

## SLUM DIVERSITY IN KOLKATA

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**ABSTRACT:**

Kolkata's slums contain a wealth of diversity that is obscured by the poverty and disorganization surrounding the communities. This paper delineates the categories of slums according to their historical generative forces, details the ethnic composition of slums, and examines the historical patterns of slum policies. Case studies from other researchers are used to paint a picture of slum diversity. The data from the studies is also foundational in the analysis of how historical influences and ethnicity have shaped current conditions in the slums.

## Introduction

Slum-dwellers account for one-third of Kolkata's total population. This amounts to 1,490,811 people living without adequate basic amenities in over-crowded and unsanitary settlements.<sup>1</sup> Considering the challenge of counting undocumented squatters and residents of sprawling bastis, this number may be a generous underestimate by the Indian census. The slums' oftentimes indistinguishable physical boundaries further complicate researchers' investigations of slums' diverse physical, social, and economic compositions. In this paper, I will elucidate the qualities of Kolkata's slums by utilizing past researchers' admirable efforts to overcome these barriers in studying the slums.

The general term slum can refer to both bastis and squatter settlements. Bastis are legally recognized settlements that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation supplies with services such as water, latrines, trash removal, and occasionally electricity. Basti huts typically are permanent structures that the government will not demolish, which allows basti communities to develop a sense of permanency and to focus on issues of poverty beyond shelter availability.

Squatter settlements are illegal clusters of impermanent houses predominantly located along canals and railways. The municipality usually does not supply squatters with basic amenities, so residents must seek access to water and other resources from the settlement's environs, including other slums and waterways.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, squatters live in anticipation, though of different degrees depending on settlement location and political affiliation, of their potential evictions.<sup>3</sup>

However, the distinction between bastis and squatter settlements does not embody the diversity of slum life. In fact, residents may not even know whether they live in a basti or a squatter settlement.<sup>4</sup> Formative history, migration patterns, ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> Vikram Sen, Director of Census Operations, *Census of India 2001: Provisional Population Totals, West Bengal* (West Bengal, Delhi: Controller of Publications, 2001), T-131.

<sup>2</sup> Mallika Bose, "STILL A LONG ROAD AHEAD: Women in Calcutta Slums," *Women & Environments International Magazine* 50/51 (2001): 16.

<sup>3</sup> R. Biswas-Diener and E. Diener, "Making the best of a bad situation: Satisfaction in the slums of Calcutta," *Social Indicators Research* 55 (2001); and Dhurjati Mukherjee, "The Calcutta experience of slum development," in *India's growing slums*, ed. John Desrochers (Bangalore: Centre for Social Action, 2000), 200-1.

<sup>4</sup> Uddalak Mukherjee, "Slumgirl in a million," *The Telegraph*, March, 1 2009, front page.

composition, employment opportunities, and political history have helped shape Kolkata's slum conditions in ways not explained by the simple basti/squatter settlement distinction. This article will analyze several additional factors that influence slum life, with ongoing consideration of how such factors relate to the basti and squatter settlement classifications.

First, I will describe how industrialization and the partition of India created two types of slums in Kolkata, and why slums that formed as a result of industrialization contain greater variability in location and social structure than slums that developed from refugee settlements. Second, I will explain why religion and language are stronger factors than caste diversity in determining slums' social and economic characteristics, and why neither religion, language, nor caste can be shown to have a stronger influence on the physical structure of slums. The significance of language, religion, and caste in the slums' social, economic, and physical features will be established by comparing, respectively, case studies of slums with Bengalis to slums with Hindi-speakers, slums with Muslims to slums with Hindus, and two studies of slums with Chamars. Third, after comparing post-independence slum policies to colonial policies, I will explain how post-independence policies are simultaneously more committed to slum improvement and slum demolition than colonial policies were.

### **Variability in Industrial Bastis and Refugee Settlements**

A comparison of bastis and squatter settlements is not complete without an understanding of how historical generative forces shape the conditions in slums. For example, a basti may form at the behest of a factory owner and become dependant on that factory, or a basti may rely on a railroad if it is the long-term product of what was once a squatter settlement along a railroad. On the other hand, refugees may flood vacant land on the outskirts of the city, or rural migrants may slowly develop a squatter settlement through evolving rural-urban linkages. However, the uncertainty and diversity behind the formative histories of non-industrial slums and rural-urban squatter settlements places a comparison of these two slum categories outside the scope of this paper. Instead, I will elucidate some of the variability in the subcategories of bastis and squatter settlements by comparing industrial bastis and refugee settlements.

