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Translocalisation and the Production of Space. West Bengal's Ex-Centric Territories

Fig. 1

F. 1 A paka-and-kancha landscape.

GRAMER SHAHAR TERRITORIES, KANCHA–PAKA LANDSCAPES

We were heading towards Kolkata on the 7:30 am Bardhaman-Haora local train, and although this was only my third time there, I already felt like a regular. The embodied experience of dozens of similar train rides, all jam-packed with daily commuters, lent me confidence, but the special sense of familiarity had, no doubt, to do with Kartik. He had commuted daily between his village in Hugli district and Kolkata for 30 years now, and his accounts on the railway in south-western West Bengal could have filled books. Looking from the window, I saw the pits alongside the rail track and recalled his detailed description of how, in 2007, the soil was dug out with Caterpillars to build the foundations of the overhead line. “Farmers now cultivate paddy here,” he had said, “no point growing potatoes or vegetables on low lands.”

Shortly after we passed through the industrial plants of Dankuni, he diverted me from my musings. “You see, now the city has started.

This is Belanagar Station; there are only little stretches of fields left here. It's still 12 or 15 kilometres to Haora. In a short while, you'll start seeing small factories. Some do ironworks, others manufacture different components for the rail, and there are many more small factories making gilded jewellery towards the interior." The scenery made me think of an old infrastructural landscape now devoid of human functions, forged who knows how long ago out of a governmental will to control the territory. Climbers and water plants covered the vacated factory shacks, deserted iron workshops, and decrepit houses. I replied that despite the new multistorey housing complexes scattered here and there, this landscape didn't remind me of Kolkata, or Haora, for that matter. "Kolkata? Kolkata is another thing!" was Kartik's assertive reaction. "When you cross Haora [bridge], *that* city has a totally different feeling. This is *gramer shahar*."

The term "gramer shahar" is nearly untranslatable. One might render it as a city grown out of, from, or within the village, although the suggestive power of its literal translation, "the village's city," is hard to match.[1] Also, defining what it might stand for in the context of urbanising India is difficult. To be sure, the difference reclaimed by Kartik is not related to a temporal delay—he did not speak of something that wasn't there *yet*—but correlates with a problem recognised by urban studies scholar Ananya Roy. In her words, the "complex forms of rural-urban differentiation [in India] exceed our analysis of urban political economy and its patterns of accumulation and dispossession."[2]

Sometime later, I joined the "Territories of Extended Urbanisation" project, and from January to April 2018, I sought a better understanding of the processes that form gramer shahar. I got off the train at stations I had previously only passed, explored the towns and villages they served, interviewed elderly inhabitants, and listened to debates in tea stalls and market areas. I learnt about traditional and newly flourishing small or even micro-scale industries; about the increasing incidence of dengue fever, formerly an urban disease, in the wake of ill-managed construction work and haphazard settlement growth;[3] about the closures of cinema halls built in the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1980s. It was generous and trying fieldwork, marked by colossal traffic jams around Haora and by the precious clues from Ram, who worked for a bus company and knew every way of getting around them; by hilarious misunderstandings with co-travellers and the disconcerting silences of village women; by drastic clashes between party activists ahead of the local government elections; by blessed moments contemplating the Hugli River—*Ganga*, as people lovingly say in Bengal[4]—amidst the taciturn commuters on the Haldia-Nandigram ferry; by tedious technical mishaps and the seductive choreographies drawn by a green-eyed seller in his shop, chockfull of electronic devices down the alleys of Haora's Ganesh Market.

Two thought figures accompanied my explorations.[5] The first was Kartik's gift, gramer shahar; the second is a relational figure, *kancha–paka.* In Bengali, the adjective "paka"[6] connotes ranges of items that have undergone one or more phases of transformation; vis-à-vis their "kancha"[7] versions, they incorporate time and/or labour. Paka refers to human and non-human things altogether, from ripe fruits to cooked food, bricks and brick-made houses to built structures made of asphalt or cement, and even skilled, "mature" workers. "Kancha," as one understands, applies to their relational opposites. [Fig. 1] Both words also recur in people's daily conversations about the city and the countryside, whereby "paka" is associated with the first and "kancha" with the latter. In the territory I studied, a large number of roads, workshops, makeshift manufacturers, houses, and granaries were becoming paka, and I frequently asked whether this could be a symptom of the countryside becoming urban. People always denied such a possibility in a way that was reminiscent of Kartik's insistence on the *difference* of gramer shahar. The paka elements, it must be said, were being added to the built environment without completely transforming it, and the kancha elements were certainly not disappearing. I also started to think about the advantages of being

Fig. 2

kancha. Settlements, like things, made solid, might be "reliable," yet not always variable or malleable enough.

In fact, the territory I am going to report on emerges from the continuous making, remaking, and even unmaking of paka and kancha in phases of developing, building up, fixing, tinkering, patching, fencing, enclosing, abandoning, and deterioration, which are determined by the seasons as much as by the initiative of the state and individuals. Similarly, at the level of dwelling and architecture, houses are adjusted, reorganised, divided, and amplified using paka and kancha materials—from corrugated iron sheets to cloth, from bamboo to plywood—that can be assembled, removed, and recycled on numerous occasions and for a myriad of reasons, such as on a daughter's marriage day, for any rite of passage, or in the hope of starting a business.[8] [Fig. 2] As I will explain later, this coexistence of paka and kancha elements correlates with the rhythms of (seasonal) migration, affecting the timing and pace of renovation works. In this chapter, I propose two conceptual shifts from the analytical lens of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, helped by the kancha–paka and gramer shahar figures, to discuss how all these influences impacted this part of West Bengal.

SHIFT #1: BRINGING THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE BACK TO THE FORE

In satellite images, these structures becoming paka show the continually built-up belt stretching from West Bengal through Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana to Delhi. For some, these internet images are evidence of what French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre called "the complete urbanisation of society."[9] Building upon that hypothesis, Christian Schmid and Neil Brenner put forward the controversial

F. 2 Houses in constant making in Begampur.

concept of "planetary urbanisation"[10]. Interacting with such expansions of Lefebvre's theory, I often feel that the focus on "urbanisation" leaves too many serious transformations unaddressed. I also doubt the validity of the idea that "the urban"—short for "the urban society" that, according to Lefebvre, was emerging from the current mode of production—connects with the concrete utopia of a fundamental societal change (one in which capitalism has been overthrown). The underlying suggestion, that "the city" facilitates "society's emancipation" through its constituting features of "centrality," "difference," and "mediation" is troublesome in its universalistic ambition. What city? In which society? Which inhabitants? It is evident that Lefebvre's notions rely quite uncritically on Western epistemologies, and this fact cannot be resolved through minor amendments. A thorough review, continuing the work undertaken by feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial authors towards more sensitive, plural, and effective theorisations, is in order.[11]

The *problématique* is rather how to critically analyse and make sense of current spatial and social phenomena impacting large but different territories worldwide from a postcolonial, non-stagist perspective that may accommodate a *grounded utopia*. I engage the word "utopia" to render a sense of possibility, of being able to cohabit with care on a non-homogeneous, non-ideal, damaged planet. But one can only use this word with wariness at a time when ecological destruction, climate change, socio-economic instability, and war are global—no longer resigned to the countries or regions regarded and exploited as Western peripheries. From this derives the need to keep it "grounded" and situate it, as feminist writer Donna Haraway would say, being aware of its limitations within its scope.[12] The scope lies in Lefebvre's emancipatory interpretation of the notions of urbanisation and urban society, which distinguishes them from usual understandings. He posits the progress of urbanisation and the emergence of an "urban society" inspired by the revolutionary events of May 1968 in France.[13] Against the backdrop of the Cold War, vis-à-vis the failure of Soviet communism and the dilution and dispersion of the proletariat after the collapse of (Fordist) industrial production in Euro-America, this urban society in which women and men fought for hygienic and affordable housing, sexual liberation, gender rights, and self-determination offered a horizon of hope. Lefebvre collocated it in the transformation of city dwellers into a revolutionary subject (a role assigned by Marxism to the proletariat).

The limitations of this theory lie in the linear view of urbanisation as following (from) industrialisation and in the presumption that it could fit the whole world. As argued by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty,[14] the capitalist mode of production which was the backbone of the industrial revolution in Europe has impacted different societies at different points in their history; additionally, in colonised countries, its predominantly extractivist nature caused deep social, economic and ecological damages without the array of innovations and redistributive by-effects which capitalist development had in Europe. As different everyday experiences, societal responses, and crises were the consequence, non-Eurocentric epistemologies are needed. Apparently, Lefebvre never challenged the stagism inherent to the Marxist concept of Europe's capitalist transition. The projection of a global urban society is blind to the possibility that the social process, even if catalysed by capitalism, might be something other than "urbanisation" and its product—as well as its promise—something other than an "urban" society.[15]

While I align myself with those authors who are working towards reviewing and updating Lefebvre's theory through positions that give more thorough consideration to the effects and afterlives of colonialism,[16] the contribution I wish to make here is to revalorise his notion of the production of space. I deem this constructive and pertinent to the reflection of postcolonial critical urban studies because, by focusing on *how* space is produced, it asks about the historical inhibitors as well as the potential effectors of social change.[17] As Lefebvre understood it, social space is a "social product," never finished or given but constantly co-impacted by various factors and actors. This production

Fig. 3

process is catalysed by state- and corporate-led decisions (e.g., new monuments, infrastructure projects, operationalisations of large territories) on the global Level "G" and by the actions of people in everyday life (e.g., specific ways of inhabiting, cohabiting, and organising) on the private Level "P."[18] The developments on the two levels, permanently interacting, are mediated at Level "M," which, in this model, corresponds to the city.[19] The crossing and complicating of the production of space as it unfolds on the three levels includes 1) *representations of space*, i.e., social norms, cultural imaginaries, symbols, and narratives, the "codes" of subcultures ("conceived space"); 2) *spatial practice*, i.e., inhabitants' routines, mobility, communication, the built and non-built environment, etc. ("perceived space"); and 3) *spaces of representation*, i.e., negotiations and contestations of space ("lived space"). For spatial analysis, this means that whether one is looking at the ways of dwelling, building, or working of inhabitants (Level "P"), at different manifestations of migration, economic growth, and shrinkage (Level "M"), or at the unfolding of urban development policies and operationalisation and extraction of landscapes (Level "G"), attention has to be paid to how space is perceived, conceived, and lived, and vice versa. As to whether the produced space is urban, this has to be answered from case to case. Then again, with all due respect, the question could finally take the backseat.

