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Introduction

As the clay-smeared streets of Kumartuli get washed out by the torrential rains, the leaky roof of the artist’s workshop covered with tarpaulin and plastic sheets gives up protecting the interior. The artists work night and day to finish the unfinished clay idols as the city gears up to celebrate its biggest festival – Durga Puja. Kumartuli, the abode of god-makers, tucked in the winding lanes of North Kolkata by the serene river Hooghly, is closely connected with the initiation of Durga Puja in the city as well. But each year as the colourful processions with trumpeting sounds of dhak and dhol (drums) take the idols to their puja mandap (place of worship), there is a melancholy behind this welcoming note. The city knows that after five days there will be another procession to take the deity back to the banks of the river for immersion, where it will meet its end. During the initial days of festivity, the lifeless clay idol is invoked with life through chants and hymns. The process transforms an idol into a deity, despite knowing the ephemeral nature of its existence. Invocation and immersion, two seemingly divergent yet rhythmic processes, are not only rituals of Hindu worship but signify the transient nature of life itself. Life, where permanence is an anomaly and where each creation comes with the precondition of destruction. Living close to the idol-makers’ colony of Kolkata, where the abstract god takes a material form, and the river Ganges, where it meets its end, this philosophy is well known to people. But no one thought that the very existence of this colony could come under threat and the artists could face the same destiny as the deity that they create.

The chapter unfolds in the backdrop of a State-initiated urban renewal project which intended to give Kumartuli a quintessential ‘modern’ look with multi-storied apartments and artist’s studios. Though initially people supported the cause of the project, after the first batch of artists was displaced and their homes were demolished, resistance started to grow in places. Since then the project has stalled. This evokes the question as to how not only the project but space itself has been envisaged both by the State and the inhabitants of the area. More importantly, when in the age of capitalist production space has been conceptualised by State as a commodity which needs ‘renewal’, how are other agencies of society looking at the same? Through the lens of Lefebvre’s production of space in the neo-liberal age, the chapter delves into the reasons behind the project’s unforeseen termination. Here, I would locate urban renewal projects taken
up by the State government and other civil actors as a neo-liberal articulation of capital through the register of land. I would further contextualise the Kumartuli project’s impasse within the overall political situation of the State. Is the response from the people a reflection of the circumstances in the State regarding the land right issue, or is their insecurity not only immanent to the loss of entitlement of land but emanating from a deep attachment with their ancestral land? Therefore, the attempt of this chapter is to see whether there is a scope to look beyond the capitalist production of space and acknowledge other forms of production of space following Lefebvre’s spatial triad.

**Urban renewal projects and capitalist production of space**

The concept of urban renewal dates back to the 1950s during the era after the Second World War. It gradually evolved in concept and terminology. After the war, many countries embarked on rebuilding efforts in the war-devastated cities. While the initial process had a different motive, it eventually turned out to be based on demolition and reconstruction. Irrespective of the location of the city, destruction of old, dilapidated areas, clearance of city slums and construction of modern high-rises became a norm worldwide. In the 1950s it was urban reconstruction, rebuilding the destroyed portion of the city. Gradually the concept started evolving and government policy started changing. So in the 1960s it was urban revitalisation, in the 1970s urban renewal, the 1980s urban redevelopment and finally in the 1990s it was urban regeneration (Roberts and Sykes 2000). This is an inherently Western experience, which characterises un-slumming, beautification and large-scale investment. But it was adapted quickly by rapidly growing East Asian cities as well. In 1960s the Government of Seoul undertook a clearance program specifically with the motive of squatter eviction. Urban space was categorically segmented on the basis of its income generation. The project saw low-income spaces of the city as a threat to development and beautification. Therefore, with the help of bulldozers and policemen, large-scale eviction and relocation was undertaken (Ha 2001). Vast metropolitan cities in China have also gone through the same process where redevelopment came in the guise of un-slumming, eviction, relocation and beautification of the city. Shanghai’s exemplifying story of transformation is another story of urban renewal which brought in foreign capital to rejuvenate the urban land market, boost industrial restructuring, initiate housing reform as well as infrastructural rebuilding and in the process provided a massive alteration to the physical appearance of its historic city (Wu 1999).

