The London School of Economics and Political Science

Under the Syndicate Raj

Criminalization and Protection in a Muslim Community in New Town, Kolkata

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

Syndicates play a central role in the construction industry of peri-urban Kolkata: small cartels for the provision of sand, stones, and bricks, they are often presented as mafia-like organisations by the national media. Stereotyped representations of gangsters and bosses, however, overlook the social mechanisms at the heart of the syndicates, namely, criminalization and protection.

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the rapidly urbanising periphery of Kolkata, this thesis explains the importance of criminalization and protection for the functioning of the 'syndicate raj', that is, the rule of syndicates. The chapters of the dissertation examine the experiences of low-class Muslim villagers, who are at the bottom of the syndicate hierarchy. Their work in the lower ranks of the syndicates is criminalised both by Hindu neighbours and by local state authorities. Muslim villagers, however, are sometimes able to turn criminalization to their own purposes: either by emphasising how syndicate work is deeply intertwined with family, kinship, and local community; or by carefully using such external labels when dealing with residents, workers, and government officials.

In engaging with syndicate work, Muslim villagers don't simply pursue their individual interests at the cost of kinship ties and family values. Instead, they try to justify their work in moral terms and build ethical projects for their families. Low-level syndicate workers are embedded in networks of state protection that they perceive as coercive and precarious. Muslim villagers become the risk-bearers of extortion practices, as they perform a visible criminal persona and face arrests, social stigma and exclusion from profits. The public criminalization of Muslim workers at the bottom of the syndicate hierarchy thus occludes inner mechanisms of coercive protection and precarious cheap labour, which reproduce inequalities between common people and wealthy politicians.

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Introduction

Everywhere in Bengal one has to pay the tolabaji tax [extortion tax] to the Syndicate Raj in order to get work done. This tolabaji has to stop immediately.

—Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2 February 2019, *The Times of India*.

Figure 1. Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking on the syndicates in West Bengal, shown on the front page of *The Telegraph* [Kolkata], 18 April 2016. Photo by the author.

Mahafuj, a Bengali Muslim man of 43 years of age, each morning rode his motorbike on the dirt path leading out of his village on his way to the main syndicate office. The office was tucked away below a flyover under construction where the unnamed road of the village met the main highway of the high-tech township of New Town, on the peri-urban fringes of Kolkata. Mahafuj lived with his family in the village of Ghashi, which was predominantly inhabited by lower-class Bengali Muslims. After being dispossessed from their 20 bighas of land in 2001 (1 bigha is 1600 yd^2), Mahafuj was employed by the "syndicates for construction materials". The vernacular term

"syndicate" refers to the local land mafia, active in illicit land transfers and the supplying of construction materials for real estate development. Mahafuj spoke of himself as a syndicate *chele* (boy) and at times as a syndicate *mastan*. The Bengali term *mastan* can be translated as "enforcer of violence", and it carries a negative connotation of criminality. In this thesis, I will refer to my informants as syndicate workers.

Mahafuj had to gain the protection of local state authorities from the Housing, Infrastructure and Development Corporation (Hidco) and of the police in exchange for his job as syndicate mastan. He had to pay regular protection money to local Hidco leaders to be able to do his work without being arrested. Mahafuj often lamented that his work involved bad moral values yet he had no other choice to keep his family going. Mahafuj's family had lost its 20 bighas of land and a fish pond and had entered a phase of uncertainty, economic difficulties, and social stigma. Mahafuj was still living in a small, modest room on the ground floor of his family's house with his wife and his two sons. Mahafuj was only making 1000 taka this month (10 GBP) from syndicate work, and he was worried he wouldn't be able to sustain his family in the coming months. As the eldest son of four brothers and with two elderly parents to take care of, he struggled to ensure a better future for his family.

In 1999, Hidco was founded as a new governmental agency in charge of acquiring 3.070 hectares of land in the northeastern fringes of Kolkata for the construction of the high-tech township of New Town. At the centre of textual state promises and publicity was this planned, eco-friendly township that was designed to solve the problem of urban sprawl and guarantee transparent and updated land titles (Dey et al. 2013; Hidco 1999). Muslim villagers in Ghashi sustained their families through farming and fishing in the wetland environment of Rajarhat. The area all around Ghashi village became the focus of Hidco state plans for redevelopment, urban infrastructure, and speculative land investments.

Starting in 2000, Hidco state officials began implementing the acquisition of most of the agricultural land in the Ghashi area. The land rights held by Muslim villagers were transferred to private developers and international IT companies. Hidco authorities offered a compensation rate of 4000 to 8000 rupees per bigha of land to Ghashi villagers. Hidco manager Gautam Sen implemented the cooperative scheme for "land losers", a compensation package that included the offer of jobs in construction work for local farmers who were dispossessed of their land. But, this cooperative scheme was shut down soon after the acquisition of the agricultural land. Muslim farmers were left with little or no access to waged employment. Rather, the vast majority of Ghashi villagers found work in the lower ranks of the syndicate organizations.

