

Locating Activist Spaces: The Neighbourhood as a Source and Site of Urban Activism in 1970s Calcutta

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Henrike Donner

London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

This article analyses the meaning of urban neighbourhoods for the emergence of Maoist activism in 1970s Calcutta. Through ethnography the article highlights the way recruitment, strategies and the legacy of the movement were located in the experience and politics of the urban neighbourhood. As a social formation, the neighbourhood shaped the relationships that made Maoist subjectivities feasible and provided the space for coalitions and cooperation across a wider spectrum than the label of a student movement acknowledges. The neighbourhood appears here as an emergent site for Maoist epistemologies, which depended on this space and its everyday practices, intimate social relations as well as the experience of the local state in the locality.

Keywords

activism, India, Maoists, neighbourhood, urban

Introduction

In spite of the focus of much recent research on contemporary urban South Asia, and an increasing interest in social movements on the subcontinent, the two bodies of literature and the questions they raise are rarely thought together. Moreover, contemporary ‘progressive urban movements’ remain largely unanalysed, unless they take the form of globally recognizable labour politics.

This article represents an attempt to think activism and urbanism in contemporary South Asia together through the ethnography of Maoist activism in 1970s Calcutta, and I will zoom in on a specific set of relationships, social and material, political and economical, which shaped this movement, namely the urban neighbourhood.¹

Corresponding author:

Henrike Donner, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: f.h.donner@lse.ac.uk

The common understanding of how these urbane forms work in Calcutta as elsewhere in South Asia centres around the rather simplistic notion that patron–client relationships formed around the figure of the *dada* (elder brother), offering protection in exchange for votes and access to lucrative rackets, so that the neighbourhood represents the informal power relations that support official party politics on the ground. But such a top–down model does not hold much explanatory power, partly because patron–client relationships exist in poor neighbourhoods all over the world, which may nevertheless be organized differently, and more importantly because not all neighbourhoods in Calcutta are homogeneous in terms of class, and thus not all residents would be exposed to the ongoing extraction of surplus in the same way. With reference to current transformations of the city Partha Chatterjee asserts that the politics of Calcutta neighbourhoods were more complicated, as networks often work across class boundaries, which allowed access to the local state and increased the chances of successful organization amongst the disadvantaged (Chatterjee, 2004). Thus he suggests that earlier, complex networks of patrons and clients protected the interests of the urban poor, and maintains that middle-class citizens were as important to successful contestations of state practices as slum dwellers.

In this sense, the political possibility of the neighbourhood (*para*) lay in the inevitability of proximity and neighbourhoods in Calcutta used to be spaces where on the one hand the constraints and limitations of effective modernization and development materialized for all of Calcutta's citizens, whilst they were also the site through which, in the past at least, 'an active and participatory sense of community was created and nurtured' (Chatterjee, 2004: 132). This notion of a political community, and the ambiguity implied, is of course the subject of literature on neighbourhoods and the role of spatial relations in contentious urban politics more generally, exemplified for example in Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's work on community, class and the 'culture' of colonial Bombay's neighbourhoods emerging in the context of migration, racial and labour politics, where such informal localities became a main site for the negotiation of resources and the formation of collective identities (Chandavarkar, 2004). Chandavarkar pays particular attention to struggles over space and resources in the making of working class neighbourhoods, a contestation still recognizable in more contemporary accounts of Calcutta working class *paras* (see Fernandes, 1997).

Until very recently, the neighbourhood constituted one of the main arenas in the life of Calcuttans, as it gradually became a centre of social relations, a site of politics and an important arena in which the state manifested itself. But rather than representing stable units, the contested character of the neighbourhood is often evidenced in narratives that oppose the interests of governance to the interests of the local community. And in the specific politics of the neighbourhood struggles over space and resources are not necessarily conceived in terms of rights. Campaigns aimed at public goods (healthcare; environment), whether initiated by the state or by activists, take on a material form, as the locality becomes a dwelling place.

In social science discourse, including the literature on social movements, the neighbourhood is therefore often presented as a site where larger national or transnational issues can be scaled down across regions and countries, a site where abstract campaigns 'receive a human face' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). But in literature that focuses explicitly

on urban environments, the neighbourhood is also characterized as an ambivalent site, an in-between space that is part public sphere, part site of supportive and intimate, long-term relationships, a space of contestation, surveillance and competition (for India see De Neve and Donner, 2006). Thus, while authors like Jacob (1994) emphasize the fact that neighbourhoods are not public in the modernist sense of anonymous and floating, Sennett insists that the territorial aspects of the close social networks involved make neighbourhoods intensely political and interconnected sites and isolated spaces at the same time (Sennett, 1974). Both of these tendencies shape politics as described by Chatterjee, who asserts that neighbourhoods are sites of civil society and associational life, while politics centred around the state are experienced here as effects, but crucially are not primarily located in this very same domain.

However, as my material shows, in the lives of political movements both levels are closely intertwined and contestations of the state–citizen relationship make urban neighbourhoods more complex sources of subjectivities shaped by political struggles than the anthropological emphasis on localities as sites of place-making suggests.

In the course of this article it will become clear that the official accounts radical urban politics in the 1970s, and more specifically, the history of urban politics and protest in Calcutta, has so far neglected the multiplicity of sources, practices and legacies of the movement. Labelled a middle-class student movement, the activist subjectivities that carried the first wave of Maoism in South Asia are routinely cast as insular and vanguard, and the urban roots of the Naxalite movement are often cited solely as sources of misrecognition. Refusal to recognize that urban struggles could only ever be conceived as labour struggles is one of the main criticisms former activists and analysts hold responsible for the failure of the movement to harness political power, and later attempts to engage in the mobilization of ‘peasants’ was seen as further proof of misinterpretations stemming from the urban, middle-class backgrounds most activists shared.

