

The climate change of your desires: Climate migration and imaginaries of urban and rural climate futures

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Abstract

What are the political imaginaries contained within representations of urban climate futures? What silent but corollary rural dispossessions accompany them? I investigate these questions through the experience of migrants from rural coastal Bangladesh to peri-urban Kolkata. The threats posed to their villages by a variety of ecological disruptions (both loosely and intimately linked with climate change) drive their migration in search of new livelihoods. Their experiences suggest that the demise of rural futures is entangled with the celebration of urban climate futures. However, social movements in this region resisting agrarian dispossession point to alternative political imaginaries that resist teleologies of urbanization at the expense of agrarian livelihoods. Current work in both agrarian studies and urban studies theorizes these linked dynamics of rural–urban transition, seeking to understand them in relation to broader political economies. I bring these debates into conversation with one another to highlight the importance of attention to counter-hegemonic agrarian political imaginaries, particularly in the face of predictions of the death of the peasantry in a climate-changed world. It won't be possible to identify or pursue just climate futures without them.

Keywords

Climate migration, agrarian studies, urban studies, urbanization, climate change adaptation, planned retreat, Bangladesh, India

You see this? This is nothing. It's not anything you can make an enterprise out of. This is nothing.

The speaker, an official at WWF-India, was gesturing animatedly at a potato field behind him. He faced my companions and I, who were standing on the edge of a crumbling embankment, staring out at the field with him in front of us. It was late January, the tail

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end of the potato harvest in the Sundarbans of West Bengal. A few farmers moved about in the field between small piles of the remaining yield. They paid little attention to us, or indeed this somewhat brazen dismissal of their work (pronounced in English for the benefit of the gathered audience peering down from the embankment).

This was day two of a sightseeing junket of the Indian side of the Sundarbans. This, the world's largest mangrove forest, straddles the border of India and Bangladesh, flanked to the south by the Bay of Bengal. The trip had been planned and organized by WWF-India through a program supported by the World Bank. In addition to WWF staff, my companions were journalists, donors, and government officials from Bangladesh and India. The WWF program officials were on a mission to reveal to this collective not only the unique ecological characteristics of the region, but also a vision of the region's future that they sought to promote through a new climate change adaptation program they were in the process of expanding. It entailed planned retreat from coastal villages and associated urban development to accommodate the climate migrants such a transformation would produce. In this vision, climate change adaptation would require the active destruction of rural futures in order to forge new, resilient, and prosperous urban ones.

In this article, I examine the relationship between the rise of new visions of resilient urban futures and the active demise of rural ones. I do so through an exploration of narratives of climate crisis and adaptation and accompanying development interventions, paired with an examination of the political economy of rural out-migration from this region to Kolkata.¹ I illuminate the intersections of three sites: a village in coastal Bangladesh, a slum on the outskirts of Kolkata, and the Indian Sundarban region being targeted for planned retreat in anticipation of climate change. I examine how climate change becomes the ecological and temporal context within which new models of development are imagined for the present and future not only in this region, but throughout the rest of the world.² In this sense, an investigation of these particular urban climate imaginaries—the climate change of your desires—offers a window into the governance of life under climate change more broadly. Here, the political economy of development, climate change, and rural–urban transformations intersect to shape and be shaped by spatially interconnected modes of governing in anticipation of an uncertain future.³ In service of this analysis, I bring together parallel debates in the fields of urban studies and agrarian studies to investigate the political stakes in both academic and popular discourses concerning the death of the village and the peasantry, stakes that take on a new and urgent valence in the time of climate change.

Through a sympathetic critique of the literature on planetary urbanization, I argue that while certain attempts to incorporate concern with rural communities into analysis of urbanization are important, there is value in directing attention to other processes and political imaginaries besides urbanization, and for this we need different tools. Urbanization is a process. As a political vision, it is hegemonic. Yet, it is not totalizing. There are other processes, political visions, and possibilities. We need to understand them, too.

The empirical dynamics I investigate here are collectively constituted within what I have elsewhere called an *adaptation regime*, a socially and historically specific configuration of power that governs the landscape of possible intervention in the face of climate change (Paprocki, 2018). In this article I investigate the epistemic and material dynamics through which the adaptation regime promotes a vision of transition away from agrarian livelihoods toward urban, export-oriented production, necessitating rural decay for the sake of urban expansion.⁴ Does a vision of urban climate resilience require the devaluation of rural lives and livelihoods? The broader implications of these investigations are to argue that we cannot understand the dynamics governing the production of urban natures without close attention to the associated production of rural natures.

The demise of imaginaries of rural futures through this adaptation regime is significant not only because of the changes it facilitates, but also because of the alternative future imaginaries it elides. For several decades, social movements led by farmers in this coastal region have mobilized to defend continued agricultural production in their villages, resisting a transition toward commercial shrimp aquaculture and the agrarian dispossessions it entails (Adnan, 2013; Paprocki and Huq, 2018). Today these movements continue to gain traction, not only supporting continued rice production, but also championing a return to rice agriculture in communities that had earlier transitioned to shrimp (Afroz et al., 2017; Paprocki, 2019). Their alternative visions of the persistence of agrarian futures contrast sharply with visions and discourses of rural decline. Their growing success speaks to the possibility of continued life and agricultural production in this region under climate change, undermining notions of the inevitability of ecological crisis and rural erasure.