Throughout my fieldwork, the public discourse on the Muslim syndicates of New Town conflicted with the everyday experiences of the people in Ghashi village. Indeed, the "syndicate mafia" was providing rich material for shocking newspaper headlines designed to attract the attention of their readers. In the accounts of media pundits and local and national newspapers, the spectacularization of the issue was reflected in daily columns titled "The Syndicate Raj" or "The Mastan Raj" or "The *Sin*dicate" (see Figure 1). These daily reports denounced the armed gangs of mastans who controlled the land and construction markets in New Town. The syndicate mastans were allegedly working against governmental authorities and stalling the planned development of New Town. Daily TV reports claimed the syndicate members were armed goondas and gangsters coming from outside Kolkata and from other districts in West Bengal. Syndicate mastans were described as pursuing their personal interests with violent means, reaping fortunes from local dispossessed farmers, and snatching land and livelihoods.

Moreover, what was striking about this spectacularization of the syndicates in West Bengal was that the media and public debates almost always associated syndicate mastans with the Muslim identity. The same could be said for local movies. For example, the local Bengali movie *Zulfiqar,* by director Shrijit Mukherjee, was released in 2015, and it narrated the stories of Muslim syndicate gangsters monopolizing the real estate market of Kolkata. Yet, this spectacularization of the "rule by Muslim mastans" masked a much more complex reality. In practice, the Muslim mastans didn't easily fit into the popular images that people used for understanding the syndicates.

Doing syndicate work seemed to have put Mahafuj in an uncertain position, leading to social stigmatization and getting by through risky livelihood activities. Over the course of my 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I frequently encountered men like Mahafuj. I realized that their stories represented structural positions occupied by many dispossessed Muslim villagers in New Town.

As my fieldwork unfolded, I was struck by the fact that most syndicate mastans were Muslim villagers who had suffered dispossession at the hands of the state and who had been active in the local social movement against land acquisitions (Dutta 2010; Arnavas 2011).In contrast to public discourses depicting syndicate men as outsiders who opposed the state government, the majority of mastans lived in the Muslim villages of New Town and had a long history of engagement with the local state through various forms of claim-making. I was guided by an empirical question: How and why were dispossessed Muslim farmers depicted by the wider public as criminals? In addition, how did farmers experience their involvement in the syndicates and their relationship with syndicate leaders and politicians? My thesis investigates what it means to be a syndicate worker in Ghashi village, New Town Rajarhat. I explore the inner structure and functioning of the syndicates for construction materials, the relations of protection between the low-

level workers and the leaders, and the criminalization of Muslim workers at the bottom of the syndicate hierarchy.

The fast-paced growth of syndicate groups in real estate, in West Bengal as well as in other Indian states, has captured growing scholarly attention. One widespread assumption is that syndicate mastans are making quick money and becoming wealthy through their illicit activities in real estate (Das 2019; Sissener 2019). Scholars of South Asia have presented a relatively coherent profile of syndicate mastans as armed gangs of "enforcers" (Ruud 2019; Michelutti et al. 2019) and "wielders of violence" (Levien 2018). It has been suggested that, in the aftermath of land dispossession, a class of well-connected farmers has emerged who harness and undermine networks of trust and kinship for their personal gain and facilitate land transfers to private companies (Levien 2015, 2018). In contrast, my long-term ethnographic research suggests a more complex understanding of "syndicate boys" and their lives. Like Mahafuj, most syndicate workers experience their role in the syndicates as a position outside the networks of power and opportunity associated with the real estate development of New Town. Most syndicate workers live in precarious conditions, struggling to sustain their families. Syndicate workers in Ghashi are in the process of adapting to their new source of livelihood, and they express ambivalent attitudes and reflections towards it. A common expression that I often heard in conversations with Muslim syndicate workers was, as Mahafuj put it: "We need to work for the devil to be able to live in heaven here [in Ghashi village] with our families".

Syndicate workers usually were expected to implement a variety of tasks: managing, sorting out, and delivering construction materials; smashing stones into smaller pieces to be sold for construction; and actual construction work when needed such as carpentry and masonry; and "fieldwork". The latter task was considered of particular importance as it was meant to represent the entire syndicate group to external parties. Fieldwork involved patrolling the area controlled by the Ghunu syndicate, making sure leaders' orders were respected, looking after cargos of materials, and identifying possible new plots to invest on. Fieldwork, most of all, implied getting new orders of materials from clients and collecting payments.

Unlike the coherent image of enforcers of threats and violence, syndicate mastans are juggling different self-identifications and aspirations for themselves and their kin. In contrast to popular images of these men as calculating entrepreneurs who negate relations of trust and family for personal profit, syndicate workers like Mahafuj are striving to rebuild their social status as providers for their families within their household and circles of extended relatives. The majority of syndicate workers are in their 30s and 40s, so they are expected to have created a family and to be providing for their children's education. Besides syndicate work, Muslim villagers are involved in

different activities such as collecting blood samples among those in need in the community and bringing the samples to the nearby hospital; they are active in the local branch of the Islamic association Jamaat-e Islami Hind; and they aspire to be good Muslims.