In this article I challenge such stereotypes through a closer analysis of the sites that produced activists and that were in turn reproduced by activism, in particular the urban neighbourhood, which is highlighted as an important space of contestation in the city that brought about specific kinds of knowledge and coalitions characteristic for social movements and their organization and a key site for Naxalite knowledge production. Thus, the article traces the origins of Maoist epistemology to the urban environment, its structures and the way it shaped not only radical subjectivities but the experience and strategies employed on the ground. Thinking activism and urbanism together is clearly relevant today, as the neoliberal policies implemented through the technologies and structures of urban governance are raising questions of urban space and citizenship once more. The possibility of resistance and the sources and determinants of protest are addressed in this article through narratives of urban activists, who joined the militant Naxalite movement and became Maoist comrades in 1970s Calcutta. Rather than reinterpret the failure of the movement and rewrite its well-documented critique, the article asks two interrelated questions: first, what makes activism in this environment at that moment possible, and more broadly speaking, what role does the neighbourhood play in the shaping of activists, the politics of the movement and its legacy? The research I will present in the remainder of the article is not concerned with the analysis of the

present politics of urban transformations in Calcutta, but questions regarding the politics of protest in the urban environment today are addressed.

That the urban environment produces specific kinds of politics has been reiterated with reference to current transformations of cities worldwide, but these transformations are more often than not analysed from a bird's eye point of view. Current struggles over space are seen as a result of neoliberal policies in the post-liberalization context of the Indian economy, and formal politics are more often than not equated with party politics. As urban governance increasingly favours the interests of newly emerging transnational elites, generally glossed over in terms of the middle-class, this narrative goes, cities become ever more segregated, but resistance to global governance, as Mayer states, focuses increasingly on the local as a site of governance made real and coalitions that are often transnational in character (Mayer, 2007).

With reference to South Asia, social scientists suggest that 'a new urban politics of informality' found here as elsewhere spreads across the subcontinent (Roy and Nezar, 2004), which destroys coalitions and networks that had protected the interests of the urban poor through discourses focusing on promises of the developmentalist state. Often the erosion of these networks and discourses takes the form of party politics, and while all city-dwellers in South Asia compete for scarce resources, including infrastructure, services and land, evictions, relocations and privatization have created new spatial relations that make earlier coalitions unlikely if not impossible.

Where successful protests and resistance will be mounted has become rather unpredictable, but as IT industries and up-market residential areas engulf the Indian cityscape, regularly after protracted lobbying and political contestation, poor populations are spatially marginalized and politically disenfranchised so that they no longer benefit from the extension of the state into the private lives of its citizens. They become more and more distant from effective politics in the city as their neighbourhoods become sites of dislocation and dispossession, spatially and socially removed from everyday formal politics.

With reference to the Indian state of West Bengal, the recent protests surrounding the demarcation of two sites marketed as 'Special Economic Zones', Singur and Nandigram, have shown, contestations around issues of land alienation and the ruthless policies of privatization do occur, but crucially hardly any have shaken the city of Calcutta, where similar processes are at work. Here, struggles over infrastructure, including the built environment, services and access to state-run institutions and employment have not brought about any forceful opposition that could be compared with the movements emerging around the Nandigram and Singur agitations. Thus, the evictions of hawkers from the city's main crossings, the long-drawn-out process by which the leather industry was removed from central Calcutta and the eviction of squatters occupying public land, which preceded the large-scale acquisition of land in the districts to make room for national and international investment, did not attract the same kind of attention. And while in all cases victims organized and formalized their protests, it transpired that the ever-growing number of middle-class residents welcomed the attempts of the municipality and the state government to improve their lives by removing polluting industries, the poor and their livelihoods now deemed 'illegal'. As struggles over transport links, private-public partnerships, building projects and the expansion of access to educational institutions and healthcare proliferate in these new forms, old faultlines of political contestation come to the surface.

Rather than assuming that protests against neoliberal policies take place on a continuum, whereby urban governance implements and locals react, the strategies employed by the state and the municipality do no doubt create very different kinds of politics and protest in different places. As Aiwa Ong pointed out for urban China, zoning technologies and technocratic expertise create differentiated but also integrated urban space through talk of rights and citizenship (Ong, 2006). Thus, in order to understand the shifts in urban politics one has to avoid the widespread nostalgia for the earlier phase of urbanisation, in which the resources of the state were supposedly accessible to citizens in the form of local organizations, and one needs to analyse the dialectics of urban space and politics during the pre-liberalization phase instead. So what has made successful protest possible in the past?

Moving beyond Ong's generalized assertion that the new regime creates space through reinterpretations of citizenship, Ananya Roy asserts that urban politics in much of the non-western world is today marked by a rigid distinction between a formal politics for the affluent middle-classes, backed by national and international frameworks for urban governance, and an informal politics for the have-nots (Roy, 2004).

However, to someone who has worked in and on urban Calcutta throughout the post-liberalization period, an approach which links the spaces of poverty and deprivation only with electoral politics engaging legitimate citizens through the workings of government, or excludes illegitimate marginalized communities, appears all too neat and linear. A closer look at urban politics highlights the complexity of political practices which are evident across space, but which crucially also sit in places, and suggests that the urban neighbourhood presents a site where overlapping regimes like those of the state and flexible coalitions between different interest groups emerge, which in turn shape subjectivities through the making and unmaking of a politics of the street.

The Work of the Urban

The struggles over land, livelihoods and resources experienced in West Bengal today link earlier forms of politics to the project of a modern city that emerged in the colonial context. Indexing this linkages and their transformation, Partha Chatterjee asks in a seminal paper: 'Is Calcutta becoming bourgeois at last?'² Like Roy, Chatterjee flags the changing spectre of state violence directed at those living and working in the interstices of the 'legitimate' city. But unlike Roy or Ong, he situates his analysis of local politics in the specificity of an urban environment marked by the democratization of public space under the Left Front government. Thus, it is significant that, while conflict over resources and space prevailed earlier on a regular basis, routine evictions, which have been common in other South Asian cities, rarely occurred in pre-liberalization Calcutta, and authorities were regularly pressurized to legalize squatter settlements. Often explained solely as a deliberate strategy employed by the ruling Left Front to garner electoral support in a hostile urban environment (see Roy, 2002), it is through everyday struggles for infrastructure rights that dwelling places became part of neighbourhoods.³ Thus, Chatterjee argues with reference to the transformation of urban politics in Communist-governed West Bengal, that events like, the removal of hawkers from main thoroughfares during the infamous 'Operation Sunshine' in 1996 and the eviction of squatters from public land in an affluent part of south Calcutta in 2003 clearly mark a transformation of