#### *Industrial Bastis*

Slums were a fixture of colonial Kolkata prior to industrialization, but enduring patterns of slum formation and growth took shape as industries created a demand for labor. Before

Kolkata's industrial transformation, the first slums emerged to house the migrant rural poor, ironically fleeing corruption in the rural tenancy system, that found employment as domestic servants for British settlers and Bengali babus.<sup>5</sup> After the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the slum population boomed as rural migrants flocked to Kolkata to work in the new industries.<sup>6</sup> It was estimated that slums grew to cover a third of Kolkata over the next forty years.<sup>7</sup> The factories did not provide housing,<sup>8</sup> effectively forcing migrants to establish slums as close as possible to their factories.<sup>9</sup> Employer location continued to dictate the locations of slums through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Settled migrants' low incomes ensure that they become spatially immobile,<sup>10</sup> thus proximity to a work place is essential to a slum-dweller. Only the most well off can use public transportation to get to work.<sup>11</sup> For example, the 100-year old Tangra slum described by Dutt, et. al originated because of its proximity to chemical and rubber industries, but it has expanded due to employment opportunities in nearby tanning and shoe industries as well as a slaughterhouse.<sup>12</sup> The Tiljala basti described by Pal was formed after Indian independence. Factory owners imported Chamars from the Bihar province, and the Chamars developed their own slum on the periphery of the factory.<sup>13</sup> These are just two examples that demonstrate that industry locations, both before and after Indian independence, directly determine slum location and growth.

Pal's Tiljala basti exemplifies how a slum's ties to an industry can affect the social conditions in a slum. Approximately 95% of Chamars in the Tiljala basti are employed in leatherworks, their

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<sup>5</sup> Krishna Dutta, *Calcutta: A Cultural History* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2008), 32; and Ashok K. Dutt, Animesh Halder, and Chandreyee Mitra, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy in India with special reference to Calcutta," in *Regional development and planning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, eds. Allen George Noble, et. al (Bookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta: Housing struggle of basti dwellers in the 1950's in Calcutta* (Calcutta: Unnayan, 1992), 7; Dutt, et. al, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy," 130.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Furedy, "Whose responsibility? dilemmas of Calcutta's bustee policy in the nineteenth century," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 5 (1982): 27.

<sup>8</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Furedy, "Whose responsibility?" 27.

<sup>10</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy," 140-2.

<sup>11</sup> Ashok K. Dutt, Suprabha Tripathi, and Anupa Mukhopadhyay, "Spatial spread of daily activity patterns of slum dwellers in Calcutta and Delhi," in *The Asian city: processes of development, characteristics, and planning*, ed. Ashok K. Dutt (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 515.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>13</sup> Surajit Kumar Pal, "The Chamars of Tiljala slum: a preliminary study on some aspects of their socio-economic adaptation in an urban setting," *Human Science* 35 (1986): 121-3.

traditional occupation.<sup>14</sup> These tasks are considered ritually unclean and reinforce the Chamars' position as a scheduled caste. The rigid caste structure dissuades most members of other castes from engaging with the Chamars, in effect isolating the Chamar basti from slums with other castes.<sup>15</sup>

The effect that the relationship between industry and caste can have on social structure is further demonstrated by the impact weather has on seasonal migrations in the Chamar basti. Chamars may close their leather shops during the monsoon season<sup>16</sup> or ask kin or neighbors to replace them in the factory<sup>17</sup> while they return to the villages for agricultural labor. Perhaps a result of this seasonal male migration, most of the females remain in the village year round – 78.7% of the 480 people in the basti are male. Additionally, 47.15% of the population live in dorms that house seasonal migrant males from the same villages.<sup>18</sup> Pal's study of the Tiljala basti provides evidence that industry ties can create unique, long-term social patterns in a slum, represented here by the effect that leatherwork and tanning have on the caste and gender composition of a basti.

#### *Refugee settlements*

The refugee movement after the partition of India initiated a new wave of slum establishments with unique settings and social features. Refugees initially squatted along train stations, but once they realized that the newly instated Indian government was not going to aid their transition, they began to seek out vacant lands.<sup>19</sup> They found suitable locations in the Dum Dum municipality near the airport, inside metropolitan Kolkata, and along an arc on the city's southern outskirts.<sup>20</sup> The southern regions clearly were the most appealing to the refugees.<sup>21</sup> Sanyal provides the example of a squatter settlement growing out of an abandoned US World War II military base along the southern arc.<sup>22</sup> It is particularly noteworthy that slums had been less common in the south of Kolkata during the colonial era as the resident European population in the south sought the demolition of nearby slums.<sup>23</sup> It is evident, then, that settlement

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 120-3.

<sup>16</sup> Sanjay K. Roy, "The applicability of the concept of marginality in a mono-caste slum in Calcutta," *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 27 (1992): 109.