My thesis is about how dispossessed Muslim villagers in Ghashi navigate the tension between the criminalization of their mastan role in the syndicates and the everyday realities of their lives, which often transcend or contradict their criminalized mastan work. I detail the experiences, the struggles, and the ambivalences that Ghashi residents associate with their work in the syndicates. Muslim villagers in Ghashi are neither simply dispossessed farmers nor syndicate mastans, neither wholly excluded from nor fully included in the profitable real estate business and state networks – they fall, uncomfortably, in all these categories. As in the case of Mahafuj, the great majority of syndicate members are *not* powerful, wealthy individuals climbing the social ladder. Rather, mastans are poor Muslim villagers who are seeking ways to sustain their lives and who aspire to find work that can help them regain their status as providers for their family and as good Muslims and to overcome the precarity brought about by land dispossession.

To probe the structural positions of low-level syndicate workers, it is important to shed light on the dynamics of protection between Muslim workers and syndicate political leaders. Muslim men like Mahafuj are embedded in relations of protection with local authorities that reproduce their precarious conditions while sustaining their criminalization.

To sum up, by delving into what it means to be a syndicate boy in the village of Ghashi, this thesis both challenges and seeks to understand the emerging criminalization of Muslim communities in the context of the neoliberal land regimes of New Town. Rather than depicting syndicate members as opposed to the state, my ethnography shows that they are embedded in complex networks with state officials and local politicians. In doing so, my thesis builds on and contributes to a growing body of literature on South Asian "mafia" and on syndicates related to real estate. Instead of taking categories such as "Muslim syndicate mafia" and "mastans" at face value, I demonstrate how my participants use them to sustain their lives and livelihoods, construct performative identities, and aspire to a better future for themselves and their kin.

The Syndicates: Nature, Organization and Activities of the Land and Real Estate Mafia of West Bengal

Syndicates are informal cartels that coercively control land deals and the real estate business, especially the supply of construction materials and labour for construction. A key element that makes syndicates criminal and illegal is the informal use of coercion to acquire plots of land, dispossess, and profit from land sales and real estate deals. With regard to real estate activities,

syndicate networks impose higher prices on materials while cheating on the quality and quantity of sand, stones and bricks, they control the supply of labour for construction, and threaten those who don't accept their terms with vandalism and show of body force. Coercion practices are key for the functioning of the syndicates, and are represented by a show of body force (*gaer jor*) and extortion (*tolabaji*). The chapters that follow contribute to the growing discussion on the use of violence by mafias in India, by focusing on the actors who enact coercion as syndicate workers occupying the lower ranks of these networks, on why they do so and their complex, ambivalent motivations, and how they do it. Syndicate workers straddle the line between their illegal occupations that they see as immoral, and their striving for an ethical personhood towards being "good Muslims".

My ethnography pointed to the fact that the condition of possibility for this coercive element typical of syndicates are mechanisms of protection and criminalization. Syndicate workers are embedded into relations of protection with local authorities. The illegal show of body force and extortion by syndicate workers are enabled by the protection and impunity offered by Hidco state authorities and local politicians. Syndicate workers, however, experience relations of protection as coercive, in that they are inserted into relations of debt, forceful regular payments and bribes, and exploitative and precarious labour relations. Therefore, the coercive element of syndicates is not only directed towards external parties, such as real estate clients and other farmers. Coercion is internal to the very organization of syndicates, and reflected in increasing inequalities within the syndicate structure and in the lives of those who form the lower ranks of these networks. The very form of recruitment and employment of the low-level workers, based on state protection, is experienced as coercive by my interlocutors.

The mechanisms of protection and criminalization of low-level Muslim workers are deeply entwined in the functioning of the syndicates. Syndicate leaders and politicians expect syndicate workers to do most of the illegal work on the ground. While syndicate leaders stay behind closed doors in their management of land and real estate deals, the visibile element of illegality and criminality is bore by syndicate workers. Therefore, protection from local state authorities is the ground for the criminalization of syndicate workers and their visibility as criminals. The common claim used by policemen and state officials to dismiss those who file complaints against the syndicates is that Muslim mastans are indeed dangerous individuals, working in groups of armed gangsters that are quite difficult to stop/incastrare. The wider political and public debates as well as the media contribute to reinforce the idea that at the core of the syndicates there are Muslim gangsters. Moreover, when state protection is withdrawn, syndicate workers find themselves scoperti and vulnerable to arrests and beating up by the same authorities whom they paid to receive protection earlier on.