state–citizen relations, He attributes these new politics to shifts in class relations embodied in local politics. Significantly, there was little support for the evicted *bustee* (slum) dwellers from liberal media and independent left activists, and the squatters soon realized that established channels to garner support for relocation and compensation had become dysfunctional (Chatterjee, 2004: 53). Like Roy, Chatterjee is interested in what made this blatant attack of a Left-Front-run government on its citizens feasible, and raises questions about political participation and community in relation to the current wave of urban restructuring more generally. However, at no point does he assume the existence of a modernist, pre-liberalization urban space of redistributive politics which is gradually disappearing. Rather, his analysis foregrounds the complexity of spatial relations in the city, which are articulated in the specific form of class relationships in the locality. Here, it seems, party politics, class relations and protest are formative for sites of contestation, which in the urban environment take the form of the neighbourhood, its inclusions, exclusions and coalitions, short-lived and extended solidarities and interests, and long-term place-making strategies, all of which provide the grounds for effective, but often surprising forms of protest and negotiation.

My Calcutta interlocutors, the male middle-class activists who took part in the Maoist movement often referred to as ‘Naxalite movement, would certainly agree that, as Berman (1982) suggested, urban life has been vital in shaping visions of a better world and the attending imagery. Implicit in his and their accounts is the assumption that a bourgeois modernity would be desired and would emerge, as ‘traditional’ patterns and associations, affective ties and ‘backwards’ institutions, especially caste and gender discrimination, were left behind. However, in the view of these middle-class men, while the colonial city was on the way up, the post-colonial city for a long time did represent this desire, but fell short in terms of the fulfilment of such modernist visions. In this version of the ‘idea of India’ (Khilnani 1997), modernity gets unstuck in a narrative within which partition and independence reversed the processes that brought the middle-class within the orbit of utopian urban imageries, and while the post-independence period saw Delhi and Bombay flourish in the new nation, Calcutta lost most of its lustre as cosmopolitan communities left, investment fled and thousands of refugees flocked into the city.

Today, this critique is mostly read in terms of a middle-class discourse on consumerism and privatization, but an earlier argument lingers underneath, which points beyond the desire for modern amenities and status symbols embedded in narratives of such urbanity. This more fundamental criticism articulates the tension between the vision of a modern, rational, bourgeois city-as-ought-to-be, and the actual experience of life in Calcutta.

These two versions of the city also play a role in accounts of the first Naxalite movement of which my informants were part, which is commonly represented as a failed attempt by city-born-and-bred activists to fulfil their political goals and ambitions because they misunderstood where militant activism had to be located in modern nation states (see, for instance, Dasgupta, 1974; Ray, 1988). The cliché of the naïve student, misguided by the much older leader, who attempted the mobilization of peasants and failed encompasses much of the debate and dialectics of a movement largely dominated by middle-class men.⁴ This is reflected in the obsessive debates about the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, at the time common amongst activists worldwide. However, how to make activists from students was a task that loomed large in internal

debates among Maoists at the time. It is of course the case that with increased state repression a large number of comrades moved to the countryside, partly to escape prosecution and almost certain death at the hands of the police and army, but also to engage in the mobilization of peasants, whom they saw as the most important force in Indian politics. The reasoning behind this move towards the peasantry was at the time based on the much debated assumption that India remained an agrarian society and that the revolutionary subject was shaped by class relations within a supposedly 'feudal system' prevailing in rural areas.

All these criticisms have been well rehearsed and are not specific to the Indian context but emerged in the course of wider debates about the character of social movements, especially in largely agrarian societies. However, what have rarely been debated are the urban and middle-class roots of social movements (see Scopcol 1994) and the impact these had on militant politics in places like West Bengal. Thus, in the case of the Naxalite movement, the participation of middle-class cadres and the origin of the movement in Calcutta are usually only interpreted as a foil against which the later mobilization, action and insurgency in the countryside unfolded. Canonized narratives represent the subjectivity of urban cadres, who allegedly misinterpreted the political climate and thus the possibilities for revolutionary politics, as one primary source of defeat, and highlight the Naxalite 'vanguardism' as the main obstacle to institutional links, which would have led to political success.

While there can be no doubt that the activists held a number of problematic assumptions, analytical blind spots and strategic naivety, this reading puts forward a rather orthodox understanding of politics, and by accepting such representations we are in danger on the one hand of missing an opportunity to reinterpret the Naxalite movement, but also of misinterpreting politics in much of the Third World as we subscribe to a birds' eye view on movements, which perpetuates formalized and overgeneralizing accounts of the origins, means and possibilities of resistance.

Frederick Cooper's assertion that during the colonial period there were multiple ways through which different groups 'mobilised and used as well as opposed the institutions of the colonial state and the niches that opened up between new and old structures' (Cooper, 1997: 406) is well taken, and invites us to look for the niches that produce and sustain opposition and resistance, even where these are marked as 'middle-class' and 'urban'.

Neighbourhood as Politics

In the literature on the Naxalite movement much has been made of the fact that the huge number of activists who joined the early phase of the movement were pupils and students from urban middle-class backgrounds. Even more weight has been given to the fact that students were recruited on campus and specific sites, notably the elite Presidency College has gained an almost mythical status in narratives about the Naxal period in Calcutta's history. However, a closer look at narratives by activists about politics in the city, which canonical accounts of the movement often represent as a mere backdrop of later peasant mobilization, highlights the importance of these sites for the movement and its development. It also emphasizes the way the history of the Left represents a foundation of Calcutta's old and new urbanism and the debates that mark current transformations. Such

references to the 'past', which are often hidden behind the loud and imminent concerns of current urban development, play an important role in Calcutta's urban politics. The case of Ashim Chatterjee, former Naxalite student leader and expelled member of the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist),⁵ who ran in the state elections in West Bengal on a Trinamul Congress⁶ ticket in 2006, provides a telling example. At the time the English-language *Telegraph* newspaper reported that residents in the north Calcutta Beliaghata constituency he contested were highly critical of his candidature. Significantly, his political foes were not seriously concerned with his history of serial party-monogamy, but they brought the legacy of the Naxalite movement in Calcutta to bear on these post-millennial elections. Thus, in extremely affect-laden language and with their own Congress-orientated readership in mind, the *Telegraph* journalist suggested that the opposition to Chatterjee's candidature would have to be read not through the lens of his current political affiliations but his moral, and therefore personal, responsibility as well-known former student leader for events that occurred in the 1970s in a locality belonging to this constituency:

In Chatterjee's own constituency of Beliaghata, there are those who have not yet lived down the tragedies that overcame them in the 1970s. One of them is Nishith Bhattacharya, who formed the second central committee of the CPI(ML) with Azizul Haque after Charu Majumdar's original party splintered. Bhattacharya's modest house is opposite the CIT quarters off Beliaghata Main Road. 'In those quarters,' recalls Haque dramatically, 'S.S. Ray's police came and shot seven youths in cold blood. Then the constables tried to wash away the bloodstains but the stains remained. Ashim Chatterjee is now coming in to finish the job, broom in hand. The eyes of the dead and the martyred are watching.' (Dutta, 2006)

As this quotation shows, politics in Calcutta are still imagined through the experience of the Naxalite movement, and its urban roots shaped not only activist subjectivities but also neighbourhood politics. Thus, while, at first sight, urban questions do not seem to loom large in the debates around Maoism in South Asia, a closer look reveals the importance of urban politics in the making of the movement, its experience and legacy.

In Calcutta, the neighbourhood (*para*) is a prime site of everyday practices, and individual as well as group-based identities are routinely described in relation to the locality. The neighbourhood represents an extremely salient part of everyday life, regardless of caste, class, ethnic or religious identity or the relative deprivation or affluence of a *para*. Neighbourhoods are not formally recognized as planned units, but they are social landscapes determined and determining physical environments that cannot be reduced to the networks they entail and the proximity and lack of anonymity that distinguishes them from the urban public sphere as it is represented in the writings of social scientists. Calcutta's *paras* are indexed according to their history, ethnic composition and political affiliation as well as local amenities, facilities, and centrality in relation to other such units.

In conversations, a specific neighbourhood culture is often attributed to the presence of class and communal divisions, which are reproduced through electoral politics and power relations as much as through more mundane spatial practices (see Donner, 2006a), and such neighbourhood cultures are expected to inform social and political lives. In my informants' stories about what made them join the Naxalite movement, younger comrades, that is those who joined as students, represented their

neighbourhoods as important sites of socialization into dominant patriarchal values. These values, which they had first experienced in the family, became linked to wider social relationships through symbolical and material practices, including ritual occasions, exchange relationships, political and economic processes. However, beyond this interest cognitive map of the neighbourhood that emerges through interaction, the neighbourhood is also constituted through the interaction of populations, the environment and the state, which becomes factual in the neighbourhood. Institutions like schools, libraries, transport and sanitation, which link discourses on the nation with the reality of the nation state, as debates about what makes a modern nation, overlap with—often locally articulated—claims of what the state should provide. In the case of these middle-class informants these were often interwoven with narratives of an ideal and global urban modernity, against which the reality of the neighbourhood in Calcutta that shaped their everyday lives was measured.

Most importantly, my informants experienced the difference between the ‘profane’ and the ‘sublime’ state (Hansen 2001) state through spatial relations in the neighbourhood, and my assertion is that the politics of locality contributed to the making of Naxalite activists in different ways.

In order to acknowledge the various factors implied in the making of political society of the 1970s we need to first establish what made for an urban crisis in the 1970s within which the militant Maoist movement formed. Calcutta, more so than other cities in India with the exception of Delhi, and certainly more so than rural West Bengal, was very much marked by the legacy of partition, which had caused the loss of a viable hinterland, and had led to the influx of a massive (Hindu) refugee population from what became East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Joya Chatterji’s work shows how the presence of these displaced populations, their governance and the resettlement politics that were implemented, drove politics in the post-independence city, and produced a degree of uncertainty within the party landscape that led to the crisis-ridden coalition governments in the 1960s (see Chatterji, 2007). In many accounts by informants, as well as the canonical *naxal sahitya* (Naxal literature), the neighbourhoods in which refugees had come to stay emblemized the opposite of the developmentalist drive the newly independent nation state had promised, in fact, their mere existence challenged this vision of successful national integration. Without much in terms of revenue to fall back on, the municipality was struggling to provide even the most basic amenities for most refugee colonies, and soon many residents were actively organizing local interest groups to pressurize the authorities for resources that would make daily life in the settlements easier, but which also came to symbolize progress (Chatterjee, 1992).

In post-independence West Bengal the rise in population and the gradual disinvestment in industries and trade affected all residents, as food prices and fares for buses and trams soared, and shortages of fuel, bread and milk became common. In personal accounts the 1950s and 1960s are depicted as a time of hardship for many middle-class families, as jobs in private firms became rare with the withdrawal and closure of many businesses and industries that had flourished throughout the colonial period. Across the city, street protests flared up on many occasions and political parties organized rallies during which the issues of deindustrialization and rising costs of living were addressed on a regular basis. Violent protest became part and parcel of electoral politics in the city.

In interviews with activists from refugee backgrounds the tension between expectations of a 'modern' life in the big city, and the conditions encountered in the 'refugee colonies' played a decisive role in their political coming of age. These young men experienced Calcutta as an intensely segregated place, in which refugee *bangals*⁷ grew up in 'colonies' at the eastern and southern periphery, whereas the privileges afforded to proper citizens were limited to the established urban neighbourhoods.