F. 3 Women taking their morning bath in Singur.

SHIFT #2: CONTEXTUALISING THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE IN AN INCREASINGLY TRANSLOCALISED SOCIETY

There is a second reason my contribution entertains a tense dialogue with the presuppositions of the "Territories of Extended Urbanisation." I

Fig. 4

F. 4 "Rajesh Cyber Café", Phulia.

see the contemporary "production of space"—including questions around settlements, occupancy, and the "right to the city"—as a variable of lives and livelihoods based on *the logic of being on the move* rather than of "the urban phenomenon." As a result, I think of a modus operandi based on movement, not simply of mobility or migration between cities and "hinterlands."[20] This perspective was born empirically by living and travelling with "people-on-the-move" in parts of India and Bangladesh. They were daily commuters like Kartik, women moving between villages and cities to sell vegetables, agricultural workers, migrant labourers, etc. (not only specific professional groups or the most deprived but larger sections of the population as well). Observing how routinely they alternated work at home and shifting sites (not only in cities) just to make ends meet, and considering the more general mobilisation of society linked to increasing precarity in different world regions, including Europe,[21] I started to ask myself: What would it be like to live, struggle, and organise in a *translocalised* society? I learnt that whole territories could rhythmically lose and regain their populations as inhabitants follow the cycles of agriculture or respond to the fluctuating labour demand in practically all other sectors of the economy; as they move between megacities, towns, and villages (sometimes thousands of kilometres away from each other) in the hope of earning just a little more, improving their income marginally; as they adapt to environmental phenomena like the monsoon that has long become volatile.

In Indian development studies, the significance of temporary and circular migration is generally acknowledged but has rarely received dedicated attention from urban studies scholars.[22] Ananya Roy's book on Kolkata mentions the emancipatory potential that commuting between the city and its peripheries can entail for working women. In fact, studies on Mumbai's suburban train travellers and Chennai's urban-rural-urban commuters have discussed "circulatory lives" and "rural cosmopolitanisms," and the scholarship on peripheralisation has traditionally dealt with

questions of connectivity and mobility.[23] The perspective of these studies remains city-centric, and the movement they discuss is prevalently only rural to urban. However, the mobility patterns I have mapped speak to centrifugal, even thoroughly *ex-centric* movements going hand in hand with complex socio-spatial phenomena. In economic geography, the urban bias is at least relativised thanks to the discipline's territorial approach and studies that have addressed how state-led territorialisation and rescaling projects (eminently for extraction a nd the construction of infrastructures) "translocalise" people's lives.[24] Nonetheless, the discussion prioritises urban metaphors and horizons.[25] Also, the debate around India's "census towns" is undermined by this bias. The term connotes settlements that, by the official statistical classification, should fall into the category of "town" (population above 5,000, density above 400 persons per square kilometre, and a minimum of 75% of male inhabitants employed in non-agricultural sectors) but are still treated as "village." Densely populated West Bengal and Kerala have the highest number thereof. When the Census 2011 revealed that more than 30% of India's urban population growth since 2001 had occurred in newly listed "census towns," scholars scandalised the "unacknowledged urbanisation" of these settlements and demanded that they be declared towns to promote adequate development.[26] Few raised this question: If a large part of the national population in settlements of various sizes is increasingly involved in activities different from agriculture, but industrial development is lagging behind, how are people making a living? My answer is by moving.[27]

In an edited volume presenting case studies from all over India, Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah have explicitly questioned the (still predominant) idea that urban growth emerges from the convergence of globalisation and metropolitanisation.[28] They also suggest that today's increased circulation and movement are not sufficiently considered when assessing settlements' growth and shrinkage. Through the hypothesis of translocalisation, I intend to correlate the "marginal," apparently harmless phenomenon of people's increasing movement with the relations of production, which are slowly but surely transforming in a context of acerbating precarity. I am speaking of a transformation caused by extreme concentration of capital—so extreme that "normal" capitalist accumulation reverts to primitive accumulation[29]—and aggravated by ecological exhaustion and climate crises (see Nikos Katsikis' chapter in this volume). As its negative implications come to the surface, fears and alarmism, coupled in many cases with right-wing outbursts, are spreading globally. But viable answers already exist and even proliferate in the social and physical spaces produced by users-inhabitants who have no chance but to be on the move and improvise, negotiating questions of inhabitation, appropriation, resistance, and protest in new ways. [Fig. 4] They create unintended and utterly surprising outcomes, assemblages of multilevel and non-linear interactions, as Bruno Latour might have said.[30]

COLONIAL "STABILISATION," POSTCOLONIAL LAND REFORM, AND TODAY'S UNSTABLE ARRANGEMENTS

High population density, high connectivity, abandonment, and precarity are just a few labels I could use to explain the region.[31] Some of these attributes are geographical and historical, others contemporary in nature; throughout my fieldwork in West Bengal, I witnessed how they all interweave. Archaeological evidence in the Ganges Delta region attests to the continued development of human settlements since the fourth century.[32] Historical records show that by the twelfth century, complex land tenure patterns and taxation systems were in place. The growth of settlements was facilitated by a combination of factors: favourable climate, easy communications, and the fertility of the soil. Within a governmental regime that some have compared to European feudalism,[33] the competi-

Fig. 5

tive coexistence of many landlords (rajas, thakurs, and from the Mughal period on, zamindars) and even more intermediaries ruling over relatively small estates gave shape to a constellation of bustling towns.[34] In the eighteenth century, the East India Company expanded its control in the Subcontinent and undertook violent moves to make the Delta's watery land "stable."[35] This fostered urban concentration: Calcutta, the initial British headquarters, passed from circa 10,000 inhabitants in 1700 to 500,000 in 1800 and about 1,000,000 in 1900.[36] Through channelling, embanking, fortifying, reclaiming, clearing, and connecting, the colonisers modified the territory to ensure quick shipments of raw export materials and promote agriculture and, therewith, the inflow of revenues through taxation. [Fig. 5] This entailed forced relocations of the population and large-scale dispossession, for which the selective and fragmented industrial development promoted by the colonisers could not compensate. As in other parts of the Subcontinent, most livelihoods increasingly depended on pauperised agricultural labour and a subsistence economy.[37]

From India's independence (1947) through the 1950–60s, Jawaharlal Nehru's government launched grand initiatives to foster industrialisation, with the main focus on extraction and metallurgy. However, the resulting damage to local economies and, in some cases, entire territories caused by the colonial regime was so severe that any slow, isolated improvements were utterly insufficient. To mitigate the pervasive rural poverty and agricultural distress, the government promoted agrarian as well as land reforms and the *panchayati raj* model of local self-governance.[38] In most places, the agrarian reform was mediated by "Green Revolution" initiatives based on monocultures and eventually fostered the centralisation of land ownership.[39] The land reform was implemented only in a few states, among them West Bengal, which from 1977 on was led by a "Left Front" headed by the CPI(M), or Communist Party of India (Marxist). Different authors have assessed this reform's mixed success, as the redistribution of land was severely undermined by local power games and individual interests. Most observers concurred that at least a tenancy reform was achieved, and, thanks to that, sharecroppers have enjoyed comparatively higher security of tenancy and protection from eviction in West Bengal, in contrast to other states.[40] The land reform

Fig. 6

discouraged monoculture, which in West Bengal—the region's topology is crisscrossed by rivers and dotted with waterbodies and seasonal flooding—remains far less common than in other Indian states. On a more symbolic level, the measures created confidence among the inhabitants. Apart from temporary moves during the lean months, West Bengal recorded altogether low levels of migration for almost 20 years, despite comparatively slow economic progress; long-term migration and permanent emigration only occurred in the districts where the land reform had been less successful. The city of Kolkata continued to grow, mainly due to the inflow of migrants from the neighbouring states and Bangladesh.[41] Today, the patchwork of bright greens (rice), yellows (rapeseed), deep greens (vegetables), and reds (sand), typical of its territory as seen from above, speaks to the reform's effects on local cultivation practices. [Fig. 6] As the contradictory methods and different phases of land distribution created highly fragmented landholding patterns, most families own fields at different sites and cultivate various crops in the same season: rice or jute in the low-lying fields, vegetables in the others.

After India's 1991 move to "liberalise" the economy, many states started to promote direct foreign investment and set up various types of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). In West Bengal, the Left Front held on to its rural legacy. However, the success of the agrarian reform had been short-lived, and agriculture's productivity was stable but not thriving. The agricultural sector, therefore, did not manage to absorb the available labour force—much to the contrary, the demand was sinking.[42] With increasing education levels, young people, especially, had little incentive to engage in rural labour (in West Bengal, the literacy level is among the highest

F. 5 Map of Calcutta and environs in 1785, showing "corrected" water bodies: rivers, embankments, tanks, broken ground, sands and soundings of the Hugli River at low water in spring tides.

F.6 A painter's interpretation of Bengal's territory: Ganesh Haloi, *Untitled*, gouache on Nepali paper pasted on board, 2014.