Hence it can be seen that the regeneration process is an inherently economic neo-liberal process which often targets dilapidated city cores and replaces the valuable old buildings with new structures. This process involves the displacement of underprivileged classes to make the city more sanitised, commercialised and global (Wu 2004). As Le Corbusier stated, ‘The old city dies and the new city rises on its ruins – not gradually, but in a burst, suddenly – as the butterfly emerges from the cocoon of the caterpillar’ (cited in Murray 2008: 41). If we try to explain the phenomenon from a Lefebvrian perspective, we can say that the statement indicates that redevelopment produces a kind of space which can be articulated only through the register of capital. These phenomena are explained as accumulation and regulation of capital in space (Harvey 1989; Smith 1996). Lefebvre’s scholarship on production of space specifically says a surplus value is generated through commodification of space. In this space there is no tolerance for spaces inhabited, dwelled and experienced by the urban poor. In this capitalist setup, the position of the State therefore stops being a regulator or mediator of the market (Harvey 1990). Instead it becomes an active agent in promoting inequality and uneven distribution. During this period, the State expresses its autonomy and power through spatial planning,
financial regulation, industrial policy and infrastructural investment, which scholars have called
the ‘state mode of production’ (Brenner 2000). This modern territorial State under capitalism performs as the most instrumental agent in creating uneven development which then the state itself tries to level by carrying out spatial restructuring. An artificial unevenness is often created and perpetuated to start new rounds of redevelopment, which leads to gentrification. Regenerated neighbourhoods tend to attract more investment and capital, gradually leading to gentrified neighbourhoods, which displace the previous residents and socio-economic activities. By investing in new sites of deprivation and devalorisation, over-accumulation is avoided, and an elevated, nuanced and filtered level of capital accumulation is articulated as spatial fix (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

Following a somewhat similar pattern, after the 1990s when India opened its door to the global economy, large investment in real estate in Kolkata started gaining momentum. Private players invested more in high-rise residential buildings, shopping malls, multiplexes and new service and commercial centres, rather than renewal of its old districts. But a different procedure took place in old districts where informal redevelopment resulted in categorical demolition and erosion of old historic as well as old ordinary buildings, settings and open spaces. From April 2005 to March 2010, over five successive financial years, the total number of building proposals sanctioned for construction in the already congested municipal corporation area alone was 17,819. Obviously, most new structures were built by demolishing the old ones (Bose 2012).

Although Lefebvre has also talked about three ways of production of space, often his work has been appropriated only in terms of capital, giving less attention to the other ways of production. His spatial triad has talked about spatial practice (societal space), a representation of space which is often envisaged as an absolute space perceived by the planners, urbanists, technocrats and engineers. This again conceives space as an extension of materiality which can be consumed, produced and reproduced in a loop. The chapter will seek to articulate the ongoing struggle of the potters of Kumartuli under the ambit of representational space which is directly lived and experienced. Lefebvre mentioned this as the space of inhabitants, users and sometimes of artists, writers and philosophers. They actively or passively try to put a meaning on the space, imagine the spatial form beyond its physicality and bring in images and symbols to make it more experiential (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Increasingly, from the 1980s the reassertion of space in academic writing came to embrace various aspects of human subjectivity and everyday life to understand the spatial component in social life. Lefebvre proposes a trialectics of spatiality essentially because absolute space and space of capitalism cannot solely explain spatial phenomena. Only an enmeshing of cultural practices, imaginations and representations, or in other words, perceived, conceived and lived space, can explain the nature of spatiality.