The refugee colonies consisted of one- and two-bedroom compounds which were occupied by members of extended families, but often neighbours would also have come from the same castes or villages in East Bengal. While many of these settlements are desirable suburbs today, they were at the time often physically remote, and lacked even the most basic amenities like sewerage and street lighting. This lack of amenities did not only constitute daily hardship, which figured particularly prominently in the lives of women as homemakers, but it produced a sense of cultural isolation, as the term *jungli* (of the forest, wild, uncultured) used to describe many such localities by some interlocutors testifies. It is this sense of isolation that informs the discussion of material conditions in Manas Ray's wonderfully rich paper 'Growing up Refugee', in which he relates how the everyday politics and struggles over resources like water, electricity, land, transport and access to markets shaped a young person's perspective, whose sense of place was intertwined with middle-class pasts and future aspirations shared by all refugees (Ray, 2002). In his *para*, as in other such localities, schooling played a key role in the relationship between communities and the state and the imagination of a possible future for members of all generations. In *para* politics pupils and students had a highly symbolic role to play, in the context of the family their expected contributions very real.

Thus, it is significant that within the lifetime of the political activists I interviewed the somewhat random refugee colonies turned into very close-knit communities, partly through the external pressures that made political action and representation necessary, which became routinized, visible and significant in the neighbourhood itself and in the relationship between the neighbourhood and other sites.

In the case of the refugee colonies the homogeneity of the locality in terms of religious origin, caste and even class allowed the formation of a positive collective identity on the basis of local roots. In this environment the politics of the left, with their rhetoric of redistribution and development, thrived, and representatives of the educated and enlightened middle-class, especially local schoolteachers, acted as mediators between the colony and the outside world.

In the accounts I collected it appears that the world young men and women grew up in the marginal space of the colony was linked with the wider world, here represented as 'Calcutta' the modern city, through politics. And there were many things to campaign for Naxalite activists of the younger generation recount, as the discourse of cultured lifestyles and proper middle-class selves was so intimately related to the provision of material amenities and institutional possibilities, the political coming of age was marked less and less by the nostalgia for the lost home projected by the older generation, but the struggle for recognition and visions of a modernist urbanity circulated at school and experienced by students in the wider city. Many activists, not only those from refugee backgrounds, pointed out that their families engaged in risky strategies to facilitate better educational and occupational opportunities for their sons (and increasingly

daughters), and the neighbourhood became a prime resource in the search for upward mobility.

By the 1960s the refugees had created a rich associational life, which emulated the same institutions that Chatterjee notes were characteristic in established Calcutta *paras*, which circumscribed the world of pupils and students:

There was usually a quite dense network of neighbourhood institutions such as schools, sports clubs, markets, tea shops, libraries, parks, religious gatherings, charitable organizations, and so on ... It was then normal rather than exceptional for middle-class children to go to the neighbourhood school and play in the neighbourhood park; for young men to assemble for *adda* in the neighborhood club or tea shop; for housewives to take out books from the neighbourhood library and buy clothes from the neighbourhood market; for the elderly to converge on a neighbourhood institution to listen to religious discourses and devotional music. (Chatterjee, 2004: 133)

However, in contrast to the established north Calcutta, structural differences between the refugee colony and 'old', more heterogeneous neighbourhoods prevailed. In the latter, the all-important patron–client relationships were established across class up until the 1990s, promoting an emphasis on territorial rather than social boundaries, whereas in the refugee colonies collective claim-making took place on the basis of the 'communal' marker, a shared Hindu upper-caste culture.

Here, the neighbourhood was a very protected space, encounter with the world beyond the narrow confines of the refugee settlement brought a range of novel experiences and tensions into the lives of future activists. On the one hand, 'refugees' were discriminated against, but on the other hand joining a college 'outside' afforded new opportunities, and introduced young men to a much more heterogeneous political environment.

Most activists from north Calcutta were of West Bengali (*ghoti*) origin and, while the trajectories of family and urban neighbourhood were equally crucial, urban politics in this established environment panned out in a rather different manner. This is evident in the cases of three former activists who all came from the same neighbourhood in north Calcutta, a locality dating back to the beginnings of the colonial city, when, according to local lore and caste names, *sari* weavers from the districts around Calcutta settled here. Soon this place grew into the Bengali-dominated, heterogeneous locality it is today, with the characteristic mixture of middle-class houses, schools, clubs, a library, a small market and a sizeable number of residents living in slums.

As common in 'old Calcutta', student activists growing up here experienced the local 'community' in terms of 'difference' rather than homogeneity; and while their accounts testified to a sense of integration into the wider, modern, city, rather than the sense of disjuncture their contemporaries in the refugee colonies expressed, their own *para* was marked by patron–client relationships and often contentious class and communal relations. In this sense conflict in neighbourhoods like these emerged not as the result of critical events and an identity that highlights victimhood present amongst the refugees (Das, 1995), but from the historical conditions of a colonial capital: the spatial segregation along racial lines which gave rise to a 'black town', the introduction of modern governance and facilities, as well as the removal of funding for the city, which preceded partition.

Such neighbourhoods grew near markets, and often centred around clusters of middle-class housing surrounded by slum populations, the institutions of civil society differentiated local populations even further. The political history of such neighbourhoods is intertwined with that of the municipality, as organized caste organizations (*dals*) lobbied for amenities in the imperial context and turned into political parties with the nationalist movement (Mukherjee, 1970). While the Bengali artisan families now in the professions still symbolically dominated official politics, slum landlords and dubious businessmen had become patrons of the local poor, and politicians, mostly of the Congress party, cooperated with these *dadas* (elder brothers) as their fiefdoms also depended on votes. This is rather different from the refugee colonies, which early in the 1950s became recruiting grounds for left-wing parties, and which until very recently constituted bastions of Left Front rule.

In the interviews, activists from north Calcutta would point out these neighbourhood histories and assert that at times, depending on the wider political climate as well as local events, politics became rather violent. The slums figure in their accounts as a source of power through votes and access to labour, sometimes utilized by middle-class residents, but increasingly independent from the vast majority of such households through the ongoing democratization of public space (see Kaviraj, 1997). In the post-independence period these neighbourhoods suffered not only due to disinvestment in the industrial sector and the loss of trading opportunities, but also the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims that occurred sporadically. The decline in industry and commerce Calcutta experienced as a whole hit poor residents, who lost their jobs in manufacturing and local markets, but did also severely diminish employment opportunities for graduates as foreign companies left India and trade and business relocated from away from Calcutta.