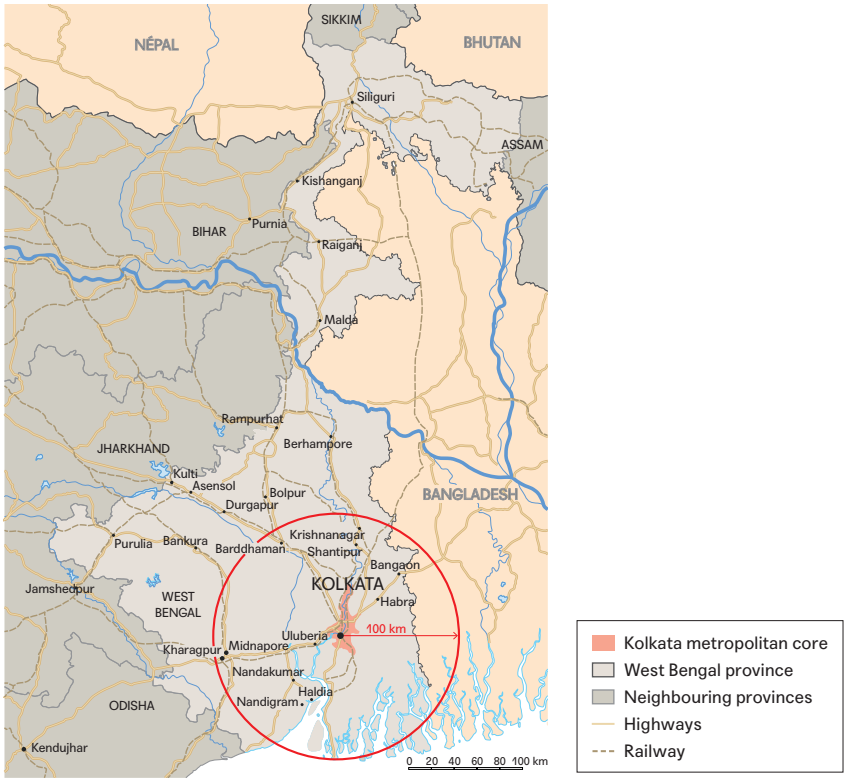
in India). Seasonal and permanent migration to the metropolises and states that liberalised their economies became widespread. In 2005, amidst an atmosphere of economic insecurity and abandonment, the state government opted for private investment-led industrialisation schemes. By this time, funds on the international market were starting to dwindle, and the desired shower of investments failed to arrive. Ever since the Left Front coalition lost the elections of 2011, successive governments headed by TMC (Trinamool Congress) have had difficulties attracting private investment and advancing industrialisation. Things have not been different in most parts of India. In fact, many observers maintain that the neoliberal turn has heightened regional disparities and competition, exacerbated environmental problems, and furthered the marginalisation of already discriminated social groups such as women, *adivasi*,[43] Dalits, and religious minorities, especially Muslims.[44] Moreover, the projects promoted in the neoliberal era have often been volatile, to say the least. The record of firms put up on a grand scale and dismantled as soon as the corporate logics or the moods of the global market commanded to do so is long in India.[45]

The state responded with innumerable subsidy schemes, various forms of loans, and the distribution of basic consumer goods or guaranteed employment—adding to and complicating the world's most convoluted (probably) quota system for members of oppressed communities. While all this only sufficed to hardly contain the damages, people soon learnt how to put the state's lobbyism and clientelism to work. In the words of political studies scholar Partha Chatterjee, the consequence was the emergence of a "governmentally managed informal social space." This social space is held together by small-scale private capital investments, a great deal of self-organisation and self-exploitation, activities on the edge of illegality, bribery, and all sorts of temporary, ad hoc, and unstable arrangements.[46] As Chatterjee also observes, this characteristic straddles and unites urban and rural settings. In the territory I investigated, it was *people* that made the best out of very little, regardless of their "urban" or "rural" location. Many fought against caste and gender discrimination, opposed public officers' abuses of power, and contested development plans. The *andalon,* Bengali for "movement," with which virtually the whole state had blocked the government's plans to convert agricultural land into factories in 2007–08, was a case in point. Movement was another reaction to precarity. If multilocal livelihoods and translocal lives have existed for decades in India,[47] their incidence has grown exponentially since the 2000s.[48] In West Bengal, the frequent stories of brothers, fathers, fiancées, and daughters who toiled in western and southern India and came home for Durga Puja, or Eid,[49] to carry out the harvest, look after the house renovations, or get married, composed a storyboard of translocalisation. Even though they were absent in the season in which I conducted fieldwork, it was clear that many houses were turning from kancha to paka[50] and small businesses popped up thanks to their savings, confounding the statistical data on male employment in "census towns."

EXERCISES IN A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE TERRITORY

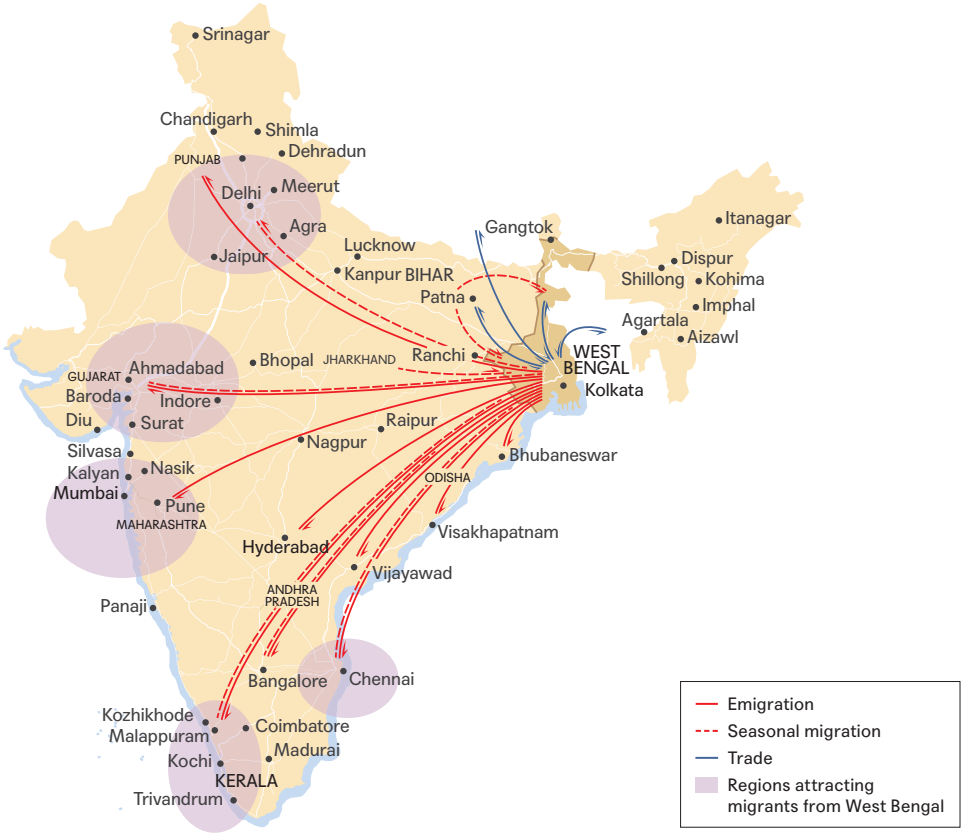
The territory I researched, a region of approximately 33,000 km^2, was obtained by drawing a circle of 100 km around the centre of Kolkata. [Fig. 7] From former investigations, I knew that this delimitation corresponded to the maximum distance a daily commuter to/from Kolkata could cover and that beyond this radius, the effects of concentration-extension gradually disappeared, the more encompassing effects of movement generated by translocalisation became dominant. [Fig. 8] Agricultural areas like Bardhaman, West Bengal's "rice bowl," received seasonal workers in the harvest seasons;

F. 8 The fieldwork area was determined according to the maximum distance that could be covered by a daily commuter to/from Kolkata by public transportation.



RESEARCH CONTEXT MAP: WEST BENGAL
Fig. 7

WEST BENGAL
Fig. 8



TRADE AND MIGRATION MOVEMENTS
TO AND FROM WEST BENGAL
Fig. 9

in mountainous northern West Bengal, past Malda, the tourism industry absorbed those who didn't engage in trade with Bihar, Bangladesh, Assam, Sikkim, or Nepal; Mumbai, New Delhi, and Bengaluru were magnets for the educated youth, who would often migrate for good, whereas the poorest and most dispossessed, such as the Muslim population of Murshidabad or the *adivasi* from West Bengal's dry western districts, mostly went to work in other states. [Fig. 9]

After carving my study's territory on the map I needed some time to calibrate my tools of observation because the Google Earth images I used to plan my visits collided with my general "sense" of the region. This type of familiarity with a territory grows gradually, enriched with local knowledge and consolidated by personal experiences in space and time. In the plains of West Bengal, the sense of the region may involve the memories of long-abandoned river ports and people's hopes and concerns about new railway connections and roads under construction. These recollections mark a (planning) history of improbable satellite cities built after armchair decisions;[51] the lower- and higher-lying areas and the red, sandy, or black soils, each fit for different breeds of paddy; the tradition of changing land uses through the seasons—there are six, not four or two in this part of the Subcontinent. I highlight this temporal variability, linked to environmental factors because satellite images generally fail to record it; a fatal problem for analysis, especially in monsoon regions. The permanent colours of satellite images, grey-rust-

dust-green-maroon-whites, also conceal the myriad of things that users (residents, denizens, tenants, owners) constantly do and undo underneath their roofs—and in their fields, which are turned into buildable lots and then returned to nature when the investors fail to appear. Morten Nielsen and AbdouMaliq Simone have admonished that these activities may have nothing to do with the overarching processes of urbanisation, making it necessary to "detach ourselves from the familiar images and vernaculars and let the details speak another language."[52] One can learn that language by sticking to everyday life, resisting the temptation to interpret the extending urban fabric too hurriedly as a sign of Lefebvrian urbanisation only. (What makes a fabric "urban," by the way? The rust-grey of tin roofs, the new "vernacular" in the majority of self-built settlements in big cities, nowadays also prevails in satellite images of villages and *adivasi* hamlets or even in army camps in the forests.)

These considerations led me to experiment with a large spectrum of representations in the field. Parallel to exploring the territory "as a whole" by travelling and mapping extensively, I tried to grasp the production of space in everyday life through regular "zoom-ins" into a number of settlements, guided by the following questions: How does "the city grow from the village"? Which actors, ideas, and spatial practices are changing everyday life in gramer shahar, turning the fabric into paka, transforming its inhabitant's aspirations? I made it a habit to sketch constituencies, axes of circulation, and landmarks in a notebook, noting transformations (some occurring over decades) to the built and unbuilt environments that the locals reconstructed for me: growth/expansion of built structures, becoming paka/consolidation, emptying, new cultivation, etc.

