them to be included in the festival. However, he said that he had already received some complaints about the noise, and the blocking of traffic.*

*But despite these modest complaints it seemed to me like everyone was having a good time. Moreover, I noticed that the appropriation of public space was in fact affecting a sort of inter-class mixing of the sort hoped for by the squatters I had spoken to. Passersby were stopping in front of the squatters Pandal, and Rajgopal (the Brahmin priest) was doling out blessings to all and sundry. I realized that this was the first (and only) time where I observed these two communities intermingling, despite the “cheek to jowl” proximity under which they live.*

#### 6.4. Puja Resistance?

It occurred to me at the time that the Durga Puja, at least for this small community, represented perhaps one of the richest symbolic events in both the classic and modern sense – Of the former we observe a matrix of mythology, familial obligations, and hierarchical exchanges of work and material objects. In this classic anthropological sense – as Dumont (1977) would have it – we see how classical hierarchy manifests itself via this particular festival where each lineage (jāti) reverts (if only in a symbolic way) to their traditional occupations – from Brahmin to Weaver, each is accorded his place, and work is divvied out accordingly.

On the other hand, we note that the hierarchical structure enacted via the Durga Puja, allows for a vernacular critique of it, and offers a way for those closer to the bottom to challenge their depressed status. Yet as I have tried to describe, this critique has a peculiar quality: namely, that it draws legitimacy from the very hierarchy it critiques in order to effectively combat it. I am here tempted to distinguish between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ (with all the difficulties these terms cause us) forms of resistance. Where,

generally speaking, western reformers have sought to completely break from the past (evidenced by our many variants of revolutionary thought), this particular Bengali community appeared to be seeking their break from past injustices, not via a revolutionary break, but rather by projecting a certain imaginary dignity onto a past that many in my own academic community would probably view as decidedly undignified, and certainly unjust.

How to explain this difference? First of all, my limited observations' regarding this topic confirms an important theoretical point made in an earlier chapter: namely that the evocation of a particular history or identity for the purposes of political action (be it symbolic or direct) tends to be employed contextually, as opposed to universally. This important point helps to explain why Bakuram (see last quote) was able to employ a term like *pālāti*, which traditionally served to *limit* alliances between families of different social status, in way that was intended to *broaden* such alliances – particularly between his own squatter community and their higher caste and class neighbours.

This kind of semantic play in general, and the redefinition of kinship terms in particular, harkens back to Ranajit Guha's observation regarding the political practices of the poor. While Guha's work dealt with the colonial context, a number of parallels can be found even today, and even though his distinction between elites and subalterns has been challenged, it is still heuristically useful. We should remember that Guha claimed that the politics of subalterns was organized differently from the politics of the elite. He claimed that, as opposed to the "top-down" legalistic and parliamentary institutions of elites, subaltern politics operated "horizontally", drawing strength and legitimacy through appeals to "kinship and territoriality" (Guha 1982: 23).

As should be obvious, nearly everyone I interviewed couched their assessment of their community's position, politically, socially, and economically, in kinship terms. Furthermore, these appeals were also framed within a very discreet territorial imaginary, moving between the particular block of Rajdanga Para, to immediate neighbours, to the state of West Bengal, and finally to the territory of India itself. This "double movement" between the employment of particular kinship terms in a universal way harkens back again to Guha's characterization of the politics of the poor as one that playfully inverts popular symbols (i.e. ritual enactments, language, kinship terms) in order to upset, and hence change, actually existing social relations.

This kind of symbolic inversion is also relevant to the use of public space. We have seen how squatters routinely couch their demands for recognition in kinship terms, and we have seen how this symbolic play relates to the particular ways in which squatters understand the complex web of social relations in which they are entangled, and how the imagination takes hold of these strands, arranging them in patterns that both explain current circumstances, and offer a program for future action. An apt metaphor, in this regard, is the concept of *Darsana* (meaning "reciprocated vision"), which, as I have already noted, was utilized by many of my informants when speaking about the significance of their *puja* celebration. I use the word metaphor because while the "traditional" meaning of this word aimed specifically at the relation between the individual worshipper and the deity, my informants were broadening the terms meaning to encompass a larger exchange of social recognition facilitated by the very reality of the event itself. What started (at least in the limited temporality of my fieldwork) as fluid discursive appeals for inclusion (the topic of the last chapter), was culminating (from my

perspective) in a very real (visible) display of both the solidarity of a particular community (Rajdanga Para), and that same communities efforts to gain inclusion into larger social formations.