The chapter first sets out a brief history of the neighbourhood of Kumartuli to contextualise the artists’ standpoint regarding the project which will be explained later. Then it lays out the aspects of the State-initiated renewal project and its consequences in Kumartuli. The next analytical section discusses different reasons for the impediment of the project. This section elucidates the nature of production of space by the State and the community. How is space being produced under the State regime and what are the alternative ways of envisaging space? This will make sense of the renewal syndrome of the city authority and see how different actors of society perceive space. The chapter is based on both primary and secondary data. Ethnographic field work through detailed interviews in 2014–15 in Kumartuli and the nearby rehabilitation site has largely shaped the argument of the chapter. Newspaper reports were used as a secondary material to gather information about the project.
Genealogy of an artist colony

Kumartuli, an artist colony of idol-makers in the northern part of Kolkata, is tucked between the river Ganges on one side and the oldest road of Kolkata, Chitpur Road (renamed as Rabindra Sarani after independence), on the other. The main livelihood of the artists living in the neighbourhood is from manufacturing and sale of clay deities which are worshipped by Hindus annually for various religious festivals. Over the years, some auxiliary industries have sprung up in the area which revolve around the idols’ ornamentation. They are mainly centres of related crafts, of Zari-work, Shola-work, Daker-Shaj and imitation hair of jute fibre, for instance.

Multiple stories consider the initiation of the colony. Cotton has mentioned that the potters were initially displaced families from the flourishing Gobindapur village, which was the chosen site for Fort Williams. The Company’s Calcutta Zamindar John Zephania Holwell was given the instruction to distribute separate districts to these workmen (Cotton 1907; IANS 2007). It can be said that there is no doubt that, in the beginning of the 18th century, artisans of the surrounding villages of Bengal were the first to give the colony of artisans a proper semblance of para (neighbourhood). It all started when the landed and moneyed gentry, zamindars and landowners settled down in the newly built city in search of their fortunes (Banerjee 1989: 31). One way of showing their prosperity, influence and power was through the grand celebration of religious functions. Therefore, Durga Puja started in this city more as a social occasion for the neo-rich among the rising business (baniya) class in the colonial era than a religious one. It is a widely circulated story that Raja Nabakrishna Deb of Shovabazar was the first one to bring the artisans.

Kumbhakar from krishnanagar of Nadia district of West Bengal, was famous for its clay products. The Bengal Consultations, a journal published in 1707 AD, gives an account of the presence of Kumartuli’s artisans who occupied 75 acres of land at Sutanuti, which is a constituent of present day north Calcutta.

(IANS 2007)

From the first half of the 19th century, the artisans of Kumartuli were in high demand. Eventually, potters from nearby districts of Banshbede, Nabadwip, Shantipur and Krishnanagar, which were famous for this art, started settling in the potters’ quarter of the city (Banerjee 1989; Dutta 2003). The nature of settlement was migratory. Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, potters used to stay in their quarter for three to four months. Idol making was not a year-long profession, and during the off season they used to go back to their villages and indulge in their ancestral occupation of making potteries (Goldblatt 1981). By the end of the 19th century, there were 50 image-making workshops in Kumartuli and permanent settlements were seen in the locality (Goldblatt 1981). Leading the first settlers were Madhusudan Pal, Kanalicharan Pal, Kashinath Pal, Haripada Pal and Annadacharan Pal (Banerjee 1989).

After independence, partition brought new sets of artists with different artistic skills in the locality. They mainly came from Dhaka and Bikrampur. Kumartuli by this time witnessed two separate organisations for these two groups, one for the original settlers and the other from East Bengal. This made the already crowded Kumartuli more congested. This congestion, unavailability of basic infrastructure and amenities, unhygienic environment and inhospitable place for living gave the much-loved potters’ quarter a reputation of basti or notified slum in the post-independence era.
Contesting spaces of an urban renewal project

Logistics of an urban renewal project

Kumartuli geared up for a structural change proposed by the government under the leadership of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya during late 2000. The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) proposed a plan to rejuvenate this unique neighbourhood with modern amenities. Despite being a place where clay goddesses come to life, Kumartuli is a notified slum and it has been repeatedly associated with filth, dirt and unhygienic living condition (IANS 2007). The potters’ miserable conditions, with no adequate space for accommodating their large families, leaky roofs in their dark workshops, makeshift stalls with tarpaulin and bamboo, made the locality incompatible to produce artwork.