In neighbourhoods like these, which dated back to the middle of the 19th century, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) played a major role in shaping the environment and social relations. Founded in 1876, CMC collected taxes with which public works were undertaken in order to make Calcutta into a European city. Drains were dug and tanks were constructed, streets were planned and public buildings were erected on sites acquired for schools, libraries and councillors' offices. Gas, running water and electricity followed, and services like street cleaning and waste removal were expanded to include Calcutta's northern areas, so that such neighbourhoods soon appeared to be privileged and appropriately urbanized, in spite of the prevailing congestion and overcrowding.

By the 1960s Calcutta's infrastructure suffered from serious neglect, and problems with the provision of resources, which often led to widespread political agitation and violence, were very visible in these localities. It was at university that students coming from these *paras* related the ongoing agitations with their own situation, but most emphasized that they had experienced politics first in the form of *para* politics, and thus often as disconnected from broader political discourses and debates within the organizational form of the party.⁸ Instead, politics appeared as a discourse on practical issues, facilities, demands and negotiations that often involved a number of players across caste and class barriers, was male-dominated and conflict-ridden.

Former activists spoke extensively about specific events, for example, a local strike that triggered their involvement with the movement, but more often than not the crisis

associated with local networks, for instance the death of a male neighbour and breadwinner, or the everyday struggles of servants working for middle-class families, as triggers that gave rise to their conscious involvement with 'politics'.

In the mind of these young citizens, all these moments became intertwined with localized disputes over housing, the control of rituals, and access to resources provided by the municipality, so that their views tended to see such 'personal' issues as a lens towards an understanding of wider political conflicts and processes. The urgency of the situation articulated in the accounts of young activists from established neighbourhoods was conveyed as a linear story of the general decline of Calcutta, and symptoms of this were graduate unemployment and the deterioration of infrastructure, disputes over property ownership and the decrease of extended family networks. With demographic change, large properties had become subdivided into small and impractical parcels in north Calcutta middle-class families, and in the refugee colonies with their single-storeyed village-type yards, overcrowding and a lack of modern facilities prevailed as well. In case of the latter constituencies, incomes were generally severely limited and often insecure, which increased the pressure on sons to succeed, an anxiety which in even in formerly relatively stable milieux of established neighbourhoods seemed to become a sign of the times. The educational landscapes they experienced played a major role in intimate relations, but also extended beyond the family to encompass the neighbourhood, and conveyed a sense of collectively debated and imagined futures.

Debates and struggles about amenities, services and maintenance of such features represented an important site of postcolonial discourses on urbanity, modernity and the nation, a space in which elections of councillors and the distribution of resources the mundane dynamics of political contestation. Clearly, the post-independence period was experienced here negatively in the form of decay and lack of services rather than the promised improvement and access, in crass contrast to the rhetoric of the developmentalist state. Thus, while these localities figured as potentially civilizing and civilized spaces, they seemed to retreat 'backwards', a fact that made promises of progress and development appear hollow. A sense of perpetual belatedness that characterizes such uneven development infused the cultural life young men were immersing themselves in, and like their contemporaries from refugee backgrounds the sons and daughters of middle-class families often felt deprived of the older generation had enjoyed.

Activists from north Calcutta do not emphasise the idiom of deprivation in the way those stemming from the refugee colonies placed themselves relation to others in the city, but narrated their own ambitions and fears in relation to a better past that made earlier phases of urban development in Calcutta resemble cities elsewhere, and their political interests were not about establishing rights, materialized in the form of services, and opportunities facilitated through institutions, they were about re-establishing a status quo that confirmed the possibility of modernity in a decaying city.

In both cases the neighbourhood came together for ritual purposes, however in the north large house *pujas* sponsored by dominant clans from a range of castes were common, whereas the *sarbojanin* (everyone's) *puja* celebrated in public places became the preferred form of community worship in the refugee colonies. Influential families also founded football clubs, and donated land and subsidies for libraries, schools and party buildings in the north, whilst associations flourished in the refugee colonies where political parties drew middle-class activists. In the case of the Congress, public displays of a

distinctly 'political' kind were limited to the patronage of civil society associations with a handful of 'Congress families'. While only a few families in the north Calcutta neighbourhoods actively supported the Communists, membership became more and more common in the refugee colonies. It was not unusual for a pair of brothers to each go their own way politically, and often these preferences had their roots in student politics, a major tradition in the city from the turn of the century onwards, where radical groups engaged in various forms of agitation on campus.

Gown as Town: Acting in the City

The movement was of course not solely triggered by urban politics, but the experience of the urban crisis that engulfed Calcutta (unlike Delhi, Bombay or Madras), and the ensuing electoral politics in West Bengal triggered the radicalization of youths. Agitations that occurred in the course of the crisis had a significantly urban twist to them, with food riots and violent clashes between party activists pushing the fragile coalition government to the brink of collapse.

Among the Naxalite activists older cadres had first been members of the Communist Party of India and later the CPI(M), before they became Naxalites (see Basu, 2000; Dasgupta, 1994; Franda, 1971). They were experienced organizers, familiar with the common repertoire of protest, the marching and encircling (*gherao*), the negotiations and the Marxist debates behind much of actual everyday politics.

The activists belonging to the 'second generation', the younger cadres, joined the Naxalite movement directly and therefore they were less experienced, not equally reflexive, but also more practice-orientated and locally embedded in their disposition.

The category student is a rather disembodied one, and led to a representation of the movement as a 'student movement' in the same vein as other mobilizations in the late 1960s constituted such formations. From what has been stated so far it is clear that this category needs to be unpacked in relation to the specific politics that made these activists. As it appears, from the accounts of their own mobilization that student cadres became politicized due to their experience of urban neighbourhoods.

Thus, educational institutions became the site through which they entered the political stage, and initially the campaigns they were involved in centred around the demand for better facilities, teaching and fair exams, but soon they moved beyond the confines of the campus and addressed much wider issues. As indicated in Chatterjee's remark, educational institutions had local roots, and in north Calcutta neighbourhoods even colleges were embedded in the local community, a relationship that proved vital for the movement in the years to come. Given that students more often than not attended such local institutions, the proverbial separation between town and gown does not provide an adequate interpretative framework for the Naxalite movement. Not only were students members of communities, but the teachers and professors who recruited them were more often than not respectable, locally known political players. In fact, as neighbours and political activists, they commanded extensive patron-client networks, which were utilized by parents to get students into specific schools and colleges in the first place (see Donner, 2010).