At odds with these local visions, there is historic precedent for thinking about the Sundarbans as a zone of social and ecological backwardness demanding exceptional modes of governance. Bhattacharyya has documented how the British East India Company and the Raj that followed used a variety of legal, bureaucratic, and engineering technologies to attempt to tame a landscape that was fundamentally resistant to administrative control (Bhattacharyya, 2018a, 2018b). Historically, aggressive dynamics of artificial land reclamation and resettlement, dating to the colonial period, shaped a sense of the region's ecological vulnerability. The unstable geopolitics of this border region compounded the sense of vulnerability. Cross-border movement led to large populations of Bangladeshi migrants on the Indian side of the Sundarbans (Iqbal, 2010; Jalais, 2005; Samaddar, 1999). Popular sentiments in India about the undesirability of these residents arise from a long history of communalism (across the Indian sub-continent), compounded by a history of banditry in the region that has fed off of the abundant forest resources (Van Schendel, 2004).

Along with these social and physical dynamics, the Sundarbans are a unique mangrove ecosystem, home to several rare and endangered species, including the Bengal tiger. As Jalais (2010) has written, "throughout the recent history of the Sundarbans, the very presence of people in the region has been seen as a hindrance to its development as a 'natural' haven for wildlife" (9). Moreover, the development and expansion of cities in this region has historically entailed the active devaluation of rural space, enrolling it in dynamics of capital accumulation (Bhattacharyya, 2018b). Yet, climate change has created an opportunity for new modes of moral and material governance of the region. Instead of benign neglect and underdevelopment, the notion that adaptation in this area should be carried out through actively dismantling its social and physical infrastructures has suggested new opportunities for regional and national growth and accumulation, now repackaged as innovations in climate change adaptation. In the final section of the article, I examine how this is now taking place through an explicit vision of managed retreat and active devaluation of rural futures.

In what follows, I frame these arguments by first outlining the relevant debates in urban studies and agrarian studies, situating them both in relation to Mitchell's concept of "enframing." I then move to an examination of the three field sites that provide the empirical basis for the paper: Kolanihat (a village in coastal Bangladesh), New Town on the outskirts of Kolkata, and the West Bengal Sundarbans. I conclude with discussion of a peasant social movement in coastal Bangladesh that has mobilized around pursuing agrarian futures that resist totalizing visions of urban futures.

Theorizing the rural and urban together

The analysis presented here is grounded in a body of theoretical work concerned with understanding relational dynamics of socio-spatial transformation through an investigation of the construction of the urban via the rural and vice versa. I explore here a very particular form of this process in the context of efforts to confront climate change in Bengal. I examine how this context has given rise to conditions under which the active erasure—social, epistemological, and material—of rural space and its alternative political imaginaries has been central to imagining the future of the urban. Scholars of planetary urbanization have drawn attention to the ways in which extraction from rural space has supported the expansion of urban space (Brenner, 2014a),⁵ a dynamic also observed here. Yet, this “urban analytical gaze” (Jazeel, 2018: 406) necessarily omits counter-hegemonic political imaginaries that exist among agrarian communities.

In an essay from which this article’s title takes its inspiration, Timothy Mitchell (1999) writes that the politics of neoliberal economic reform in Egypt relied on an epistemological device through which “the economy” was rendered an empirical object with neat boundaries that could be drawn and analyzed, delineated from its “outside” and thus radically reshaped. He thus builds on his earlier work in *Colonising Egypt* in which he developed the concept of *enframing*, a “modern kind of order. . . [that] works by determining a fixed distinction between outside and inside” (Mitchell, 1988: 55). Both in this book and later in *Rule of Experts*, Mitchell examines how this work of enframing relies on fixing the boundary condition of the “constitutive outside”—that which is both interior and exterior, but which creates the conditions of possibility for the thing or process being analyzed.⁶ Like economics in Mitchell’s analysis, the analytical tools of planetary urbanization seek to incorporate the landscapes outside the “city” into understandings of the process of urbanization. Brenner refers to the “city” and “non-city” as “agglomerations” and “operational landscapes,” respectively. The latter “are continually transformed through their roles in supporting” the former (Brenner, 2014b: 23). Thus, rendered as “operational landscapes,” rural spaces are brought “inside” an understanding of urbanization in order to illuminate how they are “subsumed” (Brenner, 2014b: 16) by the dynamics of capitalist urbanization. In this sense, planetary urbanization is a method of enframing urbanization such that rural space is both marginal and central to its operational logics.

In Bengal, this work of enframing means understanding Kolkata or Dhaka (Bangladesh’s capital) as cities that are expanding and dramatically transforming through the “operational landscapes” of Khulna and the Sundarbans, which provide the labor to build them and the products whose extraction finances them. Critically for our purposes here, the destruction of these rural sites is also embedded in the future imaginaries that shape their linked cities. Dominant emerging visions of climate futures mobilize these same tools of enframing to promote this developmentalism. Enclosures of rural space are the conditions of possibility of the emergence of these urban climate futures.

Other recent scholarship has challenged planetary urbanization on precisely these grounds, encouraging attention to rural dynamics on their own terms (Krause, 2013; Mercer, 2017) and demonstrating the value of attention to the “outsides” of urbanization (Oswin, 2018a). These debates illuminate that this insistence on understanding processes outside of the “urban” as well as outside of “urbanization” is both methodological and political. Jazeel (2018), for example, critiques what he calls “methodological urbanization” for reifying urban processes and objects of analysis, and he highlights the analytical and political value of a methodological turn away from the urban. Derickson (2018) similarly critiques planetary urbanization on both epistemological and political grounds, likening the

method to Haraway's (1988) "god-trick"—a universalizing epistemology that denies limits to knowledge from a situated perspective. Oswin (2018b) situates these debates within the broader commitment of *Society and Space* and critical geographic scholarship to the "expansion of conceptual and political toolkits." In this piece, I offer a contribution to this broad project. I am sympathetic to the methodological concern with understanding "urbanization" beyond the city, but I also draw attention to the important political work of attending to other possibilities and political visions that may otherwise be subsumed by this approach.