<sup>17</sup> Pal, "The Chamars of Tiljala Slum," 123.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>19</sup> Romola Sanyal, "Contesting refugeehood: squatting as survival in post-partition Calcutta," *Social Identities* 15 (2009): 69-70.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>21</sup> Asok Sen, *Life and labor in a squatters' colony* (Calcutta: Centre of Studies in Social Sciences, 1992), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Sanyal, "Contesting refugeehood," 72.

<sup>23</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 7-8.

location was significant to refugees and that settlements developed in predictable locations according to land availability.

The social conditions in refugee settlements derive from the social conditions in the refugees' original homes. However, the intrinsic nature of being a refugee minimized the social distinctions within the settlements. During the partition, the Hindu middle and upper classes of East Bengal lost socioeconomic power that derived largely from their elevated positions in the caste structure. Their humiliating tumble in the face of rising Muslim power may have been a significant motivation for their migration.<sup>24</sup> As they established themselves in Kolkata, their old caste structure faded. Sanyal claims that,

class and caste divisions that existed in East Bengal continued after partition as well although less rigidly as people now shared an almost equal socioeconomic deprivation, and lived in closer proximity to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Their new identities as refugees and physical proximity to 'untouchables' forced them to relinquish the sense of superiority that they had tried to maintain by leaving East Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> The refugees experienced a profound transformation, but their transformation resulted in a relatively homogeneous social structure.

*Which demonstrates greater variability?*

The slums that have formed in close proximity to industries and other employment opportunities reveal a greater variability in their location and growth than do refugee settlements. First, the location of a slum that forms due to job opportunities cannot be accurately predicted until an industry arises. Once an industry creates a demand for labor, a slum must be woven into the pre-existing fabric of the city, or if the industry settles on the city's periphery, then the slum will gradually be enveloped by the city's expansion. The Chamars' Tiljala basti was just a small section that developed within the sprawling slums of Tiljala.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, refugee settlements followed clear patterns based on land availability, specifically along the city's southern arc. They may be viewed as the cause for substantial changes to Kolkata's slum layout, but there was not significant variability within the location of the settlements. Second, as the example of the Tangra slum proves, industries other

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<sup>24</sup> Sanyal, "Contesting refugeehood," 68-69.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>27</sup> S. Roy, "Marginality in a mono-caste slum," 105.

than that which acted as a slum's economic foundation may flourish nearby and result in significant slum growth. Job opportunity is the major motivation for rural to urban migrations, and according to Ray's study of a squatter settlement with both Muslims and Hindus, 99% of the slum dwellers learned of the opportunity from relatives already established in the settlement.<sup>28</sup> These slums will continue to grow as long as there is enough housing space, labor demand, and connection between rural and urban populations. However, the refugee squatter settlements, with no employment pull factor, typically cannot grow without the population inflow of refugee migrations. In fact, some of the refugee settlements lost their squatter identity as refugees became economically successful and their neighborhoods were formalized.<sup>29</sup>

The industrially inspired slums also introduce greater social variability to the slum landscape than do the refugee settlements. First, the example of the Tiljala basti demonstrates how a specific social group can be interjected and maintained in a diverse slum environment. The development of refugee settlements resulted in the opposite as the refugees lost their class and caste distinctions over time. Second, while a slum may contain both Muslim and Hindu rural migrants from south West Bengal<sup>30</sup> or migrants from other states, the refugees from East Pakistan after partition were all Hindu and shared the Bengali language.

### **Religion, Language, and Caste: Influence on Social, Economic, and Physical Characteristics of Slums**

The religious, linguistic, and caste diversity amongst Kolkata slum-dwellers is reflected in the wide spectrum of slums' social and economic features. Limitations on vital resources occasionally require slum dwellers of different ethnic backgrounds to mix in one slum. However, self-segregation has proven to contribute to community strength, and slum dwellers demonstrate a tendency to self-segregate when possible both within a slum and between slums. After using case examples of segregated slums to elucidate the effects of caste, religion, and language on slum life, I will argue that religion and language are stronger than caste in shaping slum conditions.

#### *Chamars and Non-Chamars*

The Chamars in the Tiljala industrial basti studied by Ray have developed a residential area that suits their rural background and

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<sup>28</sup> Subha Ray, "Rural-urban migration: a case study of a squatter settlement," *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 38 (2003): 56.

<sup>29</sup> Sanyal, "Contesting refugeehood," 82.

<sup>30</sup> Ray, "Rural-urban migration," 55.

needs in the slum.<sup>31</sup> As previously mentioned, the Chamar females remain in the villages while the seasonal migrant males live in dormitories and perform their traditional leatherwork in the city.<sup>32</sup> Many of the leatherwork shop owners employ their relatives, a source of solidarity in a slum environment.<sup>33</sup> The gender composition and employment in leatherwork indicate the effects that caste can have on the development of slum-specific social relationships and economic support networks. Additionally, the *thikadars* that rent huts to the Chamars are often the tenants' relatives. The tenants feel obligated to the *thikadars*, who may be local political leaders, and view them as their guardians.<sup>34</sup> The *thikadar*-tenant relationship further demonstrates how bonds within a single caste can produce social hierarchies that determine access to secure housing.

