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Mobilizing the Fragmentary, the Stratified, the Multiple

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The city of Calcutta, one of the world's great urban centers and the hub of the British Indian Empire in the nineteenth century, has taken some heavy hits during the last one hundred years. Beginning with the British shift of the capital to Delhi in the 1910s, Calcutta's national administrative significance disappeared. After the great Bengal famine during World War II, the city witnessed its greatest "communal" carnage in 1946, followed by the Partition of India and Pakistan the following year that severed the city from much of its economic hinterland and produced a flood of impoverished refugees. The independence struggle of Bangladesh in 1971 produced more refugees just as the old extractive economy of Bengal based on jute declined. Calcutta's role as the hub of Bengali language and culture was of national and, indeed, transnational importance during the emerging nationalism of the early-twentieth century, but it became the manifestation of a strictly regional consciousness–one among many–within independent India. Amid a slow-moving economy, with more than thirteen million people in 2000, Calcutta was the site of some of the world's largest and most notorious slums, with many thousands of pavement dwellers. Simultaneously, it was slowly losing its position within South Asia's urban hierarchy to faster-growing Mumbai, Dhaka, Delhi, and Karachi, followed closely by Chennai, Bangalore, and Lahore. Calcutta thus became associated, within development circles, with the world's most intractable issues of economic crisis, urban poverty, and administrative incapacity. As the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, Calcutta has been the scene of one of the world's most interesting political experiments during the last three decades. The centuries of confrontation with European colonialists made Calcutta the home for sophisticated and radical critics of imperialism and capitalism. After several decades of experimentation with revolution and mixed electoral success, a coalition led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) took control of the state government in 1977 and has remained in control since then. This is the longest continuous term of any "democratically elected" Communist government in the world, and the longest continuing state government by a single party in the history of independent India. Although its long tenure may have discouraged national or transnational corporate investment, the CPM has implemented wide-ranging programs of social reform that it proclaims as significant improvements on class inequality and the general quality of life. Since India's dramatic moves toward economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, the CPM leadership has donned its three-piece suits and joined the parade of bureaucrats advertising their state capital as a prime site for investment by the Indian and transnational bourgeoisie. At this transitional moment in Calcutta's history, a book by Ananya Roy intervenes with a "requiem," defined explicitly as "a satire on the very trope of the dying city, and as a critique of the icon of the chaotic Third World metropolis, always in trouble, always needing remedy" (p. 7). She studies the imaginations of modernity under the leadership of New Communism, described as "hegemonic consolidations" within a new policy of liberalization (p. 18), by examining poverty through the lens of post-structuralist feminism.

At the empirical level, the author concentrates on what she terms "fieldwork nodes," or squatter settlements located at the fringes of the city, where the rural-urban continuum is particularly amorphous and where struggles over the urbanization of land are most intense. In chapter 2, she conducts personal interviews with members of seventy-two households of rural-urban commuters and eighty-seven households that have migrated from agricultural environments south of the city and are living in ramshackle housing within informal settlements next to stagnant water bodies, garbage dumps, or transportation corridors. The presentation of data

from these interviews (pp. 46-71) includes some tables of descriptive statistics (e.g., monthly income) contributing to the author's definition of poverty, along with passages in which her subjects speak about their life histories and the challenges of their existence. Chapter 3, entitled "Domestications," concentrates on the gendered aspects of the employment available to the people she studies, including domestic work, casual construction, and vegetable selling. Here again, several tables (pp. 92-96) recording descriptive statistics of up to 285 individuals accompany personal testimonies (pp. 79-84, 98-106) highlighting the importance of female labor in holding families together. Several pages of interviews with men, who self-consciously dominate local political activities (pp. 108-22), lead to a discussion of "marginalized masculinities" and the "mobilization of mothers."

Chapter 4 shifts us toward urban planning and the social processes underlying the control of land on the urban frontiers. The fieldwork contribution includes a description (pp. 146-48) of the settlement of Jamunanagar, a relatively well-ordered squatter community in the southeastern corner of the city, juxtaposed with a "condoville" and other "development" projects sanctioned by the state and the CPM (pp. 153-156). These examples lead into a discussion of the informal processes underlying vesting or the legal procedure allowing the state to appropriate private land. The remainder of the chapter is a trenchant criticism of the neo-liberal tendencies of New Communism and its drive toward a city dominated by big people, "unapologetically elitist, implicitly masculinist, and quietly Hinduist–that has inaugurated a hegemonic project of city-making" (p. 186). Chapter 5 continues this inquiry, revolving around a story of housing demolitions in the squatter settlement of Patuli (pp. 202-212). Interspersed at regular intervals in the book are a total of fifteen pages of photographs showing the people with whom the author worked, against the backdrop of their built environment and the transportation systems so important to their employment access. A methodological appendix provides geographical data on the settlements where the author conducted her fieldwork, a list of interviews, and the questionnaire form used as the basis for data collection (pp. 237-248).

The conclusion of the book contains not one, but four different postscripts, ranging from one to five pages, penned by the author at different moments when contemplating her work. This idiosyncratic style is in fact closely related to her overall approach in this volume, an attempt to confront an apparently monolithic, triumphant discourse of neo-liberalism in its CPM-mediated incarnation through the fragmentary, the stratified, the multiple. The first postscript revolves around Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Roshamon*. The second and longest postscript is a more straightforward discussion of the the thematic chapters concerned with poverty, gendered strategies of earning a living, and liberalization in the city. The third postscript positions the author back home in her office at the University of California, Berkeley, musing about aporia and diff=rence before ending with a personal poem. The fourth postscript, thirty-four lines in length, mentions a return to Calcutta in 2000-2001 and concludes with a final statement: "if this is an ending, like my narrative of the city, it can only be one of multiple and irreconcilable iterations."

Refusing to sanction a privileged viewpoint, conducting a "politics of location" (p. 126), the author never attempts to frame the people or the processes in this work outside her own encounters with them. This book is largely autobiographical, and many paragraphs begin with first-person pronouns. We are with the author to experience her mortification when slum dwellers surround her family's chauffeur-driven car, "the burden of my class position suffocating me with existential weight" (p. 76). We experience her discomfort when first encountering the visual and olfactory realities of the Indian slum: "during my first few visits to Chetla, I had to muster up every strength in my body to stop myself from throwing up" (p. 111). Confronting a series of queries that emerge from interviews at a neighborhood club, the author admits, "I was paralyzed by these questions precisely because they pointed to the unbridgeable gap between their lives and mine" (p. 129), prompting the ending of chapter 3 with a personal, sixty-three-line poem. We experience her amazement as she discovers that urban planning in Calcutta apparently proceeds without adequate mapping tools (pp. 133-137). Such excursions into the perspective of a non-resident Indian, combined with periodic references to the author's students in Berkeley, may make this volume accessible to an American academic audience, although they may be of less interest to readers in South Asia.

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