A parallel debate about the totalizing dynamics of socio-spatial transformation exists in agrarian studies, where, rather than the urban question, it takes the form of the agrarian question. In agrarian studies, this debate over the contemporary dynamics of agrarian change and depeasantization (Araghi, 2009)⁷ has manifested most animatedly as a debate over whether peasants continue to exist in the contemporary moment. This is epitomized by a disagreement between Bernstein (2006, 2014), who writes that "peasants" do not exist today in any meaningful historical sense, and McMichael (2015, 2006) who writes that they do, particularly in a meaningful political sense. Bernstein argues that the term "peasant" denotes a kind of essentialized pre-capitalist social and economic relation that no longer exists anywhere in the world, and thus obscures the multi-scalar global production relations and circuits of capital that define agriculture in contemporary capitalism. McMichael responds that this way of seeing contemporary claims about the peasantry as an anachronism reflects a reductive and fundamentally teleological theory of capitalist development. The claim of the complete disappearance of the peasantry is a corollary proposition to that of the complete urbanization of the planet.

Moreover, McMichael (2006) argues that while the "peasantry" may not exist today in some transhistorical sense, it does exist as a political category, and one that exposes the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. For McMichael, this continued use of the "peasant category" may be a strategic essentialism, yet he insists on the ongoing empirical and political importance of an analytical category referring to small producers. Similarly, Watts (2009) and Edelman (2009) have each described the usefulness of the peasantry as a political category even if it is not an analytically coherent or rigorous empirical category. In both urban and agrarian studies, we need to be attentive to the kinds of political work that concepts like "the urban" and "peasants" perform in particular historic conjunctures, and the concrete material effects of these choices.⁸

As this discussion highlights, the field of agrarian studies is and has always been invested in understanding these relational dynamics of socio-spatial transformation through deep historical and empirical investigation. In a similar appeal, Brenner (2014a) writes,

It seems as urgent as ever... to develop theories, analyses and cartographies that situate such operational landscapes—their land-use systems; their labor regimes and property relations; their forms of governance; their ecological impacts; and their rapidly changing social fabrics—quite centrally within our understanding of the contemporary urban condition. (28)

Such calls for a relational approach to understanding the transformation of global political economies and ecologies share ground with concerns in agrarian studies to see agrarian transformations as manifestations of broader historical and geographic process. Yet, the insights described above from agrarian studies illuminate two things: first, that these theories, analysis, and cartographies are already at hand, and second, that we need to draw on them to understand more than "the urban condition." Thus, if scholars of planetary urbanization and its critics are looking for resources or political visions to see outside of this

“operationalization,” they will find them in abundance in the field of agrarian studies, a long-standing scholarly project organized precisely around these questions (Bernstein and Byres, 2001). Once these insights are incorporated into analyses of urbanization, they will also illuminate that political visions operating beyond the hegemony of urbanization contain possibilities for resistance and alternatives to these violent processes that planetary urbanization seeks to make visible.

These two conversations are parallel debates in the fields of urban studies and agrarian studies. They both seek to understand rural and urban communities in relation to broader political economies, and are also fundamentally concerned with the political stakes of how that analysis is conducted. Both the planetary urbanization thesis and Bernstein’s repudiation of a contemporary category of peasants predict these foreclosures of multiple possible futures because of the way they define the urban and the rural. What I argue here is that the erasure of the rural in the context of climate change is in fact actively produced. This erasure is carried out through imaginaries of urban climate futures that not only don’t recognize the role of rural space in producing urban space, but which also fail to imagine just rural climate futures.

Political economies of rural and urban development in South Asia

The border between Bangladesh and West Bengal was uneasily settled, and despite their political separation since the 1947 Partition, these two halves of Bengal have always been dynamically connected through their cultural histories, patterns of migration, economic development, physical infrastructure investment, and material flows of water and wildlife (Van Schendel, 2004). These transboundary movements muddle any discrete analysis of development on either side of the border in isolation from its neighbor (Cons and Sanyal, 2013). An examination of the political economy of development on each side can help us to better understand them individually and together.

Bangladesh’s Division of Khulna borders the southern end of West Bengal, encompassing the eastern half of the Sundarbans, reaching down to the Bay of Bengal in the South. The lands in these coastal tracts have historically been extremely fertile, thanks to the confluence of the Ganga, Meghna, and Brahmaputra rivers that converge here to form one massive delta flowing into the Bay. The links between Kolkata and its rural hinterlands in the Sundarbans and the coastal region that is now southern Bangladesh have shaped urban development in the region since the late 17th century, when the British East India Company established the city as its primary port and trading base. Kolkata quickly grew into the most political and economically significant port in British India. All shipping traffic in and out of the port was routed through the Sundarbans, the importance of which was recognized by one British observer who dubbed the region “the British emporium of the East” (Bull, 1823: 124). Yet, in the aftermath of the Partition of India, the links between the two sides of Bengal not only became more strained, but the recognition of their historic and ongoing interconnections has also been obscured (Kabir, 2013). In what follows, I trace these extant connections between the production of space in Khulna and Kolkata through attention to the localized political ecology of production relations and migration in each, with attention to both their particularities and interconnections. All of these changes take place in the context of the emerging environmental impacts of climate change, as well as the considerable transformations resulting from new efforts to confront life and loss in the time of climate change (Elliott, 2018; Paprocki, 2019). These new imaginaries of a climate changed future also hold significant consequences for the organization of social life and production of space in both Khulna and Kolkata.