Educational institutions, which had mostly been set up in the pre-independence period, had expanded rapidly thereafter, and in the 1960s students entered overcrowded

and underfunded establishments. The poor state of schools and colleges, combined with rampant corruption that governed admissions and exams, pushed a huge number of young men towards student politics, which were marked by violence and direct action, ranging from speeches and teach-ins to more serious practices, like the encircling of staff (*gherao*).

It was against the backdrop of these circumstances that in the late 1960s and early 1970s a huge number of students moved towards street politics, initially through ‘statue smashing’ (smashing of statues of nationalist leaders), which as Seth suggests in his reading of the Naxal agitations represented a fundamental critique of existing ‘progressive’ politics (Seth, 2006).

Soon it became clear that urban politics drew even more young people into the movement and that students could be very effectively employed as cadres in Calcutta. Thus, quite soon the smashing of statues was followed by attacks on educational institutions, where laboratories and libraries were destroyed, and the deployment of bombs at cinemas screening movies deemed ‘reactionary’. All these activities culminated in the infamous ‘annihilation line’, the killing of ‘class enemies’, and it was this phase that linked statue-smashing to the localized politics of neighbourhood.

The narratives I have collected do on the one hand confirm the symbolic function attributed in much of the literature to radical students from elite institutions, especially Presidency College, but locally highly regarded colleges and schools existed across the city and their students made up the majority of student activists. For students from north Calcutta, such colleges were household names. For those from refugee backgrounds, whose neighbourhoods and connections were more marginal, admission often represented the aspired integration into the wider middle-class networks of the city. In terms of access and culture, those stemming from north Calcutta families felt strongly that the locality and the university were interrelated spaces, and that they were operating on their home turf.

Since the party line demanded a decentralized mode of organization, leaders created small urban guerrilla groups, which were often highly localized because they followed prior faultlines of friendships and patron–client relationships between teachers and pupils. Due to the facilities and networks that needed to be established, to act locally made sense, as it allowed the cadres to organize meeting places, safe houses, drop-off points, couriers and the like along known trajectories of family, neighbourhood and college.

It was also in the context of the neighbourhood that the practice labelled the ‘annihilation line’ (*khatam*), which was directed at murdering ‘class enemies’, came into its own.

This part of Naxalite history has been much debated among Naxalites, political opponents and sympathizers alike, and is often interpreted as the turning point when ‘vanguard’ politics took over. In these debates, the fact that middle-class students dealt with criminals and integrated slum dwellers into their actions is interpreted as a major moral fault in their reasoning (see e.g. Damas, 1991; Dasgupta, 1996; Ray, 1988). However, the ‘annihilation line’ had a much more important role to play in the wider political imagination. Charu Majumdar himself introduced the practice of identifying and killing ‘class enemies’ in an article, ‘A few words about guerrilla actions’, published in the journal *Liberation* in 1970 (Ghosh, 1993: 71). As Sumanta Banerjee quite rightly

emphasizes, Majumdar situates the practice within a wider field of ideas about politics, which linked Maoist teachings with local idioms of political action, based on the notion of a 'power to do' things (Banerjee, 1999; Ruud, 2000). Firstly, these actions were assumed to create a specific kind of revolutionary subjectivity, and this was significant in the case of students from middle-class backgrounds and peasants alike. Second, in selecting, showcasing and eliminating specific persons belonging to a *locality*, including policemen, local businessmen, moneylenders and—very importantly—'traitors', the actions focused on the neighbourhood. This latter objective was also tactical in that it was meant to create so-called 'liberated areas, within which the Naxalites could implement further activities, as once an area was liberated it would be void of class enemies and the police would no longer be able to distinguish between guerrillas and others' (Banerjee, 1984: 112).

However, the ambivalent local reaction to the annihilation line complicated the picture, as after 1970 hit-and-run attacks saw the state machinery fighting back, and even supporters were increasingly frightened to help the Naxalites under fire.

Localized social relationships guided whom activists identified as 'class enemies', and in theory neighbourhood residents should have supported the murder of representatives of the nexus between organized politics and property speculation, rent extraction and protection rackets. The young cadres learned soon that not all residents agreed on what constituted extortion and the like, and they also experienced that the 'annihilation line' caused fission amongst themselves and in the wider community, which came under the influence of police repression.

As Ashim Chatterjee pointed out, it was the dialectic of action and reaction that caused most of the residents to withdraw support from the Naxalites, as 'on the basis of Maoist thought we adopted what became known as the annihilation line, ... many of those killed were very much hated by the respective communities' but '[t]he Naxal movement—which is basically a terrorist movement, was based on hit and run, squads would suddenly form, appear, do their jobs and disappear, and the common people were left to deal with the aftermath, the repression, the searches and raids' (Dutta, 2006).

Thus, my interlocutors asserted, where safe houses would be located in their own *paras*, willingly or not so willingly provided by family and friends, such solidarity became increasingly scarce as police and army introduced the infamous 'combing operations'. These established the locality once more through local politics, as a neighbourhood would be cordoned off while a specific house was targeted, and when alleged 'Naxalites' had been identified these young men and women were then beaten to death in a police van or shot, with their corpses left as a stark reminder of what local involvement with radical politics implied. The legal and policing tactics pioneered in Calcutta were employed on a national scale during the 'Emergency' (Nossiter, 1988), and are still used against suspected Naxalite terrorists today, but at the time they represented a distinctive rupture with post-independence policing.