Organization

Syndicates have a widely sparsed organization, composed of many different groups. Yet, syndicates presented a hierarchical organization, a paid membership and coercive relations of unequal wealth distribution. Every *mauza* I surveyed, including Ghashi, had a main syndicate office, controlling hundreds of smaller syndicate groups, each with their smaller offices often hidden in the interiors of the villages. In Ghashi, every *para* (neighbourhood) had between five to six smaller syndicate groups of about 20 to 50 syndicate workers. For each group, a syndicate leader, often a panchayat member, had picked young, able-bodied men who were known for their hard work and good connections in the village. These young men, like Narzul or Aftab, allowed for the group to expand through kinship and friendship connections. In the other Muslim villages I surveyed in New Town, small syndicate groups often reached 50 people. Every group in Ghashi had its own small syndicate office tucked away in a hidden spot in the village. There was then the main Ghashi syndicate office, hidden behind the flyover along the main highway in New Town, where the different syndicate groups in Ghashi reported on their work and divided the contracts among themselves. The strategy of dividing syndicates into smaller ones for each village in New Town was useful to avoid paying taxes and licences for the supply of construction materials. For this reason, the small syndicate offices in Ghashi were often closed during the day, and opened only in the early mornings and late afternoons to avoid been noticed by authorities. All the smaller syndicates in Ghashi were controlled by the same MLA, Subir Mukherjee. To distinguish it from the others, each small syndicate was identified by a number. Mahafuj, Aftab, and Nazrul and the arrested Shibul all belonged to Ghashi syndicate number 218, run by Faquir. To be part of syndicate number 218 and to operate freely with impunity, they paid a regular sum as *rokkher taka*, protection money, to the MLA. As we will see, this is how powerful politicians expanded and maintained their control over syndicates in New Town.

Land Grabbing Activities by Syndicates

Syndicate groups were active both in land grabbing practices as well as in real estate activities. With regard to illegal land grabbing, syndicates aimed to acquire, control and profit from both public and private land. Similar to land mafia activities observed in other Indian states (Levien forthcoming), syndicate workers' practices for acquiring both private and public village land included coercive encroachment, counterfeiting of land records and bribing of land registry officials, and creating new ponds out of plots of either cultivable land or wasteland.

First, syndicates targeted village land in Ghashi. As it has been noted, land mafias in India often target village land through practices of *kabza* (capture) that deprive poorer farmers and lower castes from benefiting from it (Martin 2019). I observed a similar situation in my fieldsite. A common denominator of syndicate land grabbing practices in the village was that powerful politicians such as MLAs, Hidco officials and syndicate leaders controlled village land in Ghashi, both private and public. This land grabbing and rent-seeking practices were done at the expenses of Muslim poorer villagers, included the men who were involved in the lower ranks of the syndicate hierarchy. Muslim syndicate workers in Ghashi were both involved in these practices of appropriation of village lands *and* the victims of these land grabbing activities. While syndicate workers contributed to the grabs and illegal renting practices, often the land acquired was either public village land, from which they had been deprived, or of their own families. Syndicate workers thus blur the line between victims of dispossession by land mafia and village mastans.

Village private land

Since land dispossession in the early 2000s, the social and spatial marginalization of Muslim villages in New Town led to very little opportunities for residents to be able to sell their remaining plots of land through legal means and at regular market prices. Wide-spread rumors in the market, especially among real estate investors and Non-Resident Indians, focused on the fact that land in Ghashi was *Muslim* land. As a result, no one wanted to buy it directly from villagers, and no one was interested in spontaneously investing in this area. Therefore, it was not uncommon for Ghashi villagers to give up their remaining lands and sell it to syndicate leaders. Low-level politicians, Hidco officials or sometimes the police often visited the villagers who still had a few bighas of cultivable land in Ghashi and coerced them into selling their plots at a reduced market rate. Deprived of their possibility to use their land independently and gain some profit from it, village Muslim men were often offered to work in the syndicates, with the promise to find other ways to profit from land. Muslim villagers were hired as fieldworkers, with the purpose of helping in finding ways to encroach other plots in the village. My interlocutors however felt cheated by local authorities, as being a syndicate worker led to very marginal profits and small income to live by.

Another illegal syndicate practice related to village private land involves convincing syndicate workers to rent out their small plots of land in the village to Bangladeshi migrants. The latter illegally crossed the border and settled in Ghashi village to find employment as construction workers for the syndicates. There was a community of about 300 Bangladeshi families illegally settled in the interiors of Ghashi. As it has been noted (Martin 2019), local politicians, such as panchayat leaders and Hidco officials, can help encroachers not to be evicted from illegal

settlements. This was true for the situation I observed in Ghashi, where politicians offered Bangladeshi migrants a place to live, in exchange for the rent profits collected by syndicate workers and for a cheap labour force in construction sites. Syndicate workers were responsible for collecting rent from illegal Bangladeshi migrants and deliver the money to leaders at the main Ghashi syndicate office.