Kolanihat: Geographies of agrarian dispossession

Kolanihat⁹ is a village in Khulna's Paikgachha sub-district, about 20 miles south of Khulna City as the crow flies, and 5 miles from Paikgachha town, the nearest trading market. Investigating recent transformations in production and social reproduction in Kolanihat offers a window into the imbrication of Khulna's rural communities with the region's larger political economy of development. Until the mid-1980s, most residents of Kolanihat produced one to two agricultural crops per year, the most important of which was aman (monsoon season) rice. This limited growing season was the result of the low land elevation that kept some of the village's fields under water for much of the year. Nonetheless, the fertile alluvial soils enriched by sediment deposits from the floodwaters of the adjacent river facilitated an abundant crop, and most residents report historic surplus production that kept their families fed throughout the year. While many of the village's residents did not own land, most were engaged in agricultural production. A survey from a nearby village in 1987 found that over 50% of residents were either landless or marginal land holders, requiring them to sharecrop or sell their labor for seasonal agricultural production (Datta, 1998, 31). At this time, the landless and land poor survived on various combinations of sharecropping, day laboring, and seasonal labor out-migration.¹⁰

In the 1980s, Bangladesh was undergoing a period of rapid structural adjustment. Along with the growth of the country's garment industry, the expansion of commercial production of saltwater shrimp was identified as a key strategy in efforts toward export diversification. Kolanihat was enrolled in this expansion in 1986, when Wakil, a wealthy businessman from Khulna City chose it as a site for investing in a large *gher*¹¹ (shrimp cultivation) operation. Throughout the region at this time, huge tracts of land were being converted into *ghers* from rice farming lands with varying degrees of consent from local communities. While some lands were leased from their owners (who often found later on that their use went unpaid or underpaid), many were forcibly taken through illegal and often quite violent land grabbing. In 1990, in a nearby village just across the river from Kolanihat, Karunamoyee Sardar, a local farmer and landless movement leader was abducted and murdered in the midst of a protest against land grabbing for shrimp cultivation in her village. Narratives about the relative use of force to compel this transition in Kolanihat differ. While many of the village's landless residents tell stories about armed guards hired by Wakil either to force the land grab or to prevent theft from the *ghers* once they were established, wealthier residents tell stories about a calmer process through which they agreed to lease out their lands, only to find later that they were not paid as agreed, were paid less than expected, or were unable to easily reclaim the use of their lands at the end of the lease term. Regardless of the level of force they experienced, residents describe a process of agrarian dispossession driven by the shrimp boom.

Meanwhile, Wakil breached the embankment and built his own sluice gate to bring saltwater from the river into his *gher*, effectively allowing him to control the management of water within most of Kolanihat and the surrounding area. This control over the water management within the village has serious implications for life within Kolanihat. While Wakil's sluice allows for the uninhibited flow of water between the river and the land he controls, residents describe it as just one element within a larger political system in which the financial capital and political influence from nearby cities comes to shape both their physical landscape and their ability to survive within it. One man told this story about the ongoing struggles to keep shrimp cultivation out of the village,

There have been clashes with them [the businessmen who own *ghers*]. These people live in the city, some live in Khulna, Satkhira.¹² The rich people who control the [local] administration have been torturing us. We repair the river embankments and then they come at night with the police and they break them down again [to allow the inflow of saltwater]. When we go out in the morning they send goons hired from the city to attack us. They torture us. If we try to go to the police station [to file complaints], they make us file a General Diary and they say ‘we will look into it.’ They say they will look into it but that very night the water is released into the *gher* again. Nobody looks out for us. Who are we supposed to tell about this pain? There is no one to hear us.

This man’s testimony offers a window into the rural political economy of shrimp production and its urban interconnections. He describes how agricultural production in the village has been subverted by the economic interests of outsiders, and how the complicity of local authorities has actively sustained this subversion. He describes how these power dynamics are physically inscribed into the landscape of the village, most clearly through struggles over the protective embankments that keep the saltwater out (or in).

This power also reshapes the internal landscape of the village, where the fertility of the soil, increasingly salinated, deteriorates. When the saltwater is brought in from the river, it fills the *ghers* and seeps into the surrounding farmland, such that it becomes impossible to farm rice in adjacent plots. Gradually, the salinity has killed the trees in the village, crept into homesteads, and made it virtually impossible to cultivate the small garden plots that support subsistence consumption throughout rural Bangladesh. As agriculture has given way to aquaculture, the local labor market has also transformed dramatically. Residents of Kolanihat estimate that shrimp aquaculture requires somewhere between 1 and 10% of the amount of labor as rice agriculture requires.¹³ Thus, this shift has resulted in a significant labor surplus in the village, a change experienced most seriously by the significant proportion of landless laborers in the village who depended on this work for their survival. These people have been forced to migrate out of Kolanihat to find work, many permanently.

Many of these recent changes in Kolanihat can be understood in relation to the transformations in emerging social imaginaries of life in the time of climate change (Paprocki, 2019). The water logging and soil salination caused by the inflow of saline water for shrimp cultivation have been frequently attributed to the results of climate change and sea level rise by journalists, development practitioners, and some academics (Brammer, 2014; e.g. Harris, 2014; Szczepanski et al., 2018). Consequently, shrimp aquaculture has been proposed as a climate change adaptation strategy by many within the development and donor communities in Bangladesh who suggest that the use of salinated and water logged agricultural lands for shrimp is a logical and lucrative adaptive response to the current ecological crisis (Paprocki, 2018).