Pal's study on a Tiljala industrial basti with clusters of different castes reveals that Chamars' slum experiences remain mostly the same when other castes are introduced, except when the other castes engage Chamars in commercial activity. First, that the Chamars are employed in leatherwork in this basti confirms that caste can determine occupation in both a homogenous slum and in a slum where different castes interact.<sup>35</sup> Second, caste leadership, which Pal says morphed in the slum environment, is vital for incorporating new Chamar migrants to the slum, for encouraging the Chamars to maintain cultural tradition while proposing caste integration, and for controlling political influences within the slum.<sup>36</sup> This evolving caste-leadership system demonstrates that localized caste idiosyncrasies can regulate social structure within a slum. Third, it is particularly noteworthy that some members of higher castes have erected tea stalls, grocery shops, and narcotic shops within the Chamar clusters. Interaction between Chamars and the other castes is usually limited to the purchase of these otherwise unavailable commodities, meaning that the Chamars are socially isolated with the exception of some commercial exchanges.<sup>37</sup> The higher castes clearly take advantage of the Chamars' dependency on a singular occupation and fill an economic role. The Chamars must then adapt for their own prosperity to the higher castes' economic activities. This example of

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<sup>31</sup> See S. Roy, "Marginality in a mono-caste slum;" and Pal, "The Chamars of Tiljala Slum;" These studies refer to two different Tiljala bustees populated by Chamars. Despite the overlap in qualities, including gender ratio and occupational status, it is evident that they are different because the basti Roy studied had 70 households while the basti Pal studied had 123 households.

<sup>32</sup> S. Roy, "Marginality in a mono-caste slum," 107-8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 111-3.

<sup>35</sup> See Pal, "The Chamars of Tiljala Slum," 123; This slum should not be referred to as heterogenous because the Chamars are still in clusters around the factory.

<sup>36</sup> Pal, "The Chamars of Tiljala Slum," 123-4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 124-5.

Chamar clusters within a more expansive slum demonstrates how caste segregation within a slum produces similar social and economic characteristics to caste segregation between slums, except when economic interests compel the segregated castes to adapt to one another.

### *Muslims and Hindus*

Muslim and Hindu migrants settle in and develop slums that suit their cultural and economic priorities. P. Roy et. al's study on adjacent Muslim and Hindu bastis, which are defined according to religious predominance in the populations, reveals significant contrasts in the slums' social, economic, and physical features.<sup>38</sup>

Of the 160 households in the Muslim basti, none house Hindu families, leading to a nearly homogenous community with the exception of a pocket of eighteen Christian families.<sup>39</sup> Similar to the Chamars, 90% of the Muslims are engaged in leatherwork, a culturally-specific occupation that few Hindus would take. Some of the Muslim women also assist their husbands in leatherwork.<sup>40</sup> It does not appear that the leatherwork industry itself drove the formation of the slum; rather, rural-urban linkages brought migrants that were stimulated to move by riots in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the 1940s, agricultural issues, and unemployment in villages.<sup>41</sup>

Muslims' housing structures in this basti reflect some of their cultural values. Most Muslim houses, which hold seven to eight families, have an inner courtyard with a bathroom. This encourages increased social cohesion between families and allows conservative Muslim women to bathe in greater privacy. In the Hindu basti, houses hold fewer families and do not have an inner courtyard with a bathroom.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1000-household Hindu basti, 25% of the population is Muslim.<sup>43</sup> The notable difference between mixing in the Hindu slum but near homogeneity in the Muslim slum may exist because Muslims do not want Hindus in their community, Hindus do not want to be in

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<sup>38</sup> See Prodipto Roy, Arun Ghosh, Rashmi Sinha, "Measuring bustee environment in Calcutta," *Social Change* 22 (1992): 128-30; This study also describes an adjacent Christian slum. He notes a number of the Christians' unique features, including their knowledge of English and the fact that they migrated within Kolkata. This was not used in the body of the paper because Christianity is not common in the slums.