Finally, the enactment of caste solidarities during the Durga Puja can also be interpreted as a vernacular resistance to *class* exclusion. By bestowing dignity on the interdependency of caste roles; the traditional, albeit hierarchical, dividing of necessary work, we could posit that the squatters of Rajdanga Para were enacting a notion of community solidarity deeply rooted in “traditional” Hindu ideas of social roles, community structure, and religious imperatives. In other words, the nexus of class exclusion and caste hierarchy seem to have created a social dynamic whereby the “material” exclusion rooted in the Bengali class structure is critiqued by an appeal to the webs of mutual dependency implicit in the caste system. This enactment of traditional roles is reminiscent of what Raymond Williams described as a “residual cultural dynamic, whereby “...meanings and values, which cannot be verified or expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis if the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation” (Williams 2005: 40). This proposition, however, would require further research to test its validity, yet demonstrates the complex integration of new and old values and practices occurring both in India and elsewhere.

### **Conclusion:**

Let me begin by re-capping. Over the course of this thesis I have tried, perhaps unsuccessfully, to connect a number of themes that, I claim, heavily inform the way a group of squatters in one of India's largest cities fight for social recognition. Rather than focus on self-evident poverty themes such as income inequality, labour disputes, access to facilities and services, I have instead chosen to try and understand some of the basic principles upon which squatters organize their understanding and responses to their precarious situation; specifically, the symbolic re-organization of language and ritual, combined with a certain re-appropriation of specific linguistic terms and public space.

As I hope to have shown, the social, political and economic structures erected during colonialism; from the creation of an anglicized governing class; the reinforcement of caste articulations via colonial administrative techniques, such as the census; through to the post-colonial disintegration of the *Zamindari* system, and the resultant phenomena increasing rural poverty, and the rise of Mao-inspired political movements; and the devastating impact of mass migrations in response to political conflicts – most recently the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh. This broad historical arc has given rise to a mushrooming of new urban life-worlds, the cultures of which are only beginning to be understood.

That the existence of such large numbers of displaced people - slum and pavement-dwellers, squatters, casual labourers, the sick, the idle, old and young – might give rise to social instability hasn't been overlooked by scholars. Indeed the political conscience of the "poor" has been, at least amongst those scholars of the left, of great interest – on both theoretical and practical levels. Typically scholarly investigations into



the lives of the poor use them (the poor) as a springboard for critical excursions into more weighty issues like global capitalism (Davis 2006), development ideologies (Sen, Escobar), colonial critiques (Chatterjee, Chakrobarty), or to assess ‘revolutionary potential’ (Zizek 2008). While I have tried to incorporate some of these themes into the present study (they are, after all, important), I have tried to remain focused on the immediate experiences and local understandings of the poor themselves. Yet by doing so, I found myself lacking an adequate theoretical language with which I might understand *why* these people acted in *this* was as opposed to *that*, or why they talked about themselves or their community in certain terms, as opposed to others, or why political action was acted out ritualistically as opposed to directly.

More disconcerting than my theoretical struggles, was the fact that my data seemed to belie a number of my assumptions regarding the politics of the poor. First of all, given the fifty year history of Marxist politics in West Bengal, I had expected a more class based socio-political consciousness amongst the poor. However, I rarely heard this kind of talk amongst the squatters living in Rajdanga Para.

Secondly (but related), I had expected to find that caste based distinctions would be negligible (as proposed in Chatterjee: 1997), yet found that caste still plays a strong role (although in a different way than is “traditionally” practiced) in both the squatters idealized notions of community, and in the way they ritually organize communal life.

Thirdly, I had expected to find stronger community organization vis-à-vis addressing actual problems facing the community (like evictions, work related grievances, political corruption, and access to services). In fact there was no such organizing body (either organized from within the community, or from without – like an

NGO), rather the only community organization in Rajdanga Para dealt solely with important religious festivals, and smaller religious events.

What I found instead was a kind of fluid way of couching ‘problems of modernity’ in terms that, on the surface, seemed decidedly non-modern. The divergence between my own assessment regarding the causes and potential remedies of urban poverty and those voiced by the squatters who I knew, was stark. Where I saw implacable social structures, institutions, historical arcs, political and social ideologies, unvoiced cultural assumptions as barring the way for the amelioration of urban poverty (call it the sociological view – that modern problems require modern solutions), my informants viewed the root of their problems, not in terms of politics or economics, but rather in terms of culture.

That culture is contested and fluid has become an axiomatic notion amongst anthropologists, and the present case would confirm that idea. As I have already stated, the squatter settlement of Rajdanga Para (and many others around the world) are places where culture is in a state of rapid flux. Most denizens of squatter settlements tend to be enculturated in rural settings, and carry with them ideas, practices, and values that have been nurtured over generations in India’s many villages<sup>20</sup>, where notions of caste, familial obligations, and social hierarchy remain strong. In the urban environment, however, these cultural notions and structures become increasingly difficult to maintain. For example, the division of labour according to *jāti* becomes obliterated due to the imperatives of modern capitalist enterprise, which tends to promiscuously bring together men and women of different castes on the factory floor, the sweat-shop, or the construction site. Old ideas of caste purity become impossible to maintain as people cram

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<sup>20</sup> Recall here the statements made by Moni Sanyal regarding rural culture.

into metro cars, like canned sardines, during rush hour. Likewise, the maintenance of extended family networks – the basic building block of rural society – has become well-nigh inconceivable for the urban poor, as they eke out their dwellings in the dark and dirty nooks and crannies of the urban landscape.