Finally, the migrations resulting from this process of depeasantization have been reframed as climate migration (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2015; Shamsuddoha et al., 2012), obscuring the dynamics of agrarian change in the region and their consequences (Brammer, 2009). The cascading impacts of these “climate migrations” have been hailed as among the greatest global security threats of the 21st century, with out-migration to India from these low-lying islands in coastal Khulna cited as a particular flashpoint of climate vulnerability.¹⁴ Podesta (formerly Chief of Staff to Bill Clinton) and Ogden of the Center for American Progress write that “India will struggle to cope with a surge of displaced people from Bangladesh, in addition to those who will arrive from the small islands in the Bay of Bengal that are being slowly swallowed by the rising sea” (2007: 117) explaining that “these desperate individuals go where they can, not necessarily where they should” (131). Certainly,

the question of where migrants from Khulna “should” go is shaped by emerging moral economies of climate change both in this region as well as globally. Enframed as a hotspot of climate vulnerability, for which solutions are available in the form of urbanization and agrarian dispossession, the situated knowledge of agrarian change and its multiple possible trajectories are written out of this discourse of the region’s future.

As the physical landscape and labor market in Kolanihat transform, so too do migration patterns of its residents. Dwindling agricultural labor opportunities force those who previously relied on sharecropping and seasonal day labor in agriculture to leave in search of more durable sources of income. At the beginning this process involved moments of violence and it has been punctuated by incidents of violent dispossession throughout. Yet, over the past several decades, the persistent dynamics of depeasantization have turned slow and less conspicuous. Many who previously relied on seasonal migration have been forced to leave more permanently (Paprocki and Cons, 2014). Some find jobs in brick manufacturing in peri-urban areas around Bangladesh. Some go to Khulna City, where there are jobs in construction as well as in de-heading shrimp in factories where it is then frozen for export. Some find work in construction or garment manufacturing in Dhaka. Yet, residents say that most who leave Kolanihat travel across the border to Kolkata. Some do so on a seasonal basis, but many leave permanently and bring their families with them.

One resident of Kolanihat described to me this slow process of dispossession; he formerly worked as a day laborer, the income from which supported his family, supplemented by a robust garden plot in their homestead. Several years ago, he was injured in an accident and took a microcredit loan of 5000 taka (about 60 USD) to pay for the associated medical expenses. With insufficient earning opportunities in the village while he recovered, he struggled to repay the loan, and his debt grew. He traveled once to Kolkata and found that work was available there that would support his livelihood more sustainably. Within several years, his debt had grown to 17,000 taka (about 203 USD). At that point, the debt had become insurmountable, and he could see no viable future livelihood in Kolanihat.¹⁵ In September 2014, he told me he planned to sell everything and leave for Kolkata permanently. Migrations like this one are a prominent feature of the political economy of the development of shrimp aquaculture in Kolanihat. While the mechanism of dispossession is less conspicuous than the violence of an overt land grab, its impacts on the population of the village have been immense. Describing these vast migrations from her village to Kolkata, another woman in Kolanihat explained to me, *jibika nirbhor kore jay*, “they leave as their livelihoods depend on it.”

New Town: Geographies of urban migration

When Kolanihat’s migrants travel to Kolkata, most go to a small enclave on the outskirts of the burgeoning satellite city of New Town.¹⁶ New Town has been planned for residential use and as a hub of Kolkata’s growing IT sector—now envisioned as a new mode of greening urban development. It has also been the site of a battle between competing visions of urban green growth in India (Das Gupta, 2017).¹⁷ While Prime Minister Narendra Modi envisioned New Town as a key site in his “Smart City” mission for sustainable urban development, Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee has sought to develop New Town as India’s first “Green City.”¹⁸ While these visions reflect substantive differences between India’s major BJP and Congress parties over equity in urban development, water rights, and centralization of the planning process (Ghoshal, 2016), both require the labor of migrants in service of their expansion.

Migrants from what is now Bangladesh have been travelling to this part of greater Kolkata since Partition, when the area was still largely farmland. Thus, today many recent Bangladeshi migrants rent space from wealthier, more established migrants who have been there for decades. Roy (2003) has referred to such spaces surrounding greater Kolkata as the “rural-urban interface,” by which she suggests not only the spatial proximity of the rural and the urban, but also their interconnected political economies. I explore here how their liminal status between urban and rural can be understood through the relationship of these migrants to the rural spaces from which they have come as well as through their relationship to the city they inhabit and are helping to construct. The migrants refer to this space where they live as “gram,” meaning “village,” denoting the apparent rural geographical imaginaries through which they construct this space (cf. Cowan, 2018; Gururani and Dasgupta, 2018; Jazeel, 2018). Yet, the spatial configuration of the community looks more like an urban slum (or *bosti*) than it does like the rural villages from which they have come. The small dwellings made of corrugated metal and cinder blocks are tightly squeezed together, with some perched precariously on bamboo stilts over an open sewage canal. Instead of socializing in the spacious open courtyards of the traditional Bangladeshi village, social interactions are squeezed between narrow pathways or spill out into the surrounding area of New Town, into parks, bus stands, and sitting in the grass around the large holding basin of a water treatment facility.

While these migrants blend into the urban space in some ways quite inconspicuously, New Town has also been planned in many ways to actively exclude them. Large walls separate the “gram” from the impressively large developments that house the community’s wealthier residents. The names of these buildings displayed prominently on many of their facades reveal the future imaginaries of their inhabitants. As we walked together past buildings called “Website Housing” and “TechnoNest,” one young migrant from Kolanihat explained to me that it is difficult to find domestic work in these homes because their inhabitants want to see documentation of legal status in India from prospective domestic staff. However, the labor market where day laborers are recruited for construction of these buildings hosts Bangladeshi migrants almost exclusively. Compared to garment work in Dhaka, these construction jobs pay much more for almost half of the working hours (depending on one’s level of skill), so he finds that Kolkata offers the opportunity for a more comfortable lifestyle than Dhaka.