Over the years, I learnt that our body s ends us signals that can become useful when mapping the most subtle borders between public and private spaces—common transit space or *para* (residential cluster), for example. So, I also registered the sites where I had double-checked my *dupatta*[53] or taken off my sunglasses as the locals were looking at me (nobody coming from afar would go unnoticed) or where my pace had become slower either to synchronise with the pace of the majority or because the road was particularly rough. I compiled a personal atlas of "micro territories" that ranged from about 20 to 250 km^2, depending on what the inhabitants regarded as their settlement's catchment area. Once condensed, synthesised, and coloured, this information resulted in mappings of what I would call an "internalised" territorial experience: Bodily impressions, findings gathered through interviews, as well as casual conversations, along with Google Earth views adapted to my scope.

The somatic map of Begampur, reproduced here, mirrors memories of my movements impressed, as it were, "on the soil." [Fig. 10] Whether I was alone on the streets and lanes, ferries and fields, or talking with an interview partner, a traveller, or a tea stall owner, the small audio recorder hanging around my neck, underneath my dupatta and kurta, was permanently on. Once, while relistening to the recordings in search of a locality name that had already slipped my memory, I was struck by the quick interchange of the sounds produced by my steps on changing grounds: soft, muffled resonances when I was moving on *kancha rasta* (roads) and small embankments between fields; hard, rhythmic ones on *paka rasta*; staccatos when the surface was damaged or holey. I was curious as to what other details the sonic mappings could reveal. I printed out Google Earth maps of a number of localities I had visited, covered them with tracing paper, and started to report the sonic traces revealed by the respective audio tracks. This exercise re-imported the many activities that generally filled our environment into the silent cartographic space and helped me realise that kancha and paka did not just coexist but were overlapping in most settlements.

AN EX-CENTRIC TERRITORY

I generated this impressionistic transect towards the end of my fieldwork when, contrary to my habit of travelling only by public transport, I hired a driver and a car for some days. We followed two city-centrifugal trajectories,

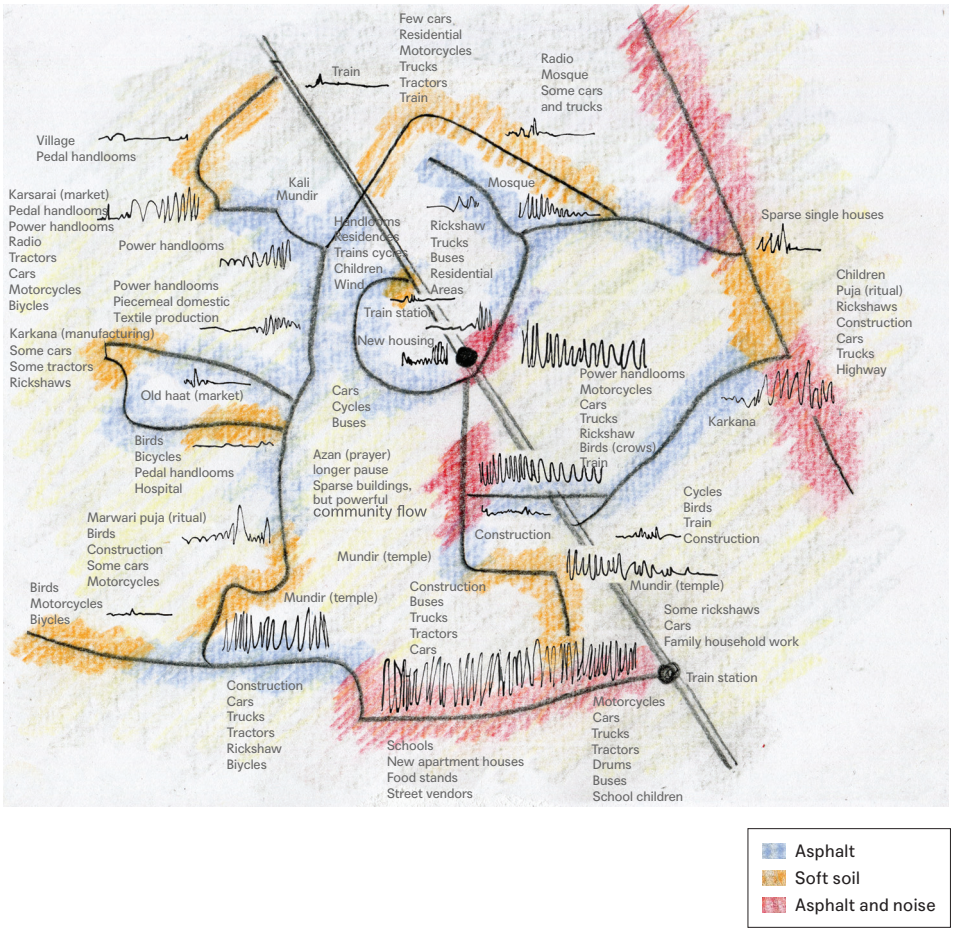
starting in Kolkata and driving for approximately 90 kilometres to the north-east on the National Highway 112, popularly known as *Jessore Road*. We crossed the district of North 24 Parganas up to Bangaon on the India-Bangladesh border.[54] We drove another 90 kilometres to the south-west from Kolkata to Nandigram, passing the districts of Haora and East Medinipur. Especially in the northward track, the built environment was turning paka, and the territory presented itself as haphazardly transforming under the effect of speculation on the land market and real estate investment; the fast connectivity with the metropolis was clearly a facilitator of these developments in the initial stretch. [Fig. 11] On the south-west track, the situation demonstrated how people's increased back-and-forth movement across urban and rural areas is reshaping old and new settlements and complicating the commonly accepted understanding of "centrality."

On our first 30 kilometres on Jessore Road, an axis of trade and communications with Bangladesh, the generic and "compressed" fabric (see AbdouMaliq Simone's definition of compression in this volume) was characterised by commercial premises, recently built and already dilapidated-looking shopping malls, workshops specialising in iron and woodworks, traditional dwellings side by side with small *new towns*, less than a decade old, and planned community housing complexes for the middle classes, generally developed with private funds.

"It's always such a mess from Belgharia to Barasat, ma'am! This place has totally transformed in the last ten years. It has become like Kolkata. Even the land prices are like in Kolkata! First, the investors came from there, and now the city people are buying the flats. And then they go to their offices by car every day!" snapped the driver in Hindi mixed with Bengali at Madhyamgram. I replied that this didn't surprise me since the road had only one lane in this stretch, and he answered: "What to do, each *member*[55] has got friends in their constituencies! Add all the people who file complaints whenever roadworks are planned or some temple committee opposing the reclamation of its land—and there you see our situation!"

Even though the billboards advertising *Fortune Townships* and *Sports Cities* chased us until Chandpara, about 60 kilometres further north-east, the agglomeration effects soon waned. For the next 40 to 50 kilometres, the Jessore Road, now two lanes, resembled a corridor passing through an almost continual row of new paka structures, one- or two-storeyed, behind which the cultivated areas and paddy fields widened as we progressed. Although the small industries and manufacturers were slowly replaced by housing and commercial premises, the fabric retained a generic-by-compression appearance. Connections with the capital city were feeble now, and trade seemed fully oriented towards northern Bengal and Bangladesh. In Navapalli, the customers of the local tea stall all agreed that, with the exception of a few businesspeople and high-ranking public officers, nobody went to Kolkata regularly. Habra, at about 60 kilometres from Kolkata, constituted some sort of frontier. From there to the thriving and dense border town of Bangaon, the paka buildings left room for kancha structures, and agriculture-related activities became predominant. Also here, the roadsides were densifying through the addition of built structures, side by side with the small houses, many of them just shacks, carpentries alternated with stores selling construction materials or wood, while in the background, scattered brick kilns underscored the absence of other significant economic or business activities.

In contrast, the south-westbound track impressed me with a progressive decompression and emptying of the landscape. Already 20 kilometres from departure, the heavy metallurgic and light engineering factories and haulier companies, typical of Haora, became sparse; much smaller shacks selling wood, iron, and cement filled the landscape. We were driving through the paka territory of gramer shahar. Slowly, orchards and cultivated areas appeared; on the horizon only sparse recently built towns. After 15 to 20 kilometres, in Bagnan, I got out of the car and took a longer stroll. Served by



A SOMATIC MAP OF BEGAMPUR
Fig. 10

the highway and the highly frequented Kharagpur railway line, the locality is a hub for commuters—manufacturing workers from factories in the Haora district, sellers, employees in the public administration, and many others. I walked down Station Road, expecting to get to the centre. Yet, Bagnan did not seem to have any centre of sorts, and after asking and searching, I concluded that its "centres" were the railway station and two bus stops on the highway. These were places cohabited by people who aimed to be *somewhere else*.

Like most other sites of my fieldwork, Bagnan was a "census town." Its fabric and infrastructures were not formally planned but well calibrated to cater to movement and, thus, a good example of spaces produced by translocalisation. Although many of the spatial developments fostered by movement that I encountered in my research gave the impression

F. 10 The somatic map of Begampur was obtained by reporting the sonic traces of the author's movements on a sheet of paper during fieldwork. Soft, muffled resonances on the kancha roads and small embankments between fields; hard, rhythmic sounds on paka roads; staccatos on damaged or holey surfaces.

AN IMPRESSIONISTIC TRANSECT OF THE TERRITORY
Fig. 11

of being ex-centric, in Bagnan, staring at a "bus stop" that was actually the occupied highway, it occurred to me that I was moving in an altogether *ex-centric territory.* A territory in which new "competitors" add to the usual centralities (administrative centres, ancient towns, *haat*, or rural markets, etc.), which are bypassed or superseded by activities that occupy some places and empty others according to logics that are not immediately decipherable. To be fully clear, I am not simply positing that territories acquire additional centralities,

competing with the old centralities. I am saying that since people increasingly cohabit in territories they occupy temporarily, centralities are losing relevance, be it due to inflation or exhaustion.[56] In Bagnan, the production of space was impacted by fugacious booms, short-term investments, and infrastructural improvements implemented sporadically by people not interested or able to afford to stay in one place. As in many other gramer shahar, social space seemed to follow an ambiguous trajectory and pointed to opaque relations, much like the inhabitants' activities that catalysed them (and simultaneously responded to them).[57] This is what, in my opinion, challenges the horizon of an "urban society." Impacted by many factors—media representations, communication technologies, the changing patterns of land ownership, old and new migration routes, as well as patterns, higher purchasing power and circulation of consumption goods, etc.—the city appears to lose one of its main features, "centrality." At the same time, "difference"—an additional feature regarded to be constitutive of the city—increases all over the territory by modes of occupancy that do not operate per extension from one point centrifugally.[58]

Past Bagnan, the paka environment waned, orchards and cultivated areas became prevalent, and sparse workshops, modest houses, and godowns[59] continued to alternate. At Kolaghat, we crossed the Hugli River and headed southwards onto the freshly asphalted four-lane National Highway 41. [Fig. 12] By the time the meter hit the 60-kilometre mark, we were looking at the open paddy fields and decongested landscape of East Medinipur. With every kilometre, the environment, dotted by shrimp farms and okra-brown fields, appeared to be more rural. I was looking forward to Reapara and its canal built in 1880. However, upon arriving, we found the bridge crowded by an orange mob. I hinted to the driver to stop. In the previous months, I had repeatedly been caught in the middle of brutal clashes between parties, and now, just before the elections, the spirits were all the more likely to be high—especially here, in Nandigram.