Indeed, Kumartuli has been depicted by scholars, writers, journalists and travellers as a place where excellence is produced in the most inhospitable environment (IANS 2007; P. Banerjee 2010). The residents who have been staying here for generations were therefore convinced that Kumartuli needed renovation sooner or later. An area was identified of 1.56 hectares in Kumartuli to build four blocks of high-rise apartment blocks. Two types of buildings were to be constructed, first with a ground floor plus three storeys and second with a ground floor plus four storeys. In both cases, the ground floor would have catered as the artists’ workshops, while the upper floors were proposed as residential units. The dwelling units were to be 27 m² with a multipurpose room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom and a balcony. Some added facilities were also introduced in the plan. There was an exhibition-cum-sale hall spread over 325 square metres, a dormitory for workers, a health centre and a training hall, two parks, a stage and a community hall (Mazumdar 2009).

Also, there was to be a separate workplace for clay, shola and other ancillary works. The ‘Kumartuli Urban Renewal project’ sanctioned under the Jawaharlal Nehru urban Renewal Mission was a joint venture of both the state and the central government. The total cost of the project was 607.67 crore (Parmar 2013). Initially, 600 residents signed up in favour of the renovation project. But from the beginning, the project got delayed due to several reasons. A revised blueprint of the Kumartuli facelift was drafted in September 2008, and chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee laid the foundation stone in January 2009 (Mazumdar 2009). But the project did not take off again for several months. First, there was the issue of choosing an alternative suitable rehabilitation site to temporarily relocate the workshops as well as the family of the artists. Three sites – Strand Bank Road, Pran Krishna Mukherjee Street and Nivedita Park in Bagbazar – were considered by the KMDA. But problems seem to have been a continuous companion with this project. In the first phase of the project, two blocks were supposed to be relocated to a new spot, block B (Ganga Prasad Lane) and C (part of Banamali Sarkar Street).

The second phase will see the relocation of block A, comprising residents of Durga Charan Banerjee Street, and block D, containing the residents of Rabindra Sarani and other parts of Banamali Sarkar Street. The proposed stretch between Strand Bank Road and Sovabazar was found unsuitable for the purpose because of its congested nature (Mazumdar 2009). KMDA officials delayed the process further from survey to plan submission and deed processing, and irritation and impatience in the population grew manifold.

Rusted fate: segmentation and relocation

Nimai Pal, a veteran artist at the age of 67 and the president of the Kumartuli Mritisshipa Sanskriti Samity, never thought he would have to leave his ancestral home and take refuge in a godown (warehouse), which was an old flour mill locally known as ‘Maida Kal’ in the colonial
era. But he hoped for a better future for the whole community and volunteered to be the first one whose home was demolished. On 23 April 2007 the first phase of demolition started and Nimai Pal, the president of the idol-makers organisation, witnessed his home getting smashed under the rolling bulldozer in front of his eyes: ‘Our family has been staying in that house for four generations. Seeing that getting bulldozed in front of your eyes is painful. But we were hopeful something better will happen’ (Pal 2015).

He talked about his ‘home’, Kumartuli, which is a few steps away from his current ‘shelter’ at Bagbazar while sitting on a long piece of unfinished wooden timber. Opposite him was another wooden appliance, a raised wooden spread known as a ‘Khat’ (bed), which is meant for sleeping but here used for all other purposes apart from sleeping. The room is filled with unfinished or somewhat finished clay and fabric idols of various sizes. Another room just opposite to this also belongs to him. In the hallway between these rooms his wife was busy in household chores. The other room is his bedroom as well as dining room and an extension of the kitchen as well.