<sup>39</sup> P. Roy, et. al, "Measuring bustee environment," 128-9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 128-9.

a Muslim community, the bastis were filled at different times, or significantly larger bastis inevitably have more religious mixing. There is not enough evidence available in Roy's study to make a reasonable conclusion. The population in this basti demonstrates further self-segregation as Bengali refugees form a homogenous section, and non-Bengali Hindus, Muslims, and Christians mix in the rest of the basti.<sup>44</sup>

Economically, the occupations vary greatly within this basti, but Hindu men oftentimes are financially better off than Muslim men because they can have secure government jobs. Hindu women may be domestic servants or vegetable vendors, as well.<sup>45</sup> The jobs that Hindu women hold entail significant exposure to the public. These are less likely occupations for Muslim women because Muslim women in slums typically earn a wage inside their homes.<sup>46</sup>

There are two other particularly noteworthy distinctions between Muslim and Hindu slum populations. First, Dastidar and Ghosh argue that Muslims in Kolkata's slums are less likely to accept family planning measures. They found that 52.7% of Hindus accept modern contraceptive methods compared to 39.8% of Muslims.<sup>47</sup> This disparity may affect slums' population growth rates, which in turn may place different financial burdens on already impoverished Hindu and Muslim families. Second, Ray's study on adjacent clusters of Hindus and Muslims showed that Hindus maintain a greater attachment to their rural homes than Muslims. 28.74% of Hindus in the study said that they wanted to return to their village while only 14.16% of Muslims said the same. Considering that 99.0% of participants in Ray's study learned about the squatter settlement from friends or relatives already settled there,<sup>48</sup> it is evident that ties between slums and rural villages can affect future migration patterns. Migration patterns directly affect slum growth,<sup>49</sup> which has an influence on access to resources and the housing and employment opportunities for both new and old slum-dwellers.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>46</sup> Bose, "STILL A LONG ROAD AHEAD," 16.

<sup>47</sup> Madhusree Ghosh Dastidar and Ranjan Gupta, "A study on family planning, fertility and ideal family size among the Hindu and Muslim slum dwellers of Calcutta city," in *Contemporary research in anthropology: a felicitation volume in honour of Professor Alope Kumar Ghosh*, ed. R. Khongsdier (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2000), 246-7.

<sup>48</sup> Ray, "Rural-urban migration," 56-7.

<sup>49</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy," 135.

*Bengalis and Hindi-speakers*

Bengalis and Hindi-speakers self-segregate according to their migratory patterns and their knowledge of the local language, which in turn shapes social integration in the city and employment options. A Paikpara basti population mostly consists of permanent-migrant Bengalis from rural West Bengal and Bangladesh. They quickly assimilate to living in an urban Bengali environment and relinquish their connection to their rural homes. The exceedingly rare remittance that Bengalis send back highlights their disconnect from their hometowns. Most Bengalis are hawkers or vendors,<sup>50</sup> occupations that likely are easier for them than Hindi-speakers. Their ability to communicate fluidly with potential customers must facilitate commercial transactions. This indicates that linguistic similarity between a slum's population and the greater city's population encourages integration.

The Tangra slum population mostly consists of Hindi-speakers, whose particular language and culture have isolated them in a Bengali city. First, as previously mentioned, this slum developed around industries. Industrial labor jobs may be more suitable occupations than vending for Hindi-speaking migrants because less communication in Bengali may be required on the job. However, it is also particularly striking that a quarter of the heads of households are self-employed.<sup>51</sup> Self-employment may ease a non-native speaker's transition into a slum environment. A self-employed slum dweller does not need to speak Bengali to gain employment, and depending on his job, he may not need to speak Bengali to carry out his job's tasks. Second, the potential for cultural value differences between the Hindi and Bengali groups is represented by the emphasis placed on education by the Hindi population in the Tangra basti.<sup>52</sup> Third, the Hindi-speakers maintain close contact with their rural homes, sending back frequent remittances, and consciously maintain their cultural traditions.<sup>53</sup> Similar to the Hindi-speakers in another slum studied by Dutt et. al, this can be attributed to their experience as "aliens" in a Bengali city.<sup>54</sup>

*Does caste or language and religion have a greater impact on slum life?*

From these descriptions it can be concluded that language and religion have more pronounced influences than caste on the

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<sup>50</sup> Ashok K. Dutt, Chandreyee Mitra, and Animesh Halder, "Slum location and cycle of poverty," *Asian Profile* 25 (1997): 419.

<sup>51</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Spatial Spread," 314.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>54</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Slum location," 421.

social life of slum dwellers. The exceptional gender composition in the Tiljala bastis appears unique to the Chamars' urban situation. However, case studies on the effects of caste on slum life are extremely limited. Thus, it must not be surmised that the entire caste system, or even just subcastes of the Dalits, affect social life as identifiably as in the case of the Chamars. On the other hand, ethnic groups exhibit consistent differences in their social lives that affect the economic aspects of their lives. First, Muslims and Hindus practice family planning differently and are not equally attached to their rural homes. These distinctions have ramifications on family life and migration patterns. Second, Bengalis integrate into Kolkata's Bengali social environment more easily than Hindi-speakers.