Other migrants from Kolanihat expressed a similar kind of ambivalent belonging in Kolkata. Some say they don’t like it there, don’t want to stay, and would prefer to go home. This comparison, in which they convey longing for the declining agricultural livelihoods of their rural homelands, was the emotion these migrants articulated to me most commonly. One woman explained, “I like it here ok, but it’s not like Bangladesh. There’s not enough work in Bangladesh, but it’s better there than anywhere else.” I heard these sentiments repeatedly from migrants in New Town. While some had come very recently, others had been there for 30 years or more. Among the wave of migrants who began coming in the 1980s were primarily landless people who previously relied on day labor or sharecropping but found that the shrimp boom created an insufficient number of jobs to keep them employed. One such migrant told me that every landless person in her village had ultimately migrated here to New Town. More recent migrants were smallholders, some of whom had participated in shrimp production but hadn’t found it to be profitable enough to survive on, or who experienced some kind of personal or familial crisis that forced them to leave. Many were the sons of smallholders who continued to cultivate shrimp, but who were struggling and didn’t see a viable future for it.

In general, these were people who continued to identify deeply with the villages from which they had come, and the peasant livelihoods they led there. Even as they had moved to New Town, the home of Kolkata's future imaginaries in both a material and ideological sense, they continued to very actively value, embrace, and identify with rural lives and livelihoods. This identification is precarious in a context in which not only their present livelihoods depended on this urban political economy, but also the possibility of a rural future—farming rice in the villages from which they had come—was not guaranteed. In the narratives of these migrants, their aspirations for rural futures coexisted with their active participation in the construction (both literal and imagined) of urban futures.

Here we see how residents of Kolanihat contribute to what Roy (2016) calls the “constitutive outside of the urban” (813, see also discussion of Mitchell, 1999 above). The rural identities of these migrants are not dialectically opposed to their habitation of this urban space; rather, they are a “condition of [its] emergence” (Roy, 2011: 224). What is more, they exercise resistance to urbanization in retaining these imaginaries of rural futures, demonstrating that these processes of enclosure are not totalizing. It bears reminding that these migrants are among that great populace of people moving from Bangladesh to India who are often referred to as “climate migrants.” Whether they have migrated as a result of climate change or otherwise (indeed, even if they have stayed), their futures are intimately tied up with the production and imaginaries of climate futures.

Sundarbans: Geographies of imagined erasure

Here we return to the WWF sightseeing junket where this article began. “This is nothing,” says the WWF official, motioning toward the potato field. Indeed, this particular enframing of rural space is fundamental to the production of urban climate imaginaries in Kolkata. The devaluation of agrarian livelihoods, in the formulation of this official, is seen as necessary to imagining a more desirable urban future. This vision of climate futures is spelled out more directly in a policy brief published by WWF in 2016 entitled “Away from the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Planned Retreat and Ecosystem Regeneration as Adaptation to Climate Change” (Ghosh et al., 2016). In this report, a group of academics and development practitioners working for WWF articulate a plan for the implementation of managed retreat from the Sundarbans, and the economic benefits that would derive from such a transformation. This vision of retreat builds on a growing discussion in both policy and academic communities concerning the possibility of planned relocation of communities as a climate change adaptation strategy (Koslov, 2016, 2019a; Marino, 2018). The report extends these discussions to a concrete empirical investigation quantifying the value of the existing agrarian political economy relative to an alternative vision of planned retreat in which agriculturalists in these coastal villages relocate to “newly developed areas in [a] nearby stable zone” (Ghosh et al., 2016: 12), where they will find work in the service sector and “skilled employment” (meaning outside the agricultural sector). The normative values underpinning this bold vision are part of a distinctive vision of climate futures not only for the Sundarbans, but for Kolkata, all of India, and beyond (Farbotko, 2010; Hardy et al., 2017; Pulido, 2018).

The report describes this vision of social and ecological transformation for managed retreat proceeding in four phases, culminating in the year 2050. The plans are both material, relating to technical and economic interventions, as well as explicitly epistemic, relating to the kinds of work that will need to be done to reshape desires and imaginaries of life in the time of climate change. In Phase I, the “high vulnerability zone” would be demarcated, and a policy framework implemented to prevent “outsiders” from moving into the area.

There are two significant implications of this: the first is the creation of barriers to migration by Bangladeshis, who are thought to be disproportionately represented among inhabitants of this Sundarban region. The second is that by creating impediments to migration and land acquisition, the land in the region would be effectively taken out of circulation, and thus economically devalued.¹⁹

In Phase II, new physical infrastructure is built in the “stable zone” meaning urban development in Kolkata and other urban or peri-urban areas. Some physical infrastructure costs associated with this phase cited in the report’s appendix include the establishment of Industrial and Information Technology Training Institutes. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the report’s references to the costs of “reskilling” are a metonym for the costs of transforming rural livelihoods into urban ones. These material interventions in Phase II are accompanied by explicit epistemic interventions in Phase III, which involves “preparing the residents for this change in order to minimise their psychological barrier towards the movement from the vulnerable to the less vulnerable zone” (Ghosh et al., 2016: 12). The report specifies that at this stage resettlement is undertaken by choice, noting “the movement is envisaged as voluntary and ‘organic’” (Ghosh et al., 2016). Yet, even in the absence of forced relocation, the “choice” to migrate in this context is undertaken within extremely constrained conditions of the active erasure of livelihood possibilities and devaluation of the assets that make these agrarian livelihoods possible. These manufactured constraints on migration choices are thus a more explicit (yet perhaps logical extreme) of the rural–urban migration choice facing residents of Kolanihat today, for whom the political economy of shrimp production offers no viable rural future. This political economic transformation might thus be seen as the “adaptive” precursor readying the ground for the emergent strategy of planned retreat.