In New Town, forceful encroachments on private land involved identifying a plot of wasteland adjacent to a private plot, often owned by Marwari real estate companies. In their daily patrols by motorbike throughout the New Town area (chapter 5), syndicate workers looked for these plots and reported their findings to their panchayat leaders. Overnight, syndicate workers were in charge of encroaching a portion of the identified Marwari plot, removing existing fences or pillars in a way that reduced the private plot and enlarged the portion of wasteland syndicate workers had identify for occupation. This practice of shifting boundaries and expanding onto neighbours' lands were very common ways for illegal land grabbing by syndicate workers.

In all these cases, the difference between the cost of coercive acquisition of land and the market price represents the profit that is accumulate by syndicate leaders and politicians. As I observed in my ethnography, profits from syndicate land grabbing practices in the village and in New Town flew upwards in the hierarchy.

Village public lands

Village public lands once belonged to everyone in Ghashi, and the panchayat was in charge of holding open auctions for these plots and find the best bidder for the lease (Martin 2019). Yet, since the rise of syndicates, common lands in Ghashi have generated very little profit for villagers and are controlled by syndicate leaders and politicians. Once again, however, the role of syndicate workers was key for the identification, the physical occupation and encroachment of plots of public land in the village. Moreover, syndicate workers used their body force with state officials at the New Town Land Registry Office to falsify and obtain legal records to make illegal allocations.

An important case of illegal appropriation of village public land in Ghashi regarded the Muslim graveyard. During land dispossession in early 2000s, Hidco acquired most of the Muslim graveyard (*khoborstan*) in the village (chapter 2). As a compensation for this loss, the government assigned a differed plot to serve as a new *khoborstan*. My interlocutors from the syndicate group n. 218 were involved in the encroachment and illegal acquisition of the plot destined for the graveyard. As syndicate workers, they patrolled the area making sure no one used the plot to cultivate or settle, and they used pillars to delimit the area signaling that it had been informally acquired. Another common practice to mark areas that were encroached was to assemble piles of

construction materials on it. Syndicate workers then showed their body force to the land-records officials in order to obtain a manipulation of documents and an illegal allocation. Once the plot was acquired, syndicate workers patrolled the graveyard plot daily, to make sure everything was in order and no one took the plot away without permission.

Similar tactics were also used for plots of public land that in the past had been donated to the village by relatively wealthier Ghashi residents. Village playgrounds, ponds or school land were a primary example of these. Besides physically occupying these lands with construction materials and marking these with pillars and fences, fieldworkers used another strategy for illegal encroachments. This tactic involved creating a pond out of a plot of public land. To prevent further dispossession of farmers, the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had declared that local ponds used for fishing purposed could not be further acquired for speculation and construction in New Town. The purpose of this decreet was to allow dispossessed farmers in New Town Rajarhat to benefit from their sewage-fed fisheries, which were the main local form of livelihood before the construction of the township. By creating ponds out of plots of public village land, syndicate workers could claim they were using their ponds for their family sustenance, hence making it very difficult for anyone else to acquire the plot. This tactic would allow the syndicate groups to wait until they found a good investor for the plot. Once the land deal was done, syndicate workers used suction pipes to suction the water out from the plot to start the constructions.

The same tactics were used to encroach public land in New Town. While Hidco had acquired most of the land in the township, there were several extended plots of wasteland and abandoned land that had not been sold or constructed upon yet. In these plots, local poor farmers had kept cultivating portions of land with paddy and vegetables. Syndicate workers were in charge of the "convincing work" of *dite hobe*, "you have to give us the land". My informants thus forced farmers to give up their cultivations by letting syndicate workers appropriate these plots. With regard to these practices, I observed a tendency of communalism. My interlocutors explained that they would never target the public lands in New Town encroached by other Muslim farmers in different villages. They rather targeted farmers living in Hindu settlements in New Town.

Illegal Real Estate Activities

Real estate activities represented an important part in syndicate workers' daily occupations. Once plots of land were coercively acquired, syndicate groups needed to find real estate investors to profit. Relationships of protection allowed for MLAs and Hidco officials to put real estate clients in direct contact with syndicate leaders and workers (chapter 4). Upon instructions of their leaders, my Ghashi interlocutors roamed around New Town with their motorbikes with the purpose of

collecting orders for the supply of construction materials and construction workers. By enacting the role of fieldworkers, Muslim syndicate workers usually met real estate agents and their subcontractors at New Town offices or construction sites. Here syndicate workers enacted extortion practices (*tolabaji*), imposing a certain price that was higher than market rate on the materials supplied. In case the client refused the offer, claiming the price was too high, my interlocutors were sent to do some "*mastan* work" and coerce the client into accepting the terms of the sale with the use of body force. Actual violent means such as injuries were often not necessary. Verbal threats and a *mastan* performative attitude were sufficient for clients to give up. In a context where governmental authorities and police officials had been previously bribed to protect the syndicate workers, real estate clients were left with little choice as to give up.