F. 11 The transect merges an extensive bird's eye view with the author's expansive-associative gaze of the landscape. Towards the north-east, the territory was seen transforming in haphazard ways under the effect of speculation on the land market and investment in real estate. To the south and west, it was faced with the dynamics of de-densification.

NANDIGRAM: CONTESTED REPRESENTATIONS AND INHABITANTS' RESPONSES TO STAGNATION

"Are you from the state or the central government?" inquired the gracile old man firmly. I immediately guessed what he might be afraid of: Some 15 years ago, under pressure to promote industrialisation, the Left Front government planned to build an SEZ in partnership with the Indonesian conglomerate *Salim* in Nandigram. We were just a few kilometres from the port city of Haldia, a hub for refineries and related industries. I clarified that I'm no surveyor measuring land for some government programme but just a researcher grappling with questions around the development of settlements. He did not seem to be fully convinced but reciprocated my introduction by telling me, mixing Bengali and Hindi, that he had worked as a *coolie,* or porter, in a market in Ahmedabad (in the western state of Gujarat) for most of his life. He then spoke about the events of 2007, when the government tried to reclaim 20,000 acres of agricultural land, and the locals resisted. The details of the state's terrifying response were gruesome—murders, rapes, and infanticides commissioned to scare and repress those unwilling to cede their land. Journalists and intellectuals from the city, NGOs, and local, national, and international media flocked to the place, "and finally, the people won," he concluded. "The people of Nandigram have always fought against oppression."[60] I could

Fig. 12

not suppress the feeling that his words were a warning.

The past struggle seemed to have shaped a special identification with the place in Nandigram's inhabitants. In other localities, people appeared to relate the most to their village, if not just to their local para; they spoke of the larger aggregate of villages and cultivable land grouped under the administrative unit of the Community Development Block (CDB) as an abstract entity. [61] But in Nandigram, they regularly insisted that I visit this and that locality—the 7-kilometres-away ferry *ghat* (port) of Kendemari, the 10-kilometres-away ancient river port city of Terapekhia, etc. [Fig. 14] However, the answers to my question, "Is Nandigram rural or urban?" coincided with those I was given everywhere. "We're not urban. It's the people from outside, the city people, who started to call us a city." And, "Nandigram is a village, just with a lot of paka." Two factors immediately stood out as deterrents to becoming a "town," as the villagers discussed them very openly whenever the question of "rural or urban" was on the table.[62] At the time, scholars and politicians were making a case for "upgrading" India's "census towns," and Nandigram, like Bagnan, fell into that category. From a practical, everyday-life point of view, living in a city means paying higher taxes on real estate and commercial activities. Additionally, India's subsidy system has historically benefitted rural areas more than urban ones, i.e., CDBs and gram panchayat are allotted more funds than municipalities.[63]

Nevertheless, representations of space are too multi-layered and dynamic to assume that inhabitants would only conceive of "village" and "city" depending on, or responding to, some state's denominations. Thus, for some, "city" promised at least a partial liberation from social control and caste identities that are difficult to elude in rural areas, whereas, for others, it was a synonym for undesirable features such as elitism, power games, and alienating social relations. All these are, in turn, common representations of "city" offered by popular culture, starting with the influential dream factory of Bollywood.

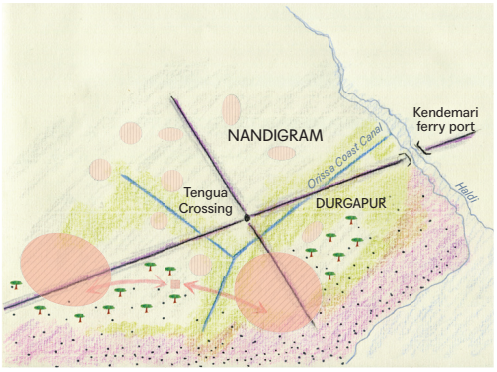
F. 12 View from the window, Chandpur, National Highway 41.
F. 13 A cottage industry for textile manufacturing in Phulia.

Fig. 13

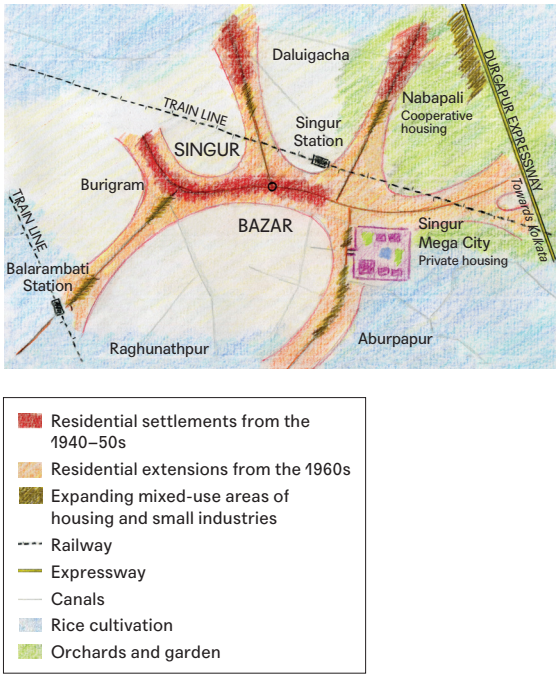
When one tries and reads it through Lefebvre's model, in which conceived, perceived, and lived space are mutually correlated, the scepticism about being "urban" appears even more nuanced. The spatial practices ("perceived space"), mirroring an ongoing rearticulation of material fabric and everyday routines in connection with the introduction of new communications and means of transport, are changing much faster than the social relations in the realm of "lived space," where change is reluctant and prone to backlashes and unexpected detours. I am not thinking of explicit cultural resistance, although that plays a role too,[64] but of phenomena that would be simplistic and relate to the "urban phenomenon." In Nandigram itself, for example, I became aware of the emergence of a low-profile textile industry whose future developments were all but predictable. It took the material form of "generic" tin shacks adjoined to the brick or paka dwellings of lower-middle-income families.

"Are these all your sons working in the workshop?" I asked the young woman enjoying the evening breeze in the small yard before her house. "No, only my eldest son," she replied. "He used to work in factories outside, in Kolkata, Haora. Now he's married and has just settled down here. He gets the orders and the cloth from outside; they make jeans, shirts, and T-shirts. He employs three of his cousins. My smallest son is still in primary school, and one is in college. The third has gone to work in Tamil Nadu with my cousins a few years ago. He comes for Eid and stays with us only now and then. Would you like to take a look?"

In the neighbourhood, every third house accommodated such a workshop. Although this density was exceptional, people engaged in domestic textile production in many other villages within my study's territory. Closer to Kolkata, in North 24 Parganas, I found a capillary network of one-person enterprises, mainly women who hand-stitched or machine-sewed shirt collars, T-shirt sleeves, etc. They did this "on-demand," often on very short-term bases, from their one-room homes. Certain households complemented their regular income through it, while for others, it was the only source of livelihood. The business had developed very recently, in the last five to seven years. Thereby, the *karkana*, or workshops, were indistinguishable from the cottage industries typical of localities with a century-long handloom tradition in the more northern districts of Hugli and Nadia, which are traditionally integrated with the homestead. There, the old foot-treadle looms were being replaced by electric ones, but the work with and around them had resisted transformation. The weavers were caught in individualised relations with their commissioners, leaving minimal room for bargaining, and the labour relations were typical of traditional domestic systems, with women's and children's unpaid work taken for granted.[65] This represented another parallel to the newer manufacturers. [Fig. 13]



FIELDWORK SKETCH OF NANDIGRAM
Fig. 14



FIELDWORK SKETCH OF SINGUR
Fig. 15

These self-employing, small-scale suppliers could be portrayed as agents of "the urban," bringing an industry from the city to the village, often via the mediation of NGOs as loan givers or contact makers, contributing to a transformation of production and consumption behaviours, causing debates about power blackouts, and perhaps even raising the question of child and female unpaid labour—adding a Lefebvrian difference, so to speak. Yet those who ran the workshops were regarded and regarded themselves as farmers—as they did engage in farming, some on their own land, others as wage labourers, others only in the harvest seasons. Looking closely, it was the new roads and incremental houses of the wealthy that created the impression of the built environment turning paka; in the "generic" fabric of the residential quarters, the karkana were hardly noticeable additions. The production process, finally, based on domestic work and individualised producer–commissioner relations, was difficult to identify as "industrial," per Marx, or "urban" in Lefebvre's terms.