In the final phase, remaining residents are relocated (presumably by force, although the report does not use this language, insisting on the importance of framing the process as benign). Once the lands in this “high vulnerability zone” have been entirely depopulated, they will be made available for mangrove regeneration. As described in the report, the benefits of this transition away from an agrarian political economy are manifold. In addition to the benefits of storm surge protection and carbon sequestration facilitated by mangrove reforestation, they describe a range of economic opportunities opened up. These include crab and fishery production, the collection of honey and prawn larvae (for use in aquaculture), and new revenues from tourism among the growing urban population. These tourist possibilities were highlighted in particular on the sightseeing junket through visits to existing eco-resorts catering primarily to middle class visitors from Kolkata.²⁰ The analysis of the report’s authors suggests that collectively the benefits of these alternative income streams would be 12.8 times greater than the economic benefits derived from the current agrarian political economy in the region. The report thus offers a systematic vision not only of the process of managed retreat, but of a plan for combined material and epistemic interventions to facilitate a transition from rural to urban climate futures. Enframing these rural areas of the Sundarbans as empty and vulnerable, these actors render them objects of intervention. In this way, the demise of agrarian futures is framed as necessary to the achievement of this alternative vision of (urban) development in the time of climate change.²¹

Alternative agrarian climate imaginaries

In these collected stories, one could see Kolanihat and the vulnerable areas of the Sundarbans as “operational landscapes” subsumed by the urban agglomerations of Kolkata’s “stable zones.” Doing so would draw attention to the dispossession that supports

the growth of Kolkata, centering the city as the subject. It would not, however, illuminate the alternative possibilities and political imaginaries that exist in those rural areas independent of their urban entanglements.

In contrast to the visions of urban climate change futures described above entailing rural dispossession and out-migration to urban areas, in some parts of Khulna, social movements are organizing around alternative agrarian imaginaries. One example is Nijera Kori, an organization that supports the mobilization of autonomous landless collectives throughout rural Bangladesh, with a strong presence in Khulna.²² Landless group members of Nijera Kori describe themselves as *krishok* or *chashi*, meaning farmer, cultivator, or peasant. This self-description defies political-economic classifications that would otherwise suggest that (as people who work on sharecropping or daily wage labor contracts) they are laborers, not peasants. In Khulna, Nijera Kori groups have organized to resist shrimp aquaculture since the 1980s, when shrimp started spreading rapidly throughout the region. Even as development agencies increasingly promote shrimp as a climate change adaptation strategy, in recent years new resistance to shrimp has sprung up throughout the coastal zone inspired by the successes of some of these collectives in continuing to farm rice. In one village in Khulna's Dumuria sub-district, landless movement members joined forces with a group of smallholders calling themselves the Saline Water Resistance Committee to mobilize against the flooding of their land for shrimp cultivation by wealthy businessmen from nearby Khulna City. This resistance was not easy. In discussing this mobilization, residents described guarding the village's sluice gates overnight to prevent people hired by these wealthy outsiders from coming to open them surreptitiously to flood the land with saltwater. Once they got rid of the saltwater, it took seven years of farming rice on this salinated soil for it to return to its former fertility. Here, the commitment of this cross-class agrarian coalition was crucial, as the smallholders farmed their land at a loss for most seasons during this period, anticipating the gains to be had when the soil recovered. Once it did, all of the landless people who had migrated out of the village during the shrimp period were able to return to the village, finding work again in sharecropping and agricultural day labor. While the success of such mobilizations is not yet widespread, it is growing. Afroz et al. (2017) have also documented the success of this movement against shrimp, driven by one such cross-class coalition in a community nearby where smallholders and landless people collectively mobilized against shrimp in support of a return to an agrarian political economy dominated by rice production.

Despite the prominence of climate discourse in development narratives about this region, these peasant collectives have not invoked climate change in their own movement narratives. Yet, they offer a clear vision of agrarian justice that diverges sharply from the urban visions of climate change adaptation I have described above. Attending to these agrarian struggles thus suggests new opportunities for imagining and pursuing climate justice. Moreover, just as I have described the present logics of adaptation as in an ongoing state of production (and therefore not static), imagining alternative climate futures through these movements for agrarian justice helps to illuminate a multiplicity of possible climate futures—contested, shifting, and often in conflict. While Nijera Kori pursues alternatives to dominant development imaginaries, it does not propose a return to some romanticized agrarian past. Rather, its visions for the future are rooted in robust demands for agrarian reform. A major priority is land reform—a promise enshrined in the Bangladeshi constitution, yet never fully realized. Integrating their visions for agrarian justice with visions for climate justice could thus entail a demand for land reform as a climate change adaptation strategy.²³ Pursuing this would entail recognition not only of the role of the rural in shaping the urban but also of the potential of visions of climate futures that begin with agrarian politics (not in service of urbanization, but of pursuing something outside of it).