Religion and language also reverberate more consistently than caste in the economics of slum life. Chamars are known for their leatherwork, but it must not be assumed that other castes are as committed to a single occupation. In fact, as shown in the cases of the Tangra and Paikpara slums, members of other castes choose their occupation based on factors not related to caste. Bengalis and Hindi-speakers primarily base their occupational decisions on their ability to assimilate to a Bengali city. P. Roy's study on Muslims and Hindus shows that each may choose employment in a sector that the other is unlikely to join. Muslim and Hindu females' occupational decisions are equally as affected by their religions.

It cannot be concluded that religion and language or caste has a greater impact on the physical structure of slums. First, segregation is common in the physical structure of slums with caste, linguistic, and religious diversity. Second, while the dormitories in the Tiljala slum are a unique physical component, the different castes in the Bengali and Hindi-speaker slums do not require specific housing structures.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Muslims may have a stronger cultural preference for having a bathroom within the house's confines, but such a bathroom is a luxury that most slums cannot offer.

An understanding of the variability introduced into slum life by language, religion, and caste is not comprehensive without factoring in the history and political status of the slums. Unfortunately, the wealth of case studies on Kolkata's slums does not encompass all the permutations of language, religion, and caste and the subcategories of the basti/squatter settlements distinction. Nevertheless, the politics of basti development and limitations on squatters' and refugees' access to secure housing, water, education,

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<sup>55</sup> In each of these conclusions, the Tiljala bustees have proven to be insufficient evidence to make claims about the effects caste structure. However, it was necessary to include both examples to prove that caste can have a profound impact on slum life in both a homogenous slum and a slum that has caste diversity.

and employment must be developed as a context of structural constraints in which language, religion, and caste operate.

### **The Politics of Slum Life: Historical Patterns**

The future of slums has been a contested topic for two centuries. Both local and foreign political forces have debated the issue of slum improvement versus slum demolition. The British colonial government in Kolkata practiced both, but with an emphasis on demolition; the post-independence Indian government emphasized slum improvement but with the ultimate goal of slum demolition and relocation. In this section, I will describe British policies, trace some of the significant post-independence legislation, specifically the *Thika Tenancy Act of 1981* and the Bustee Improvement Programme, and describe the effect that communist parties have had on slum life. A comparison of British and Indian policies will reveal that Indian policies were more committed to both slum improvement and slum demolition than were British policies.

#### *British colonial policies*

The British executed slum demolitions and slum improvements for personal gains. Furedy explains that the colonial government refused to take financial responsibility for improving slums because they existed on private lands.<sup>56</sup> The municipal corporation only acted initially out of concern for public health and fire hazards.<sup>57</sup> For example, to protect neighboring European houses from fires, the corporation prohibited thatched huts in 1837 and converted the roofs to tile in the 1850s.<sup>58</sup> In the 1880s, the municipal corporation actually began to focus on water provisions and sanitation to improve slum conditions.<sup>59</sup> However, landlords simultaneously evicted slum dwellers as property values rose and the corporation leveled slums to build more streets.<sup>60</sup> Prioritization of street construction over slum improvement grew during the 1890s and early twentieth century as power was allotted to the Calcutta Building Commission and the Calcutta Improvement Trust, respectively.<sup>61</sup> Slums were also cleared in the early twentieth century to make room for British settlers.<sup>62</sup> At no point were the authorities concerned with the welfare of displaced slum dwellers. Rather, the

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<sup>56</sup> Furedy, "Whose responsibility?" 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>58</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Furedy, "Whose responsibility?" 35-7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 30-1.

<sup>61</sup> Furedy, "Whose responsibility?" 39-41; and Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 15.

<sup>62</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy," 131.

British policies emphasized “commercial viability.”<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the colonial government accepted that slums were ingrained in Kolkata’s landscape and thus were unlikely to be eradicated.<sup>64</sup>

### *Post-independence policies*

After Indian independence in 1947, slum policies in Kolkata gradually shifted toward slum improvement. In 1949, the city passed the first *Calcutta Thika Tenancy Act*. This legislation was supposed to prevent landowners from evicting tenants unnecessarily. However, it left loopholes for owners to evict if they decided to convert their blocks when land values increased.<sup>65</sup> Despite the loophole, this legislation is an early sign of the independent state’s willingness to supervise slum conditions on private land, something that the British would not do.

Indian independence did not immediately impede on the colonial era’s slum demolition patterns. Policies in the 1950s called for slum clearance but with provisions for evicted slum dwellers. An amendment to the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1954 required rehabilitative measures for evictees. The *Calcutta Slum Clearance Bill* of 1957 proposed offering subsidized flats to evictees.<sup>66</sup> Improvement of pre-existing slums did not take precedence nationally until the fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-1979),<sup>67</sup> but the Bustee Improvement Programme in Kolkata began the process in the late 1960s.