Of course, I asked myself whether these garment manufacturers installed in villages weren't evidence against my hypothesis of translocalisation and people's increased movement. Here, inhabitants were creating the conditions for working without having to move at all! Nonetheless, here the production of space appeared to correlate positively with movement—if due to levels of precarisation that people who had previously migrated to the city for better opportunities were now forced to abandon it as a place to live, and as the horizon projected by Lefebvre. Most of the current small textile manufacturers I interviewed (not only in Nandigram) had in fact lived and worked for years in textile factories, predominantly in Haora, or commuted back and forth. To advance hypotheses on which sort of "society" under the effect of which "phenomenon" might be taking shape, I should have analysed the social relations and productive forces on site more closely than the time available allowed. I could have investigated the relationships between

producers and buyers, and how those were negotiated; the forms of ownership over mobile and immobile assets in place; the funds—remittances of migrated relatives, private lending, microcredit—backing the new karkana; and the impact of the modalities, times, and places of work on the family structures. If all this unfortunately exceeded the scope of my fieldwork, it is now clear to me that such a study could as well have turned into an investigation of non-capitalist class processes, in J. K. Gibson-Graham's terms.[66] Their non-capitalocentric perspective fractures the alleged identity and homogeneity of capitalism by highlighting economic diversity, that is, the variety of non-capitalist economic activities and different forms of organisation scattered over the economic landscape.[67]

Of course, I asked myself whether these garment manufacturers installed in villages weren't evidence against my hypothesis of translocalisation and people's increased movement. Here, inhabitants were creating the conditions for working without having to move at all! Nonetheless, the production of space appeared to correlate positively with movement—if due to levels of precarisation that people who had previously migrated to the city for better opportunities were now forced to abandon it as a place to live,[68] and as the horizon projected by Lefebvre. Most of the current small textile manufacturers I interviewed (not only in Nandigram) had in fact lived and worked for years in textile factories, predominantly in Haora, or commuted back and forth. The reasons they had decided to move back to the village were personal, and their conditions differed, but the conversations recalled the title chosen by Ananya Roy for her book about Kolkata, *City Requiem*. The city had failed to keep its promises. Movement played a significant role also on a more infrastructural point. The "ex-centric" production in the karkana was 1) enabled by improved mobility infrastructures, from highways to mobile phones, and 2) integrated with a complex supply chain, ensuring the movement of materials and goods through truck drivers, petty and bulk sellers, intermediaries, contractors, and sub-contractors who did not reside in Kolkata or any city, at all. This resonated with the supply chain analyses produced in the 1990s by economic geographer Pierre Veltz.[69] To be clear, Veltz took the correlation between economic growth (of the West) and the growth of cities for granted and this correlation has never fully described the context of India, whose territorial developments and rearrangements (as shown, e.g., in the aforementioned book by Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah) are more ambiguous, multi-factored, non-linear. Nonetheless, I find the metaphors with which he described the territorial effects of globalisation interesting, as they perfectly apply to my understanding of how translocalisation affects the production of space. Globalisation, he wrote, led to a reinforcement of centrifugal forces and the emergence of an "archipelago economy," a "poly-centric space of simultaneities" rendered "relational" by the augmented movement of goods, money, and of people.[70]

SINGUR: INHABITANTS' STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION AND EXPERIENCES OF TRANSLOCAL SOLIDARITY

My decision to include Singur in the study was the least neutral. In 2007–08, Singur, a "census town" in Hugli district, had been the epicentre of a conflict over land that brought the Left Front its first failure at "industrialising"—Nandigram followed shortly—and eventually, its bitter demise in the 2011 elections after 35 years of uninterrupted rule.[71] The government wanted to acquire approximately 1,000 acres of high-yield land, part of which was common land used for grazing and foraging, to accommodate a car factory for the production of the Nano, a new cheap compact city car by the Indian corporation Tata Motors. The farmer compensation was unfair, and they united in demanding better conditions, yet the state ignored them and proceeded to expropriate the area. The farmers were joined by fellow villagers, including

Fig. 16

F. 16 Land evolving into kancha: weeds and birds reappropriating the fields once earmarked for the projected Tata factory in Singur.

many who did not own any land but worked as sharecroppers and/or grazed their cattle on the common land, and women for whom the area was a reserve of wild vegetables and herbs.[72] They became the protagonists of dramatic clashes, which soon circulated in the form of media images of peasants literally shielding the land with their own bodies against the public officers sent to fence it in. The *andalon*, or movement, had started. The Left Front was blind to those images and deaf to the voices raised not only from Kolkata and West Bengal but from elsewhere in India and abroad. Its reaction was unexpectedly violent and continued until Tata pulled out and chose to build its factory in Gujarat, in western India.

Although the major opposition party at the time, Trinamool Congress (TMC), was crucial for the mobilisation, this sort of event speaks to the inhabitants' potential to unite across social classes, religions, and party divides to oppose state decisions and effect long-term change.[73] Additionally, Singur's struggle, at least on paper, had a non-capitalist background: Even if the landowners were initially concerned about their returns from the "commodity" land, the movement took off and was maintained thanks to the numerous *users* of the collective land, and external supporters who denounced the Left Front's betrayal of the land reform it had once implemented. Another reason I took an interest in Singur's movement was its translocality, which was twofold. First, it was quickly adopted, expanded, and refracted in the rest of West Bengal and far beyond. As noted by anthropologist Dayabati Roy, "Singur's land movement has … been translated in different places of the country wherever the respective governments have tried to acquire agricultural land for the interest of corporate capital."[74] Second, it was backed morally and materially by civil society groups, university students, and intellectuals from Kolkata and other cities, as well as the international diaspora.

As is often the case, the situation I found on site was less unambiguous than expected, starting with the state of the land the inhabitants had fought for, which lay idle and fenced in by cement slabs. Areas once envisaged to host factories and new housing, and to that end fenced in or covered with cement, were being reappropriated by weeds and birds and evolving into kancha. [Fig. 16] Villagers had hardly any access to it, and ten years on, many of the landowners were still waiting for legal compensation for the damages and losses caused by the government's violence.[75] In general, even though the events of 2007–08 were continuously recalled with a mixture of indignation and pride, disillusion about the present was by far the prevalent emotion. The new ruling party, TMC, had neither addressed the political, social, and developmental contradictions inherited from the previous regime nor lived up to its promise of bringing about "fair" industrialisation. With stagnant production and an overall unplanned and underdeveloped infrastructure for the storage, preservation, and transport of agricultural produce, farmers could hardly face rising costs while their productivity

constantly decreased due to land fragmentation and soil exhaustion. As the younger generations (in particular) looked for different ways to ensure their livelihoods, the two most common options were becoming mobile or starting a small manufacturing unit. Not surprisingly, the middle/lower income class neighbourhoods of Singur "shahar,"—i.e., the core area of the settlement, but also parts of Singur "gram," the more agricultural areas—resounded with hundreds of electric looms and textile workshops like those I had become familiar with in Nandigram.

During my mapping exercises on foot, I observed an unmistakable ex-centric effect in and around Singur, with all current building activities—around houses mostly combining residential and commercial functions—gravitating around the main roads, departing from and "bypassing" both the town's old core with its dilapidated houses inhabited by entrenched local families and the newer residential quarters. [Fig. 15] The settlement illustrated the circumstances forging what Kartik had called gramer shahar—stagnation, abandonment, precarity, and people's initiatives, translating into everyday patterns and physical spaces that diversify *and* mix "rural" and "urban" features until these very concepts are completely transformed. At the same time, Singur featured a range of comparatively large construction endeavours. The middle-class neighbourhood of Nabapalli ("New Quarter"), for example, was developed 30 to 35 years ago by a "housing society," which was founded by state employees who commuted daily to Kolkata. Green Park, an alien-looking block of four-storey apartment buildings, was instead a developer's project built in anticipation of the Tata car factory. Only a few of its flats were inhabited, and I learnt that these were majorly occupied by childless working couples who commuted by car daily to Kolkata or other cities in the district. "Thanks to the Durgapur Expressway,[76] this is not a problem anymore," I learnt from one of them. He was employed in the industrial town of Durgapur, 135 kilometres away. So, ten years after the *andalon* with which they had opposed the state's top-down development plans, in both Nandigram and Singur, I found people entertaining or exploring livelihood strategies that accepted the state's incapability of promoting any "development" whatsoever. These strategies remarkably foregrounded movement.[77] In Nandigram, a majority had either opted for circular migration (mainly) to South India or started small enterprises that benefitted from the new mobility infrastructures. In well-connected Singur, the prevalent strategy was daily commuting.

HORIZONS FOR SPATIAL PRODUCTION AND RESEARCH BEYOND "THE URBAN"

In the context of this book, the case of West Bengal may be read as an ordinary example of decolonisation and development boosting a patchwork territorialisation under circumstances of dense population, low industrialisation, economic stagnation, and relatively high connectivity. By "patchwork territorialisation," I mean that the production of territory was constantly co-determined by the state's strategies—often partially implemented, mismanaged, or undermined by false promises, corruption, and interrelated local and global crises—and the inhabitants' responses. This text described two responses to this situation, with the diversification of local production in the form of small textile manufacturers in villages and towns, facilitated by the improved mobility and communication infrastructures, being one. Migration following a fluctuating demand for labour (farming and non-farming) is the other response. The latter isn't a new response nor one peculiar to West Bengal, but it takes new contours with the growing number of people opting for circular migration and translocal livelihoods, no longer only the rural landless, but thousands of fairly educated men and women from rural and urban areas. This speaks to a transformation of the modalities of the production of space—rural, industrial, urban, *x.*

The hypothesis of translocalisation, which shifts the hypothesis of urbanisation articulated by Lefebvre, cannot address all, but at least some of the multiscalar relationships responsible for the current production of space. It also proves more helpful in approaching a postcolonial context where, as discussed, the idea of rural–industrial–urban transition never really applied. The production of space evolving under circumstances of translocalisation, featuring dispersion and a sort of "vectoralisation" much rather than concentration-extension effects, has specific manifestations on the territory. In West Bengal, I observed built infrastructures that are growing "generic" in Nielsen and Simone's terms and centralities that are dissolving with the proliferation of ex-centric circulations, transactions, and exchanges. The domestic garment manufacturers and textile workshops—which were spreading in the state at the time of fieldwork—represent forms of production based on ways of organising non-corporate capital that, in the current historical moment, are producing an *other* social space that is non-urban, reliant on movement, and highly improvisational.[78] In whole economies, the scope of accumulation that is con*centr*ation has long become minimal. Parallel to, and caused by, unseen levels of enrichment of a very few people in very few places, the prospect or actual occurrence of expulsion is an everyday reality for the sheer majority and being on the move becomes a matter of survival. Yet the movement I am talking about, even though it is marked by indeterminacy and not always voluntary (on the contrary, often strictly necessary, compelled, or forced by utter poverty and dearth), relates to choices. People make decisions daily through down-to-earth appraisals of options, awareness of the pros and cons, and practical knowledge of their economic, social, and ecological environment. These choices, coming with specificities and opacities, render movement a horizon of humble, even battered, day-to-day possibilities, a promise of unexpected events, even reversals, of history as usual.