Conclusion

How do we imagine a desirable climate future? What spatially differentiated processes of enclosure and emergence are entailed in that imaginary? In this article I have traced the links between three sites, both rural and urban, and the interconnections and ruptures between their future imaginaries. In the process I have mapped the relationship between the managed decline of rural futures and the development of urban ones. The devaluation of rural space and rural livelihoods is fundamental to the planning process through which this urban future is operationalized. The vision for a modern, urban Kolkata requires the labor of rural migrants and the dystopic imagination of the impossibility of a future for the communities from which they have come.

Beyond this, however, I have also illuminated the alternative agrarian imaginaries of peasant communities in Bangladesh that suggest resistance (with varying degrees of success) to these urban imaginaries. These alternatives refuse the climate crisis imaginaries that enframe rural communities as operational landscapes subsumed entirely by the processes of urbanization emanating from cities. While highlighting the profound dispossession driven by this urban expansion, the social movements described here also indicate the political potential of the peasantry as a dynamic category in an ongoing state of formation and transformation. By forging alliances of workers collectively identified as peasants (even where some members move in and out of migrant labor in cities), Nijera Kori collectives in Khulna demonstrate the peasantry's political power, not as an anachronism but as emerging from a category that resists the teleology of capitalist development and urbanization.

Both materially and epistemically, the visions described above of desirable futures for urban livelihoods entail the elision of rural ones. They do this both through the failure to imagine desirable rural futures as well as through lapses in recognition of the interconnections between rural and urban transformation. Does the imagination of urban climate futures in Kolkata and elsewhere necessitate a vision of decay in the spaces beyond it? If we embrace the possibilities of future imaginaries beyond the city, what alternative futures might be made possible? We need to understand that the world is not "completely urban" in order to understand the political possibilities of these visions outside of urban climate futures. This analysis reveals the significant political stakes in recognizing the lives, livelihoods, and futures that have been rendered superfluous in these new urban climate imaginaries. It also shows the political potential of imagining otherwise.

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Notes

1. This article is based primarily on two years of multi-sited ethnographic research conducted by the author in 2014–15, involving interviews and participant observation in rural communities in Khulna, slums in Kolkata that are home to migrants from those villages, and development practitioner communities in Dhaka and Kolkata. It also draws on a participatory study of shrimp aquaculture conducted in 2013 (Paprocki and Cons, 2014), carried out in partnership with Nijera Kori, a landless social movement discussed further below.
2. Cf. Elliott (2017), Koslov (2019b), and Zeiderman (2016a, 2016b).
3. Kian Goh (2019) has recently used a similar approach to consider climate change adaptation through global-urban networks, understanding urban space as constituted through relational and interconnected processes.
4. See Cons (2018) on other imaginaries of climate futures in this region.
5. Recent scholarship on planetary urbanization has sought to shift attention from the “city” as the primary object of urban studies to urbanization as a process, a methodological maneuver that aims to draw attention to urban processes that result in social and spatial transformation beyond the city as the traditional object of urban analysis (see also Angelo, 2017; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015).
6. See Mitchell (1988, 50, 2002, 282 fn85).
7. This debate over the agrarian question can be traced from Kautsky’s (1988 [1899]) early text to the present. While the precise nature of contemporary manifestations of the agrarian question remains a matter of debate (Bernstein, 2006; McMichael, 2006; Watts, 2002), the agrarian question has always been concerned with the transition to capitalist production relations, and corresponding impact of capitalism on agriculture and its relationship with rural classes and politics (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2009).
8. See also Zeiderman (2018) in relation to urban studies.
9. I have changed the names of villages and people in this section in order to protect the identities of my informants.
10. This labor out-migration was largely limited to male landless farmers, where their wives and families stayed in the village year-round (see also Paprocki and Cons, 2014).
11. *Gher* is the word used for the large saltwater ponds or bogs used for aquaculture cultivation.
12. Khulna and Satkhira are the two largest cities in Khulna Division, where much of the shrimp trade is based.
13. There is no clear consensus on this discrepancy in labor requirements between rice and shrimp. Belton’s (2016) research indicates a less dramatic, but nevertheless serious shift in labor demand for shrimp, citing a requirement of 54% more labor for rice agricultural systems relative to shrimp production.
14. Cf. Baldwin et al. (2019).
15. This reflects a pattern of cyclical debt and dispossession through microcredit observed elsewhere in rural Bangladesh (Paprocki, 2016).
16. I avoid naming the specific neighborhoods inhabited by Bangladeshi migrants in New Town to protect the identities of my informants.
17. For similar debates on competing visions of urban green growth outside of India, see Angelo and Vormann (2018), Angelo (2019), and Cohen (2016, 2017).
18. For more on urban future imaginaries in India’s “Smart Cities” initiative, see Datta (2019).
19. For more on the dynamics of devaluation in the context of climate change, see Elliott (2019), Knuth (2017), Sayre (2010), and Johnson (2015).
20. See also Jalais (2007) on earlier visions of transformation of the Sundarbans through the possibilities of tourism.

21. For a corollary discussion of alternative urban climate imaginaries, see Cohen (2016), Goh (2017), and Ranganathan and Bratman (2019).
22. Nijera Kori itself is an NGO, but the collectives it supports refer to themselves as *bhumiheen shamity* (landless association) and they refer to the assemblage of these associations either as “Nijera Kori” or *bhumiheen andolon* (“landless movement”). In some parts of Khulna, residents refer to the movement as *chingri andolon* (shrimp movement) or *Karunamoyee andolon*, in honor of Karunamoyee Sardar, the murdered landless collective leader mentioned above. I use “Nijera Kori” as shorthand to refer to this movement, while recognizing the diversity and multiplicity of the autonomous collectives that compose it.
23. Similarly, Mitchell (1999) argued that in Egypt, far-reaching land reform should be the first priority in resisting the neoliberal agenda.

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