### *The Bustee Improvement Programme*

The Bustee Improvement Programme (BIP) was Kolkata’s most expansive slum improvement scheme. At the urging of the World Health Organization, the city created the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation (CMPO) in 1961. The CMPO developed the BIP in 1964, but the programme only made progress when the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority was created in 1972.<sup>68</sup> The BIP proposes:

- (1) the immediate implementation of a major programme of bustee improvement covering 400,000 slum dwellers within the next five years...
- (2) that all future slum clearance be concentrated and accelerated as much as possible in the bustee areas

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<sup>63</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Furedy, “Whose responsibility?” 42.

<sup>65</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 17-8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-8.

<sup>67</sup> Dutt, et. al, “Shifts in slum upgrading policy,” 127.

<sup>68</sup> Mukherjee, “The Calcutta experience of slum development,” 201-2.

of the central city, and that specific re-housing programmes for the 170,000 bustee dwellers in those areas be expeditiously developed.

- (3) the total acquisition of all bustee lands... outside the central city by... 1971.
  
- (5) the preparation of a systematic programme for the eventual clearance and redevelopment of all bustee lands acquired, and the use of these lands to meet the present and anticipated social needs for such essential community facilities...
  
- (8) the establishment of a strong administrative arrangement for the coordination and execution of the management functions essential to the improvement programme... and social management to enlist the effective voluntary participation of the bustee-dwellers themselves in a vigorous effort of bustee community development.<sup>69</sup>

[The fourth, sixth, and seventh proposals have been omitted.]<sup>70</sup>

The first proposal clearly states the slum improvement objective, and the eighth proposal establishes a bureaucracy that can carry out that objective. The bureaucratic system specifically includes a place for basti-dweller involvement,<sup>71</sup> which British policies avoided.<sup>72</sup> In fact, for the social programme, the BIP wants “maximum possible voluntary leadership and participation by bustee-dwellers.”<sup>73</sup> Basti improvement, whether basti-dwellers are active participants or not, is an integral part of the BIP because of concerns over “public health

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<sup>69</sup> Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation, *Bustee improvement programme: Calcutta and Howrah* (Calcutta: Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation, 1967), ii-iv.

<sup>70</sup> The fourth, sixth, and seventh proposals concern the legislation that will permit the programme to proceed, overall urban land policy, and the programme’s financing methods. These have been omitted because they are not immediately relevant to this discussion.

<sup>71</sup> See Socio-legal Aid, Research, and Training Centre, *A report on the socio-legal problems in identified slum areas of Calcutta Slum Improvement Project*, comp. Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (Calcutta: The Centre, 1990’s); Future bustee improvement programs enhanced community involvement. For example, authors of the 1990’s report on socio-legal problems in bustees initially built rapport with community leaders. Then, they developed educational initiatives for both community leaders and disadvantaged females based on what the community said it needed.

<sup>72</sup> Furedy, “Whose responsibility?” 29.

<sup>73</sup> CMPO, *Bustee improvement programme*, 27.

and public welfare.”<sup>74</sup> The public was assured that the improvement initiative “would rapidly benefit not only the bustee-dwellers but every citizen of the Calcutta Metropolitan District.”<sup>75</sup> The projects that would improve public health and welfare called for amelioration of the unsanitary conditions and provision of basic amenities, including water systems, community water taps and baths, sanitary sewage system, sanitary latrines, storm drainage systems, pavements, street lighting, and the filling of unsanitary water tanks.<sup>76</sup>

The second, third, and fifth proposals clearly emphasize that slum clearance is the ultimate goal. The second proposal states that basti demolition in the center city should be expeditious. This was deemed necessary because of “economic as well as urgent health considerations.”<sup>77</sup> The third and fifth proposals demonstrate the state’s willingness to immediately begin preparations for the eventual clearance of all slums. However, the vast basti lands were not rapidly acquired by the state for demolition - they planned to acquire them by 1971, but the program did not begin to progress until 1972. Instead, the state later enacted additional legislation to provide slum-dwellers with more stable housing.

#### *The Thika Tenancy Act of 1981*

The three-tiered tenancy system from the colonial era had been creating eviction and price-elevation issues since long before independence. The *Calcutta Thika Tenancy Act* of 1949 did not do enough to solve the problems. A *thika* tenant, described in the 1949 act as “any person who holds, whether under a written lease or otherwise, land under another person,”<sup>78</sup> was still subject to the economic interests of the *zamindar* and his *thikadar*. With the *Thika Tenancy Act* of 1981, “the State became the new landlord.”<sup>79</sup> The legislation removed the *zamindars* from the equation and had the *thikadars* pay the state directly.<sup>80</sup> An appointed government “controller” had to be consulted by a *thikadar* before a tenant was evicted or prices were raised.<sup>81</sup> However, this system, designed by the communist parties after they gained power in 1977,<sup>82</sup> has not been fully implemented, essentially leaving the *thikadars* as the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., i.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., ii.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 6-8 and 17-8.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., ii.