The following step in real estate deals were the delivery of materials. Sand, stones and bricks were generally purchased by syndicate groups from contractors in the Burdwan district. My interlocutors explained that their contacts in Burdwan didn't often have licenses to extract huge amounts of materials, but they bribed local state authorities to be allowed to do so. Sacks of sand and stones then arrived in several white trucks in Ghashi village. Syndicate workers were in charge of unloading the materials, sorting these in the exact quantities that needed to be delivered, and store them in the village in protected sites.

The process of sorting out the materials for delivery involved systematic cheating on the quantity or measurements (*napi*) of materials. For example, if the order required 10 sacks, syndicate workers would deliver 5 sacks at the price of 10. The quality of sand was also object of cheating: the cheapest sand (*bali*) was often delivered at the price of sand of better quality, which would have lasted more and ensured stronger buildings. My informants felt that these forms of cheating would allow them to take control of their own future as syndicate workers, making their work indispensable for building reparations and refurbishments in the future (chapter 2).

Another key task performed by syndicate workers that involved mechanisms of coercion was the collection of payments after the delivery of materials. Muslim men went to construction sites or directly to real estate company offices and made sure payments were done according to the agreed deal. In case payments didn't amount to the expected sum, syndicate workers made a show of their body force. Strategies for coercion and extortion involved forceful occupations of construction sites, in order to stop the entire construction process until the payment for materials was received in full. In the most serious cases, I heard of syndicate workers vandalizing the machinery for construction or burning parts the site down.

Literature Review, Main Arguments, and Contributions

The emerging neoliberal land regimes and real estate markets in India are entwined with the criminalization of lower-class Muslim communities. Without an adequate analysis of the experiences of poorer Muslim communities at the bottom of mafia hierarchies, we run the risk of overlooking the ways urban development projects often rely on and sustain the criminalization of precarious Muslim labour in India. In the scholarly debate across the world over neoliberal land regimes and responses to land expropriation, West Bengal has figured as a place of violent peasant mobilizations (Nielsen 2009; Levien 2011b; Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2011). Analysed on an international scale, the anti-dispossession movements in the villages of Singur and Nandigram have been presented as paradigmatic examples of the rural poor's resistance to, and exclusion from, the new legal regimes implemented by the state regulating access to land (Levien 2011a; Chatterjee 2008; Banerjee-Guha 2008). However, given the absence in New Town Rajarhat of such dramatic contestations, scholars have sought to understand what has made peasant resistant in Rajarhat unsuccessful. The early emergence in New Town of the syndicates has been considered the main reason for this lack of resistance (Dey et al. 2013). The economic literature has assumed that Rajarhat inhabitants, mostly East Bengali refugees and lower-class Muslims, were not interested in keeping their land and that, once syndicate men offered small amounts of money for their land, farmers left to find employment in the emerging service economy of New Town or other jobs in the city (Mitra 2002; Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2011). The only extensive study available on New Town land expropriations presents a political-science perspective (Dey et al. 2013) and resonates with this line of argument. Syndicates are starting to be described by scholars as "mafia gangs" (Samaddar 2013: 225) or "bands of locally powerful people" (Sen 2013: 63) who are grabbing up land and profiting from marginalizing dispossessed farmers. Caught within an arena of domination produced by the syndicate mafia and the neoliberal land reforms, dispossessed farmers are represented as completely cut off from by the state and marginalized by the new enclaves of profit (Samaddar 2008), becoming surplus labour and joining the 'lumpenproletariat' (Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2011).

Unlike these studies representing syndicates as powerful, independent criminals opposed to the state and to the dispossessed farmers, in my fieldsite the great majority of the dispossessed farmers were also syndicate members, which makes it difficult to neatly distinguish between these two categories. In Ghashi, every Muslim family I visited had at least one person working in the syndicates, and it was a common pattern that every male member of the household between 20 and 50 years old was also working as a syndicate mastan. I surveyed three other Muslim villages near New Town – Pukurghata, Baliguri, and Mohishbatan – and found a similar pattern: every family I

visited had one to three men working in the syndicates. The population of the rural villages of New Town is predominantly lower-class Muslim farmers and fishermen who are now syndicate members. Syndicates, therefore, provide a helpful ethnographic lens for understanding the relation between the processes of land dispossession and the criminalization of Muslims in the context of neoliberal land regimes and state-building by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Michael Levien focuses on the role of the state in dispossession as "the predominant owner of the means of coercion, leaving aside dispossession enacted by decentralized actors – mafias, militias, armed gangs" (2018: 7). As a consequence, land mafias are seen as a separate force from the state and as only a later effect of neoliberal land regimes.