The intimate relations that the Naxalites already had with residents in these *paras* helped their struggle, they also provided an ongoing critique of their analysis and politics. In the refugee colonies, for instance, local shopkeepers and businessmen belonged to the same Bengali Hindu community and the same families as schoolteachers or doctors, and Naxalite attempts to convincingly identify 'class enemies' were hampered by their close links with these individuals. Intimacy also soon bred traitors, and police

oppression forced many former sympathizers to betray a neighbour or family friend to protect one's own. While urban politics and guerrilla warfare provided a blueprint for Naxalite visions of an ultimately successful political struggle, they ultimately turned towards a context which in their view was less complex and more accessible, namely 'peasant society'. Based on experiences that had informed their activities in the streets of Calcutta hundreds of students migrated to remote villages to work with the locals, and while these early attempts to mobilize these idealized revolutionary subjects failed miserably, Naxalites proceeded to create knowledge from local political struggles in much the same way as in the urban environment.

Provincializing India: The Meaning of Urban Activism

In a very perceptive reading of the relationship between Marxist analysis, political movements and the status of politics from a historian's point of view Sanjay Seth observes with reference to the Naxalite movement in 1970s Bengal that the refusal to play a role in electoral politics stemmed from activists' distrust of the categories that informed Marxist distinctions between appropriate politics and mere protest movements (Seth, 2006). He suggests that the first Naxalite movement refused the Nehruvian 'idea' of a rational, modern and progressive India (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Khilnani, 1997) and that it was precisely their engagement with 'all sorts' of politics, including the peasants, which allowed activists to question traditional Marxist readings of key categories like the 'class enemy', 'revolutionary action' and 'history'. This article has provided a number of themes that support these claims, while it goes further in integrating a critical reading of Naxal history with questions of social movements more generally. Theda Skocpol makes an important point when she emphasizes that from a comparative perspective on social movements it appears that the search for the ideal 'revolutionary subject' has foreclosed discussions of the multiple perspectives that elites contributed to successful social movements in the so-called Third World, precisely because the industrial working class may be limited and middle-class activists, who are more often than not urban and educated, can therefore engage in complex coalitions (see Skocpol, 1994: 261). This insight challenges the common reading of the urban guerrilla phase of the Naxalite movement, which suggests that desperate vanguard not able to cope with the complexity of urban politics left for the village. In the process, this narrative continues, they superimposed their ideological and strategic interpretation of the revolution on 'backwards' and 'disenfranchised' rural populations.

While for many commentators, even sympathetic ones, the neighbourhood could only ever be a site of revolutionary action, but not its source, I have shown that specific kinds of knowledge emerge here. My interviewees insisted that their tactics were idiosyncratic and depended on whom they worked with, that urban politics were significantly different from what some of them experienced in the countryside later on, and that a lesson learned was that commitment and inclusion of locals produced various effects. However most did not decide against a politics of the urban, but sought a reconfirmation of the need to search for revolutionary subjects and tactics in unlikely places. Thus, they claimed that youths made for great innovators, and that tribals and landless labourers could be included in the writing of history, but also that urban localities ought to be sites for revolutionary action. Their experience suggested that for local populations in the city as

well as in the countryside their actions followed logically from the politics of the neighbourhood, and even student activists were familiar with local grievances and inequalities. Crucially, they saw their identification of ‘class enemies’ as born from their experiences as locals as well as a critique of classical left readings of class relations. More importantly, the Naxalites subscribed to the Maoist idea of learning by doing, which fitted neatly with the tradition of militant political activism prominent in Bengali politics of the past, as well as a localized understanding of the political sphere in terms of the power to command action. In their own words, activists and tactics were not evident prior to the action that made up the loosely organized movement, but their knowledge emerged through engagement with politics and ontologies produced in the course of specific strategies, and which in turn shaped subjects and organizational forms. It is this theory of knowledge production which allowed the Naxalites to understand and exploit the artificial difference between the state, civil society and political society.

Essentially, Naxalite histories provide a refined theory of knowledge production, as they suggest a synthesis, rather than separation, between different spheres, whereby the movement brought left elite discourses into the orbit of pre-bourgeois knowledge formations and vice versa. Within this space, the neighbourhood was a prime site to develop and experiment with a politics that ‘denied the distinctions and the corresponding privileging—between modern and pre-modern, progressive and reactionary, between countryside and city’ (Seth, 2006: 602). The neighbourhood was experienced by the activists as an ‘emergent site’ (Marston et al., 2005) that was brought together through discourses on material resources and local forms of control, experienced subjectively. As the term ‘emergent’ indicates, temporalities at play here go beyond the lived experience but are framed in narratives as duration understood in term of autobiography, the lifespan, intergenerational relations and political biographies.

As contemporary neoliberal discourses challenge older and familiar forms of resistance, social movements, including environmental justice movements and the anti-globalization movements, have rediscovered the locality as a site where ‘neoliberalism “touches down” to make itself felt, where global issues become localised’ (Mayer, 2007: 93) in the form of the local state. With urban restructuring in full swing, the status of the status of the neighbourhood in the lives of activists is often changing, and solidarities are made and remade under new conditions, while ‘old’ and ‘new’ regimes of inequality are challenged by members of multi-faceted coalitions, who engage in practices of place-making through various forms of activism in the niche between the state and civil society we refer to as politics.

Notes

1. The research is based on fieldwork in Calcutta from 1993 onwards and was supported by the ESRC and STICRED. An earlier version of this paper was given at a conference at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies and I am indebted to the participants for critical comments on that occasion, as well as to the anonymous reviewer for valuable suggestions.
2. The local connotation disappeared when the article was included in the edited volume *Politics of the Governed* (Chatterjee, 2004).
3. To clarify: while the state of West Bengal has been governed by the Left Front since 1977, the left has always fared poorly in Calcutta’s municipal elections.

4. This line was probably not taken as seriously as it might appear, but the leader of the movement, Charu Majumdar, distinguished between the 'advanced' sections among the working class, and those not yet ready for revolutionary action, including traditional trade unions (see *Liberation* Dec. 1967, cited in Ghosh, 1993).
5. The Communist Party of India Marxist, commonly known as CPI(M), has been leading the ruling Left Front in West Bengal since 1977.
6. The Congress party and the Trinamul Congress are oppositional parties in West Bengal.
7. A common colloquialism used to denote cultural differences, e.g. dialect, cuisine, and ritual traditions found among East Bengalis.
8. The Congress party did not necessarily operate in the formalized and rather abstract manner of the left-wing parties at the time. Its structure was often opaque and its institutionalization weak in comparison.

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