<sup>78</sup> West Bengal, *The Calcutta Thika Tenancy Act, 1949*, ed. Benode Behari Das Gupta 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Calcutta: Nalanda Press, 1964), 4.

<sup>79</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 19.

<sup>80</sup> S. Roy, “Marginality in a mono-caste slum,” 106.

<sup>81</sup> West Bengal, *Calcutta Thika Tenancy Act*, 27-8.

<sup>82</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 19.

property owners.<sup>83</sup>

*The communist influence*

Communist political parties have affected the lives of slum-dwellers in Kolkata since India became independent. In the 1950's, "the Communist Party lodged itself in the leadership of the refugee movement in West Bengal,"<sup>84</sup> and it was the "pivot" of the basti uprising.<sup>85</sup> Asok Sen's (1992) study on a squatter colony by a railroad reveals the local-level power that communist parties held through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When the government wanted to level the colony, the population was mobilized and confronted the police force. Congress and the Communist Part of India (CPI) supported them even though other nearby colonies had been wiped out.<sup>86</sup> In another instance, the government wanted to resettle the population. The resettlement was cancelled in part because the CPI had no influence in the proposed resettlement area.<sup>87</sup> When the railroad company tried to fence in the colony as it had done to others nearby, a press conference was convened and the squatters marched to the State Assembly. The CPI supported them and stopped the railroad company.<sup>88</sup> Even the local leader during Sen's study rose to power in part because of support from the CPI.<sup>89</sup> These examples demonstrate that connections to the communist parties can be the source of survival for all types of slums in Kolkata.

*How colonial and post-independence slum policies compare*

Colonial and post-independence policies on slums exhibited a similar dynamic tension between slum improvement and slum clearance. Post-independence policies enacted by the local Indian government revealed policies at odds with each other. They were simultaneously more committed to slum improvement and slum clearance than colonial policies.

The British and Indian governments were motivated to improve slums for similar reasons, but post-independence activity was far more comprehensive. Both regimes hoped to improve the city's public health situation. The British, faced with a cholera epidemic, simply filled the slums' unsanitary water tanks.<sup>90</sup> Faced with a fire hazard for their settlers, they changed *thika* building

<sup>83</sup> S. Roy, "Marginality in a mono-caste slum," 106-7.

<sup>84</sup> Sen, *Life and labor in a squatters' colony*, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Unnayan, *Basti movement in Calcutta*, 74-5.

<sup>86</sup> Sen, *Life and labor in a squatters' colony*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Dutt, et. al, "Shifts in slum upgrading policy," 131.

materials. The BIP also improved sanitation out of concern for public health. However, it additionally provided access to basic amenities, strove to build a community that could sustain the improvements, and devised a way to overcome the issue of private land. The British authorities wanted nothing to do with slum-dwellers, but the Indian government extensively considered the living conditions in the slums. It is likely that winning slum-dwellers' support was a motivation for Indian politicians. The CPI's thorough infiltration of slums further proves politicians' interest in claiming the slum-dwellers' votes. The BIP and *Thika Tenancy Acts* demonstrate the lengths to which the Indian government would go to improve conditions for its enfranchised slum-dwellers.

Colonial and post-independence policies were openly committed to clearing slums, and they both admitted their economic and public health motivations. However, the British only cleared slums when they found it necessary, specifically when they wanted new roads or British settlers wanted more land. On the other hand, the Indian government aspired to dismantle all slums. This extreme ambition separates colonial and post-independence policies because, unlike the British, the Indian government apparently believed Kolkata's urban landscape could be effaced of its slums. Colonial and post-independence policies also differed on what should be done with displaced slum-dwellers. The British ignored the problem while the Indian government sought to provide varying levels of rehabilitation. This post-independence policy may again reflect the politicians' desires for votes. More likely, the Indian government recognized that, without re-housing options, their plan of sweeping slum demolitions would invite hundreds of thousands of former slum-dwellers into Kolkata's open streets.

### Conclusion

The slum-dwellers of Kolkata live “under physical conditions that are not fit for human habitation,”<sup>91</sup> despite the efforts of the BIP, a variety of philanthropic organizations, and slum-dwellers themselves. In order to accelerate amelioration of the grim slum conditions, slums' physical, social, and economic characteristics must be understood for the factors that shape them: the populations that inhabit them and the constraints imposed by the politics of bastis, squatter settlements, and refugee settlements. Lessons must be learned from the shortcomings of past policies on slum improvement, slum clearance, and slum-dweller rehabilitation. New policies must consider ethnic diversity, disparate occupational skills, and social and political structures that have proven critical to the survival of slums and their inhabitants.

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<sup>91</sup> CMPO, *Bustee improvement programme*, i.