What are the requirements for an analysis of the translocalised production of space? The approaches vary. In previous research, I chose to follow people-on-the-move, whereas, during the fieldwork that backs up this chapter, I mapped the traces drawn by movement in the territory itself.[79] These were visible in the daily commuting of many inhabitants; in the experiences of temporary, circular, and permanent migration I was told about in every locality I visited; in the new and original socio-economic experiments through which small manufacturers accessed supply chains at national or even global scales; in the translocal influences of political struggle across India, and beyond. A particular mention should be made of the remittances sent by people-on-the-move from other Indian states or abroad, part of which was used to build new houses and businesses. Remittances represent an "abstract" but essential factor for the ongoing transformations of the environment in that they catalyse the kancha–paka interplay in the territory, the ex-centric growth of settlements, and the many opaque activities that ensure subsistence in "census towns." The "zoom-ins" into settlements allowed me to compile a tentative list of gramer shahar qualities. These include temporariness, or the temporal variability of people's presence and occupancy, linked to their increased movement; ex-centricity of physical and social developments; an environment whose paka and kancha elements mirror overlapping cycles of investment, abandonment, and re-inhabitation; and socio-economic precarity against the backdrop of deepening environmental exhaustion.

The hypothesis of translocalisation also responds to the desire for solidarity and collective organising in circumstances where "the urban" is not able to provide a concrete utopia and where top-down nationalist and classist/casteist versions of centralised power are experiencing a revival. Devastating structures of exploitation and deepening environmental exhaustion were not the only worrying circumstances I encountered during my fieldwork. In West Bengal and India-wide, widespread disenchantment and precarity have given a boost to right-wing ideology; hate speeches against activists, journalists, researchers,

Fig. 17

F. 17 When kancha–paka make up ex-centric territories.

and crimes against minorities in the name of a skewed image of the nation are on the rise. The stories told to me over the past years by locals in many places across India and Bangladesh, those I heard in Singur and Nandigram in 2018, and scholarly and media discussions about the struggles that started there, demonstrate that the mobility and exchange of inhabitants across "urban" and "rural" territories enabled resistance and activated translocal solidarity. In other words, despite the risk of alienation that is permanently linked to it, movement (as "being on the move") can facilitate translocal solidarity and information.[80] Migrant labourers, "guest workers," young people studying abroad, diasporic communities, and those derogatorily called "economic migrants" all transpose and refract struggles happening elsewhere, making them at least shareable and, in the best cases, shared.[81]

AN ECOLOGICALLY GROUNDED MORE-THAN-HUMAN COHABITATION AS LEVEL "M"

My story started with one train conversation and will close with another. This one has stuck with me since its occurrence in the "ladies' compartment" of a local train to Haora.[82] I had gotten aboard in Singur when the sunset was just starting to colour the deep greens of the fields and silvers of the waterbodies in soft reds. I held myself on one of the compartment's doors, open as usual, my attention oscillating between the landscape and my co-travellers. There were some two hundred of us, teachers, schoolgirls, domestic workers, vegetable sellers, mothers with infants, and apathetic children, and I could tell that everyone (apart from me) commuted to Singur regularly. Some would go there for studies or tuition, others for work or family visits; they would get off within two or three stations in Diara, Seoraphuli, and Serampur. Among them was a student of Singur's girls' public school, currently in class 9, as her uniform revealed. Partly to distract myself from tiredness and heat and partly to not leave her curious gaze unreciprocated, I entered into a conversation. We exchanged the usual information, then looking outside, I interposed: "I like this landscape of West Bengal so much!"

Her answer arrived like a cold shower: "In a few years, all these paddy fields will be covered with buildings." She spoke with no sentimentality, yet her jolly face had suddenly turned serious with a bitter shadow. Her words echoed something that the much older Kartik used to tell me about the crises confronting the region, from land fragmentation to ecological exhaustion, in a similar tone. As with him, I didn't know how to reply. Nevertheless, this interaction led me to articulate an urgent question: How is it possible to document, describe, and help circulate possibilities, and *other* viable approaches, to human and human-non-human cohabitation in times of ecological crisis?[83] My attempt to answer interweaves feminist philosopher Judith Butler's reflection on recent anti-capitalist movements and Anna Tsing's anthropological meditations on salvage accumulation and indeterminacy. Butler has long been concerned with the divides constructed by patriarchy, capitalism, and universalism along the lines of gender, race, class, nationality, city-countryside, colonial-decolonial (or global North-global South), and how these fragment the resistance of the oppressed. She has suggested that the problem could be overcome by calling into being an assembly or a tactically expandable time-space of cohabitation founded on the recognition of a deeper commonality—the differential distribution of precarity caused by capitalism.[84] The assembly she considered is the Occupy Movement, which in 2011 spread from New York to many other cities worldwide and, for Butler, was a re-elaboration and continuation of other struggles, like those sparked in 2010 in countries in North Africa and West Asia.

The necessity for human beings to stick together and cohabit on this planet, Butler argues, is "generalised" when owed to their *precariousness* (or vulnerability) but "unchosen"

when it links to *precarity,* which is produced: "Our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organisation of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions."[85] In such an understanding of precarity and its necessary consequence—cohabitation in a connected world—lies a contemporary, concrete utopia of the grounded, humble type I invoked above. An assembly's spatial and, above all, temporal expansion is tactical. After all, people occupy a square, a neighbourhood, a building, agricultural land, etc., to achieve certain demands for periods of time, which vary (also according to a state's levels of tolerance or oppression). As opposed to it, the time-space of cohabitation is durational; it evolves in everyday life. What logics and practices sustain such a cohabitation when each day is increasingly determined by the need to be on the move or to support others' mobilities?

Anna Tsing's work is based on her studies of the assemblages developed by expelled groups (in the specific cases of South East Asian migrants and Vietnam War veterans) in which the individual and collective options are curtailed, and the state support *and* control infrastructures are decreased, whether by neoliberal capitalism and austerity measures or by colonialism and its aftermaths. She shows that as a form of living and resisting, cohabitation is not limited by but benefits from translocality and indeterminacy.[86] In and through cohabitations that are temporary and tactical, chosen out of necessity and collectively devised in everyday life—different people are already developing practices fit for times of heightened mobility and multiple crises. I believe it is a task for contemporary research to study extant cohabitation practices and explicitly facilitate them through adequate solutions in architecture, urban planning, and mobility studies.

In both Butler's and Tsing's work, cohabitation correlates with an ethical commitment "to an equal right to inhabit the earth" for humans and non-humans.[87] This highlights an obligation to preserve the plurality of the world's population and, read against the grain of Lefebvre's "right to (inhabit) the city," reminds us that it is not up to humans to "save" other species (the case has instead been the contrary so far), but for humans to endorse other species' rights to cohabiting a planet that is damaged, yet nonetheless worth living on.[88] My proposal is hence to further theorise cohabitation, updating Lefebvre's notion of "inhabitation" with feminist and ecological contributions. Inhabiting, according to his theorisation, is a practice of appropriation on Level "P" and, as such, entails an emancipatory potential that human beings may always upscale into appropriation on Level "G." The city plays a particular role there and Lefebvre projects it as the mediating Level "M," on which people exercise their right to self-determination, e.g., by demanding public amenities or opposing elitist urban development projects or by demonstrating and occupying streets and squares. The problem with this notion is that it does not sufficiently consider two aspects. It ignores the exclusion and oppression (sometimes utter violence) experienced worldwide by women, gays, non-heteronormative households, people of colour, indigenous peoples, and all other groups identified as "minorities." Nor does it pay enough attention to the consequences of humans' aggressive, extractivist attitude towards non-humans and the environment in general.[89] Due to this, "appropriation" remains an expansive, indeed expansionistic, approach (albeit counter-hegemonic), unavailable for too many. Rechannelling the efforts into cohabiting would foreground practices of care and paying attention in temporary, improvised, collective habitations, which are more widely available. Here lies the potential for emancipation from the hegemonic, white, male, and anthropocentric understandings, which for centuries have produced divisions in social space, gender relations, and the environment by dividing life into categories of less and more "worthwhile."

The inseparability of human and non-human cohabitation is relevant for the *problématique* of this chapter concerning the scope of a concrete utopia vis-à-vis the contemporary

phenomena of territorialisation and operationalisation of extended territories. From the stories of Nandigram's and Singur's struggles, I learnt that resistance and mediation under the contemporary circumstances of translocalisation take different forms from those projected in earlier times. People-on-the-move can and do participate in such struggles, in spite of or with their being-on-the-move (last but not least, by sending extra money to those mobilised in the struggle). It is also important to remark that they can assemble at many venues while on the move, including social media, the networks of diasporas, and so on. This is why I do not believe that the role of the "mediating level" can be assigned to "the city." This potential is common to all places where humans and non-humans cohabit, debate, negotiate, and stand up in solidarity, be it against unjust land acquisition and extractivist plans or privatisations and gentrification. This resonates with the ideas of political scientist Stefan Kipfer, reporting on the fight against the extractivism of indigenous people in the country known as Canada. Kipfer refused to reduce this dynamic to a "new model of urbanisation" since "political orientations among Indigenous groups involved in pipeline politics vary, [and] few would argue that they can be dissociated from issues of Indigenous self-determination and land control."[90] The struggle for self-determination goes hand in hand with the reclamation of territorial understandings and practices, which are based on non-Western cosmologies. The land is not regarded as an asset to commodify, as per capitalist tradition, or to "protect" as per the conservationist anthropocentric ecology en vogue today—but common ground to cohabit together, humans and other-than-humans. In this spirit, the utopia needed today is humble, situated, grounded, anti-colonial, and feminist; it lies within decentralised but interlinked and reciprocally informing assemblies of inhabitants, and, vis-à-vis the deep ecological damage faced by territories worldwide, it consists of the task to collectively reconfigure the notions and practices of cohabitation across the planet.