In South Asia, the growing rate of processes of land dispossession and land transfers from smallholders to large-scale businesses has attracted the attention of scholars (Feldman and Geisler 2012; Adnan 2013; Cross 2014; Levien 2011a, 2011b, 2018; Gardner and Gerharz 2016). Sixty million Indian citizens have been displaced from over 25 million hectares of land since Independence in 1947 (Levien 2011a). With the onset of liberalization in the 1990s and the opening of the economy to foreign investors, state-led dispossessions have further increased to enable business projects associated with national and global capital. Citizens dispossessed of their households and land face insecure livelihoods and marginalization. Literature on land dispossession in South Asia has employed and challenged David Harvey's (2003) concept of "accumulation by dispossession". Harvey argued that land expropriations are also typical of fully developed and financed capitalism. In his view, these are purely economic processes through which capitalist and private entrepreneurs can make new profits by expropriating peasants (Harvey 2003: 149). While Harvey's concept is useful to understand the role of markets and financial demands in land dispossessions, his approach still tends to depict current land reforms as monolithic and deterministic economic processes (Hall 2012). Recent literature has tried to offer more nuanced ethnographic accounts of land dispossessions. Levien (2011) has taken Harvey's approach further by stressing the role of "extra-economic" violence in processes of accumulation by dispossession. In his view, it is the key role of the state that makes such processes possible by exercising violent expropriations of farmers. The state acts as a violent land broker (2011: 461) as it coercively implements the "disaccumulation of peasants" (2011: 458) to favour capitalist rentiers and entrepreneurs. I build on Levien's account by paying attention to the way state actors and public schemes and programs enact force and violence on the ground to enable processes of dispossession.

However, Levien claims that "if consent is the appropriate term for long-term submission to exploitation, compliance captures the necessary and sufficient condition for the temporally discrete process of dispossession – that people are made to leave their land and no more" (2018: 18). In

describing dispossession in a township in the Indian state of Rajasthan, Levien argues that farmers are "dispossessed for a form of economic growth requiring their land but not their labour" (2018: 101). Other scholars have argued that one of the main effects of land dispossession is the huge unemployment rates among youths and surplus labour among the dispossessed communities (Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2011; Dey et al. 2013; Samaddar 2016). Only once the escalation of land and prices of real estate became evident did unemployed youths get involved in the syndicates and land mafia (Das 2019: 10).

Yet, if we take for granted that syndicates first existed independently and then employed the surplus labour of young villagers – a claim often supported by politicians – we don't fully uncover the longer histories of exploitative relations that have coalesced in the syndicate groups. Indeed, in describing dispossession as "a short-term relationship requiring only temporary compliance" (Levien 2018: 19) and fully excluding the dispossessed and their work, we tend to miss the complex encounters, struggles, ethical dilemmas, kinship expectations, inequalities, and meanings of labour that people experience in relation to land dispossession. As has been noted (Gardner and Gerharz 2016), these complexities shape people's lives well after they lose their land. For this reason, I follow Gardner and Gerharz (2016) in moving away from a focus on the *effects* of capitalist accumulation and rather considering land dispossession as a *process* (Gardner and Gerharz 2016: 2). I agree with Gardner and Gerharz that the very process of dispossession often does not lead to a "straightforward transfer of rights in which those that once possessed are dispossessed . . . [but] the local realities . . . are often more nuanced, involving complex interrelationships between groups of users, legality, the state" (Gardner and Gerharz 2016: 2).

Building on Gardner and Gerharz's (2006) helpful distinction between the terms "land dispossession" and "displacement", I use the term "land dispossession" to refer to the forceful and deceptive process through which Hidco authorities acquired land plots held by Muslim farmers and fishermen of Ghashi. In Ghashi, the majority of my participants were smallholders, holding land titles for agricultural land and fisheries. The majority of Ghashi inhabitants used to own between 5 to 30 bighas of land. A smaller number of the residents were sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers. Ghashi villagers' land rights were transferred to Hidco and private companies through the use of eminent domain and the Land Acquisition Act. In the case of Ghashi and the other Muslim villages of Rajarhat, land dispossession didn't involve homestead land, and thus the village houses were mostly left intact. Yet, as has been noted (Feldman & Geisler 2012), the fact that their houses were untouched by dispossession didn't make the process less disruptive for villagers, including my participants. The land dispossession involved more than the loss of paddy fields and fisheries for pisciculture (the local term for sewage-fed fish farming). Muslim villagers associated

land dispossession with conflicts within the household, feelings of shame, loss of status, and marginalization from access to lucrative plots of land.

Because of their participation in the social movement fighting land dispossession, my Muslim participants were familiar with the English terms "land dispossession" and "land acquisition", which they used interchangeably when discussing the history of how they had lost their land. More often, however, they referred to Bengali expressions indicating that the process of land dispossession was for them forceful and deceptive. In particular, it was the promise of work in the cooperative scheme that they saw as deceptive. As their narratives reveal, Muslim farmers saw the work in the cooperative, often taken up by the eldest brother of each dispossessed family, as the means through which they lost their land. Idioms of shame and negative moral evaluations were used whenever eldest brothers spoke of their own involvement in the cooperative scheme for land losers. They spoke of how they were "tempted" with the promise of work to sustain their families yet were not given the stable, waged employment in construction they had hoped for. The cooperative scheme led to conflicts between brothers that are still vivid in the memory of my participants and have affected the way brothers live separately under the same roof. This process is not dissimilar to the one Ahasan and Gardner describe as "development by dispossession" (2016: 2), whereby the promise of development emerges as a means to dispossess. In my fieldsite, the promise of work, as well as the harnessing of patriarchal relations between brothers, emerged as a means to dispossess.