These experiences, at least for my informants, seem to be the raw stuff out of which a distinct kind of socio-political knowledge is built. In our discussion of the imagination we posited (with Kant) a role for the imagination that mediated between pure sensibility (raw sense data) and understanding (concepts, categories, and rules). For the urban poor we see this operation in effect, and we can now (finally) posit a hypothesis that tries to explain why my informants think and act the way they did. Let me claim that Kant's idea of understanding is very close to what an anthropologist might call culture – i.e. the way in which groups of people carve up the world into categories, concepts and rules. On the other hand, we have immediate sense data arriving in a more or less constant stream of “manifold” data that we either consciously or unconsciously “place” into whatever cultural schemata we are accustomed to. Anyone who has traveled to a foreign culture knows the unsettling feeling that comes when what we perceive is disjointed from what we know – we call it culture shock. But the situation of the visitor is different from that of the squatter. The problem of creating enduring meaning does not arise for the visitor, as he or she can be secure in the knowledge that this disjointedness is temporary. Not so for the squatter.

For the squatter, insofar as my data is representative, negotiating and understanding the complexities of the urban landscape, and taking action to ameliorate

his or her poverty, is accomplished by blending encultured rural values with the harsh realities of urban survival. Their explanation of poverty therefore takes on the shape of a cultural critique. If educated progressives speak in terms of citizenship, rights and responsibilities, my informants spoke of kinship obligations, caste duties, and religious identity. Yet in speaking this way, my informants – probably unconsciously – recast the more rigid qualities of Bengali “tradition” in a way that attempted to forge discursive, moral and ritualistic links between themselves and other castes and classes.

This point helps to explain why government officials, educated Bengalis, or foreign students, tend to mistake the discourse of many of the urban poor as “uneducated”, or “mired in tradition” as councilman Moni Sanyal exemplified. For while it is certainly true that most, if not all of the denizens of squatter settlement, slums, pavement lean-to’s are formally uneducated, it is a mistake to characterize their ideas as a kind of retrograde harkening back to the dark days of village oppression. Instead, I think it might be more helpful to characterize the stance taken by my informants as a process of meaning-making, of sliding between “traditional” concepts and modern realities, in an attempt to situate themselves (and their community) in a larger (and largely foreign) context, while at the same time revising concepts and practices to gain a certain amount of recognition and redistribution.

To finish, let’s recall, once again, my main question:

*How do the slum-dwellers living in Rajdanga Para both discursively and ideologically construct their community within the context of the development state; and what have been the outcomes of this encounter?*

While I feel that I have at least scratched the surface in my explorations regarding the first part of this question<sup>21</sup>, the “outcomes of this encounter”, I now realize is well-nigh impossible to answer with any degree of certainty. Will this intersection of culture and politics morph into a Hindustani “culture war” akin to what we observe in the United States, or are we seeing a new and creative way of couching progressive demands within a traditional framework? Did the way in which my informants spoke of their community resonate with other parts of the social body (it seemed not, at the time), or will their veiled appeals get interpreted through the filter of a modern/tradition dichotomy so prevalent amongst India’s educated classes?

The evidence, either/or, is woefully inadequate, and what little we have reveals no clear trends, but does raise some interesting questions: what is the relationship between language and political consciousness? In other words, were my informants appeals to traditional concepts and values – as instruments of social change – conscious, or were they employed due to a lack of other, more specific, terms (call this a Wittgensteinian thesis)? Or, does this kind of linguistic and ritualistic play indicate a conscious “strategy” that seeks to win recognition by transforming hierarchical ideas and practices into modern, egalitarian ones (call this the Gandhian thesis)?

Clearly these are questions for which further research would be required, and perhaps the “truth” lies (or moves) somewhere in between these two poles. Yet it is clear that the idea that would pigeon-hole the urban poor as uneducated or mired in tradition needs to be rethought. If this study is of any use, I hope that it may forward the notion that what appears to be a “traditional” idea, locution or practice vis-à-vis urban squatters,

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<sup>21</sup> A proper answering of this question would, in my view, require an extended multi-sited (rural/urban) research bonanza, which was obviously way beyond the scope of this project.

is most likely an imaginative response to modern social, political, and economic problems. By denying this near-fact we perpetuate the myth that frames today's legions of the urban poor as mere passive receptacles of a modernity imposed from without, as opposed to active participants in it. It is to be hoped that the present study might add a sliver of evidence to combat that faulty notion.

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