This is the temporary shelter for 170 families which have been displaced from their ancestral home in Kumartuli in the hope of a better tomorrow (Banerjee 2010). After much inspection a spot was selected to relocate the residents of C block, five minutes from Kumartuli, at 541 B Rabindra Sarani. Asit Mukherjee, an elderly idol-maker who has been shifted from Kumartuli and is currently a resident of this shelter, said:

This godown (warehouse) was full of heaps of cement and iron rods which were not suitable for living, but KMDA cleaned it and temporary rooms were made for us. We thought it is a temporary shelter and we will get a better place. But now our entire future is in crisis. (Mukherjee 2015)

Everybody thought these rooms were temporary when they first moved here in May 2010. But the project has hit a setback for the past six years. From 2010 to 2016, a lot has happened in Bengal politics. Trinamool Congress took an overwhelming majority of seats on the Bengal assembly and took control of the left front government. Subsequently, they own the seats of Kolkata Municipal Corporation as well, and the much-anticipated project of Kumartuli’s revival has been difficult since then. The grand colonial building with a wavy roof, green windows and red brick walls by the riverside, a building presently owned by Public Health and Engineering Department and the Department of Health and Family Welfare, has become the shelter for nearly 200 families with no future hope. For the past five years the project is in stagnation. Only the rusted iron gate in front of the mill bears the mark of ‘Rehabilitation for Kumartuli Urban Renewal Project’, and the project is in irrevocable uncertainty. The fortune of the potters who left their homes anticipating a better future is in utter jeopardy.

Land as capital

The banner at the entrance of Kumartuli, the potters’ quarter, seems to proclaim Kumartuli’s position loud and clear. It is the banner, like many such banners in the locality, which announces Kumartuli’s resistance to the renovation process. It declares loudly that Kumartuli finds its essence in the labyrinth of lanes and tottering huts. Between the relocation site and the original site there are two different worldviews. While the dislocated wanted fast completion of the project so that they could go back to Kumartuli again, those staying in Kumartuli refuse to be part of the project. Multiple narratives and multiple realities came up in the fieldwork as the reason behind the stalling of the project.
Contesting spaces of an urban renewal project

There was also inter-party conflict, which accelerated the whole dispute. The main two organisations comprising artists from East and West Bengal started meeting with the officials of KMDA, who were backed by the government. This instigated those who were supporting the opposing party, the Trinamool Congress.

The larger political scenario of the State was also marred with the land right and land accusation issue starting from Singur to Nandigram at this point in time. In May 2006, the government of West Bengal, led by CPI (M), selected 403.472 hectares of prime agricultural land in Singur. They wanted to acquire the land for the purpose of leasing it out to one of the biggest automobile companies of India, Tata Motors. Tata Motors intended to build a car manufacturing unit in Singur, with the motive of producing its most affordable car of the world, Tata Nano. The government acquired the land in spite of the fierce resistance of the unwilling farmers. The protest, which eventually turned into a movement of the farmers, continued against the land acquisition and, in late 2008, Tata Motors decided that it could not operate a factory in this hostile local environment. Therefore, they decided to shut its operations in Singur and move the entire factory to Gujarat. The opposition leader of TMC, Mamata Banerjee, took a lead role in advocating the cause of the farmers and eventually Tata Motors had to withdraw. But on the ground the situation remained in deadlock, as the acquired land remained vacant and it was not being returned to its owners. A similar incident with more political velocity happened in Nandigram in 2007 where the government wanted to acquire 4046.85 hectares of land for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The land was to be given to the Indonesia-based Salim Group to develop a chemical factory. As resistance began to brew in the area, the main organisation which was resisting took charge of the area and the police could not enter the villages for three months. In the meantime, several families who are supporters of the ruling left party were attacked and evicted from their land. At last, the State government cancelled the project, but they decided to send police in the region to break the standoff. In a clash between villagers and police, 14 people were killed and several were injured as per the official count. The impact of both the incidents and the government policy of industrialisation in the exchange of prime farm land acquisition resulted in a massive electoral defeat of the government after 34 years of its rule in West Bengal.