ENDNOTES

1 In the local language, Bengali, *shahar* means "city" and *gram* means "village."
2 Roy, "What Is Urban About Critical Urban Theory?" 10.
3 The mosquito transmitting dengue fever proliferates where water is stagnant.
4 The Ganges River, holy to the Hindus, of which the Hugli River is one of many distributaries.
5 Thought figures, *Denkbilder* in German, are "montages" of images in the tradition of Walter Benjamin; for further discussion, see Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*.
6 An online vocabulary for Bengali–English reads "পাকা: 1 Ripe, grown or mature (fruit squeezing, intelligence); 2 White (hair); 3 Full mass (boiled) … strong (ripe bamboo); … 5 Skilful, accomplished (ripe artisan, ripe thief); … 7 Perfect, pure (ripe gold); 9 Permanent, durable; … 11 Burnt (fire brick) in the fire or in the heat of the sun; … 13 Paved, stacked with stone bricks, etc.; 14 Irreversible, unsteady (tired); 15 Edited (legal documents) … the words that do not alter or move."
7 "কাঁচা: 1 Raw, unfavourable (raw fruit); 2 Crushed, imperfect (raw meat); 3 Raw (raw bricks); 4 Mud (raw house, mud road); 5 Soft, green (raw grass); 6 Young; 7 Immature (raw intelligence); 8 Improperly done (raw text, raw work); … 10 Temporary, may vary (raw receipts, raw words); … 13 Amish, pure (raw gold); … 17 Available; … 19 Agricultural or unprotected, under normal conditions (raw material) … on the way to the path of fulfilment."
8 On this temporal "variability" of Indian spaces, see Mehrotra and Vera, *Kumbh Mela*.
9 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*.
10 For a critique of this text that includes feminist and decolonial arguments, see Brenner and Schmid, "Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban"; Buckley and Strauss, "With, Against and Beyond Lefebvre."
11 Santos, *Another Knowledge Is Possible*.
12 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."
13 Lefebvre, *The Explosion*.
14 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; for further discussion on the specific impact of capitalism in India, see Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted*.

15 Its extreme compatibility with Western epistemologies could explain why, 50 years on, the horizon of urbanisation is deemed irrevocable by hegemonic agencies like the World Bank, IMF, UN, etc., which draw useful arguments from it in favour of their developmentalist programmes.

16 Buckley and Strauss, "With, Against and Beyond Lefebvre"; Kipfer and Goonewardena, "Urban Marxism and the Post-colonial Question."

17 Bertuzzo, "During the Urban Revolution."

18 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; for further discussion on this notion of production of space, see Bertuzzo, *Fragmented Dhaka.*

19 "In itself mediation, the city was the place, the product of mediations"; see Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," 107.

20 Bertuzzo, *Archipelagos.*

21 Sheller and Urry, "New Mobilities Paradigm"; Brickell and Datta, *Translocal Geographies. Spaces, Places, Connections*; Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*; Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Urbanization.*

22 Deshingkar and Farrington, *Circular Migration in India.*

23 Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta;* Echanove and Srivastava, "Mumbai's Circulatory Urbanism"; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India"; for a pertinent study on Kolkata and West Bengal, see Mondal and Samanta, *Mobilities in India.*

24 Gururani and Kennedy, "The Co-production of Space, Politics and Subjectivities in India's Urban Peripheries."

25 For further discussion on regional developments that (like those that have concerned me in West Bengal) cannot be ascribed to state-led mega-projects and/or the effects of globalisation via the concept of "subaltern urbanisation" see Denis, Mukhopadhyay, and Zérah, "Subaltern Urbanisation in India."

26 Pradhan, *Unacknowledged Urbanisation.* Before the coronavirus pandemic, scholars projected that "because of the huge increase of agricultural labourers … many new census towns might be reclassified as villages for the next census in 2021"; Guin and Das, "New Census Towns in West Bengal," 68. Since many migrant labourers have left the cities and stayed back in their localities since the pandemic, the prediction might have been matched.

27 Kundu, "Politics and Economics of Urban Growth." Demographer Amitabh Kundu is among the few to ask this question and come to my same conclusion.

28 Denis and Zérah, *Subaltern Urbanisation in India.*

29 Sassen, *Expulsions.*

30 Latour, *Reassembling the Social.*

31 "Ad hoc investments" would be a fifth feature, but here I shall remand to Bear, *Navigating Austerity.*

32 A region that broadly corresponds to today's Bangladesh, West Bengal, and parts of Assam.

33 Sharma, "The Origins of Feudalism in India."

34 Bandyopadhyay, *Land and All That.*

35 As Debjani Bhattacharyya's brilliant study points out, this stabilisation was from the very outset aimed at "propertising" the land. See Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta.*

36 The East India Company settled in Calcutta in 1696 and the city acted as capital of the British Raj from 1858 to 1911. Like other Indian cities, "Calcutta" was renamed "Kolkata" in 2003; in this chapter, I use this name when referring to events that occurred before that year. For other localities, I adopted the spellings used in the state's records.

37 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts.*

38 The basic unit of panchayati raj is the *gram panchayat* or village assembly, which unifies a varying number of village councils composed by elected councillors.

39 Shiva, et al., *Seeds of Suicide.*

40 Roy, *Rural Politics in India.*

41 Chatterji, *Ethnicity, Migration and the Urban Landscape of Kolkata.*

42 Rogaly, et al., *Sonar Bangla?*

43 Term used to classify ethnic tribal groups living all over South Asia.

44 Kennedy, *The Politics of Economic Restructuring in India*; Shah, et al., *Ground Down by Growth.*

45 A case in point is the departure of multinational companies, especially in the car industry sector, from Tamil Nadu—a state that, differently from West Bengal, has consistently promoted industrialisation—during the 2007–2008 crisis. For further discussion, see Homm, *Global Players – Local Struggles.*

46 Chatterjee, "Democracy and Economic Transformation in India"; Roy, "Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities."

47 Breman, *Footloose Labour.*

48 Deshingkar and Farrington, *Circular Migration and Multi Locational Livelihoods.*

49 Major religious celebrations for the Hindu and Muslim communities.

50 Bertuzzo, "The Changing Temporalities and Ecologies of House Production."

51 Bagchi, "Planning for Metropolitan Development."

52 Nielsen and Simone, "The Generic City. Examples from Jakarta, Indonesia, and Maputo, Mozambique," 138.

53 Thin scarf that most women wear over the *shalwar kameez* or *kurta* (a longish shirt).

54 Jessore is in Bangladesh.

55 Members of the local (municipal) government.

56 A longer discussion would concern the role of digitalisation of work in "dissolving" centrality.

57 Glissant, *Poetics of Relations.*

58 Benjamin, "Occupancy Urbanism."

59 Storerooms for agricultural produce or commercial goods.

60 IMSE, *Nandigram says NO to Neo-Liberalisation*; Sarkar and Chowdhury, "The Meaning of Nandigram."

61 In India's *panchayati raj* self-administration structure, variable numbers of *gram panchayats* form so-called community development blocks, shortened into CDBs, which are managed by community block development officers, CBOs.

62 On the not always smooth intersection of administrative boundary setting and inhabitants' actions in support of, or against, urban status, see Glover, "Living in a Category."

63 This ought to account for the demographic situation, as approximately 65% of India's population lives in areas denominated as rural, but, of course, it is also meant to contain migration to the big cities.

64 Ashis Nandy's analysis in *An Ambiguous Journey to the City* is still fitting, whereby in more recent years, the traditionally complex process of cultural transformation in India's multi-language, multi-religious, multi-ethnic context has been affected by the strengthening of political discourses with conservative (Hindu) nationalist tendencies. See Nandy, *Regimes of Narcissism, Regimes of Despair.*

65 Saith, *The Rural Non-farm Economy*.

66 Processes that "create the conditions under which individuals might appropriate their own surplus labor (rather than having it appropriated within capitalist firms) and at the same time enjoy a viable standard of living and decent working conditions. They also *[could]* promote noncapitalist commodity production and, more importantly, the existence of noncapitalist class processes as positive and desirable alternatives to capitalist employment and exploitation." See Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism*, 170.

67 "Capitalocentrism is a dominant economic discourse that distributes positive value to those activities associated with capitalist economic activity however defined, and assigns lesser value to all other processes of producing and distributing goods and services by identifying them in relation to capitalism as the same as, the opposite of, a complement to, or contained within." See Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 56. On the economistic fallacy, Adaman and Madra, "Theorizing the 'Third Sphere'".

68 High living costs and bad living standards are the reasons for that. For further discussion, see Kundu and Ray Saraswati, "Migration and Exclusionary Urbanisation."

69 Veltz, *Mondialisation, villes et territories*. Christian Schmid is among those who used Veltz's analysis in support of theories of urbanisation. Schmid, "Specificity and Urbanization: A Theoretical Outlook."

70 Ibid, 220.

71 Bhattacharyya, "Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime?"

72 On the consequences of enclosure from a gender perspective, see Federici, *Caliban and the Witch;* and Shiva, *Staying Alive*.

73 A change of political leadership in West Bengal, but also a change of policy through reforms both in West Bengal and the national level. For further discussion, see Roy, *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal*.

74 Roy, *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal*, 253.

75 Guha, "Have We Learnt from Singur?"

76 The Durgapur Express is officially registered as NH 19.

77 Dey, "The Suburban Railway Network of Kolkata."

78 Simone, *Improvised Lives*.

79 Apart from multi-sited research, the advantages of comparisons between cities, regions, cases—understood not as "global" or "planetary," but as "ordinary" in Jennifer Robinson's terms—are obvious. For further discussion, see Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

80 Brazilian economist Roberto Luís Monte-Mór advanced a similar argument within his framework of (extended) urbanisation and "the urban." See Amaral and Monte Mór, *Uma outra mobilidade*.

81 The role played by media in fostering translocal resistance is not to be underscored, and consists, again, in circulating images and information.

82 On the local trains of the Indian Railways, a few compartments are reserved for unaccompanied female passengers.

83 This crisis, as recognised by writer Amitav Ghosh, also points to a deep crisis of the imagination. For further discussion, see Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.

84 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

85 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 119.

86 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

87 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 114. In her own understanding, this commitment articulates an ecological supplement to solely anthropocentric views of cohabitation.

88 Tsing, et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.

89 Several authors in the emerging field of urban political ecology have highlighted the unequal distribution of environmental damage. For further discussion, see Swyngedouw and Kaika, "Urban Political Ecology."

90 Kipfer, "Pushing the Limits of Urban Research."

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F. 5 British Library (Public Domain); https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/survey-of-the-country-on-the-eastern-bank-of-the-hughly

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