As stated above, in each scenario the left front government faced considerable opposition from the people who were backed by the opposing party, TMC. Things took the same course in Kumartuli as well. The landowner artists with the support of TMC formed two parallel associations, ‘Kumartuli Adhikar Rakshak Samiti’ and ‘Kumartuli Pragatisheel Mristilpo o Sajhshilpo Samiti’. They simply said that Kumartuli’s renovation was stalled because of the land ownership issue.

Most of the land in Kumartuli is ‘thikajami’, which is leased land. Out of 600 applicants, 50 first resisted the handover of their own land to the government. Most of them were the owners of their land allocated for the workshop. They were unsure of getting back a place which would be equally valuable to their owned land, though, as a solution, KMDA was ready to allocate one extra flat to the land owners, but people still refused to give their land. Kartik Pal, a veteran idol-maker in his 60s, says,

Historically there have been instances where the government did not keep its words. We cannot trust them. No matter which government it is. They can take up our lands and use it for something else. We are not sure if we will be relocated back here. The project can take very long to complete. What will happen to our business during that time if they displace us and put us somewhere far away from Kumartuli. If we move from here we will face huge loss because we won’t get any order. People associate idol-making only with Kumartuli.

(Pal, 2015)
Kartik Pal’s last line, ‘people associate idol-making only with Kumartuli’, leads us to the other side of the story regarding the renewal project, namely its stagnation and how people see their ancestral land. Ownership of land, their insecurity of not getting back the lost land and distrust towards the government were reasons, but not the only ones. The land issue was the legal, logical and most easily understandable reason, which was communicated from the artists’ side to put an impediment on the whole process of displacement, rehabilitation, relocation and construction of a modernised Kumartuli. This official narrative was put forward to stop the displacement process. But the one narrative which was completely unreported in the media was people’s attachment with their land and how they see land as more than a vector of exchange. I discuss this in the next section.

Overall, in the country, the general trend of India’s developmental paradigm involves large-scale transfer of land from rural communities and disposed groups to private corporations. It is noticeable in the State initiative at Kumartuli that for this quarter of the city, ‘renewal’ projects are the only answer for the State to show it is serious about the development of the old city. The proposed restructuring project by the State is intended to legitimise and recognise aesthetically pleasing and sanitised renderings of space as developed space. This proposed restructured landscape was, therefore, essentially uprooted from its temporality, which propagates the State’s modernist agenda. As many scholars have already said, what we study in the 21st-century metropolis is largely a study of modernity (Robinson 2006). This modernity is largely an emulation of Western expressions and experiences, which does not remain confined in the scale of society but also gets reflected on space.

**Space as lived**

Narratives were presented by the people about their deepest attachment with the land. More than the exchange value of the land, some people talked about the ‘character’ of the place. Following Molotch, they talked in favour of a place where aspects like the economic, social, physical and intangible elements are all existing together (Molotch et al. 2000). The maze of lanes and bylanes, the small homes for large families, the deep dark workshop, the shaky bamboo scaffolding, the smell of riverine clay, everything associated with old Kumartuli is so dear to these people, so deep-rooted in their minds, that they could not consider a place with shining state-of-the-art buildings, broad boulevards and glittering art galleries.

In Kumartuli, fear of displacement as a result of a proposed restructuring project was overpowered by fear of losing one’s home, fear of unfamiliarity, fear of losing one’s identity and most importantly, fear of losing the mundane ways of life. Sunil Pal, an artist and a long-time resident of Kumartuli, proclaims,

> After old Kumartuli will be modernised I am sure nobody from outside world will come to see our way of work. The hardship, struggle and darkness of our lives have made us extraordinary. I will miss the shutterbugs and foreigners who find our way of work so intriguing that they spend days with us drinking tea from this roadside stall, from this clay pot. I don’t think these shops will have any place after renovation.

*(Pal, 2015)*

Sunil Pal’s concern is not only his. The people of Kumartuli know that their way of living made them unique in front of the whole world. Once they become ‘modern’ and ‘developed’ they will lose that particular essence – that which makes them different, makes them one of a kind and unlike any other artists’ colony in the world. Certainly, they feel they belong in this messiness,
in this soil, and if something disrupts their familiar environment they won’t be able to recover the loss. The loss here is not merely in economic terms but involves a loss of self and the loss of an artist’s core existence.

Those people who were already displaced have got a covered workshop, which protects them from torrential rains in the monsoon and scorching heat in the summer. They don’t have to run or hide, and they don’t have to cover their unfinished clay idols – issues they constantly used to face in Kumartuli. They are secured from potential loss of any kind. Their homes and workshops are safe from nature’s wrath. They should feel content. They should feel a significant improvement in their standard of life. Asit Mukherjee, a resident of the shelter says:

It’s true we don’t have to cover our idols like we used to do in Kumartuli during rainy season. But our idols used to get dried up in the nature by sun, in the wide open. Here we are dependent on fans. Our electricity bills are huge. We constantly miss the vibrant activity of Kumartuli streets.

(Mukherjee, 2015)

The artists work quietly inside their impenetrable workshops, but they feel a sense of detachment from the soil. They miss the buzzing activity in the narrow lanes of Kumartuli, they miss the sudden need to cover their idols from rain and they miss the natural sunlight where the idols got soaked up.

These narratives were completely missing from the official version that we heard before. How the piece of land acquired a certain meaning over time, which is incommensurable by an economic standard value, is worth noting. Here, people expressed their emotion about Kumartuli, which is much more intimate, pervading and in some ways ordinary too. It emerged from their daily life experiences, interactions with neighbours, friends, family and even strangers, which to a large extent defines who they are. I am not suggesting that the way the State viewed the land in Kumartuli and the way they wanted people to measure its disposability is not economic, but the idea that I am grappling with here highlights the need to acknowledge other forms of production of space. Similarly, Kumartuli’s natural and built landscape is where they have grown up; they have ancestral roots attached to the place. Over the years, the space of Kumartuli itself has acquired a meaning because of its long tradition and its past connection. The very process of a facelift may uproot Kumartuli from its living traditions. There will be a complete rupture in the existing ‘sense of place’ once the low-lying tally huts are demolished and the narrow lanes are broadened.

Conclusions

In the case of Kumartuli, it can be seen how the State conceptualises space. First, it assumes that space is absolute and physical where a price can be put on it. Second, this spatial understanding has been positivist in nature; hence it has remained impersonal. In Kolkata, the mushrooming of redevelopment efforts in ties with the private real estate sector has shown utter disdain towards the existing design, architecture, sense of place, feeling of locality and historic value of a neighbourhood. Planned reconstruction has torn down old houses and in its place built high-rise structures where more people can be confined. The plan and vision has always been to make the city quintessentially modern, disregarding the experiential landscape. Therefore, more than the concern for crumbling infrastructural decay, the intention of the Kumartuli Urban Renewal Project was to make it worthy of a major tourist attraction centre in the city. To make it consumer worthy, a demolition was planned, which came at a certain cost: the cost of people’s
belonging, pride, identity, local distinctiveness and experience that made the spatial understanding more complex as well as fluid and dynamic. Here, Lefebvre’s insistence that rather than two opposing tenets, only three moments of the spatial triad can produce urban social space makes this scholarship more insightful. To mark a crack in the neo-liberal façade of capitalist modes of production, there is a need to adhere to Lefebvre’s representational space which gives precedence to everything that is passionate, humane, imaginary, yet lived.

References


Mukherjee, Asit (2015) Interviewed (about half an hour) on 17 February at his shelter home.


Pal, Kartik (2015) Interviewed (about half an hour) on 20 February at his workshop in Kumartuli.

Pal, Nimai (2015) Interviewed (about one hour) on 15 February at his shelter home.

Pal, Sunil (2015) Interviewed (about half an hour) on 5 February at his workshop in Kumartuli.