On the other hand, I use the term "forced displacement" to describe the process through which East Bengali refugees lost their houses and source of livelihood and had to move to a new refugee colony on the other side of the Bagjola canal. The state implemented the process to make way for lucrative plots of land and luxury residential neighbourhoods. This process was in fact an ex situ displacement as refugees lost their houses, jobs, and clusters of settlements of extended families and had to build a new life in the new colony. The refugees didn't have title to any land; instead, they were landless agricultural labourers and fishermen. The resettlement scheme implemented by Hidco involved land lease documents, compensations and subsidies for building new houses, and employment in the cooperative scheme.

My long-term ethnographic study foregrounds dispossessed people's past and present experiences of work in the process of dispossession. Unlike the studies outlined above, my participants have never been "unemployed" for long periods of time. Rather, they were employed by the cooperative scheme, which was essential for implementing the land acquisitions and clearing the agricultural fields. Muslim villagers in Ghashi drew connections between their work in the cooperative and their work in the syndicates, and they see the latter as the continuation and

evolution of the former. My participants' accounts call into question the idea that syndicates are only an incidental, unintended effect of land dispossession in New Town. Rather, as a direct transformation of the cooperative scheme, syndicates are intertwined in the process of dispossession. Since my informants are both dispossessed Muslims and mastans, their stories show the importance of looking at longer histories of dispossession, disenfranchisement, claim-making, and engagement in state cooperative programs. Indeed, the temporalities that frame people's experiences of land dispossession can encompass past, present, and future. For my participants, these were the past of Partition, the past of family conflict in the process of dispossession, their present marginalization, and their future aspirations for the self and the family. My ethnography foregrounds the experiences of the dispossessed and their narratives, connecting these to the ways Muslim communities are criminalized in Hindutva India.

Scholars of South Asia have pointed to the relation between exclusionary growth and caste-based agrarian inequalities (Levien 2018; Le Mons Walker 2008). As has been noted, processes of dispossession and neoliberal land regimes lead to increasing differential positions between powerful agrarian castes, such as Brahmin and Jats, and lower castes, such as Dalits and Scheduled Caste (Nielsen, Sareen, and Oskarsson 2020; Agarwal and Levien 2019; Shah and Lerche 2018). Ethnographic research has shown that politically powerful landowning castes have consolidated their dominance through new rentier regimes and access to lucrative land sales and speculative investments (Sareen 2016; Levien 2011; Sarkar 2015;). On the other hand, lower castes have been mostly excluded from the new enclave of profits. Pre-existing agrarian relations of caste, class, and gender have undermined the prospect of inclusion of the poor in the present economic growth (Levien 2018). At the same time, within the poorer communities, scholars have pointed to the emergence of differential positionings and uneven access to resources. In particular, informal groups of "petty asset managers" (Levien 2018: 101) have emerged, land brokers or syndicate members (Das 2019) who form an intermediate stratum of society and have gained quick profit from the new land regimes. I take from these studies the attention to previous agrarian relations, land entitlements, and previous displacement and dispossession which are key elements to account for the emergence of old and new inequalities in the present land regimes.

While these studies provide rich accounts of the consolidation of inequalities between dominant and lower castes and of the emergence of a class of wealthier farmers within poorer communities, they do not sufficiently account for the new inequalities emerging between poorer communities along religious lines. My ethnography shows that, among the poorer population of Rajarhat, there has been a restructuring of class relations between neighbouring communities of landless Hindus and Muslim smallholders. My ethnography points to an absence in the Ghashi and

Jolergram area of a caste of large landowners and Brahmins and to a predominance of Scheduled Caste, mostly Namasudra, of Dalits turned Muslims, and of Bengali Muslims. A long history of tenuous and fickle land rights in this area has been reinforced by neoliberal land regimes and has led to divisions between Muslims and Hindus. I pay attention to the role of state patronage, to the planning of New Town as an Hinduized city, and to the marginalization of the Muslim population in the hidden interiors away from the lucrative land. These factors have led to differential access to state welfare programs and to employment and other forms of livelihood in construction and real estate.

Scholars have attempted to uncover the "othering" of the Muslim communities by Hindu nationalist rhetorics and the Hindutva movement (Jaffrelot 2007), and by analyzing the construction of populist political devices under the rule of the BJP party (Gudavarthy 2018).The enforcement of the beef ban, which prevents the slaughter, consumption, and trade of cow meat, has triggered episodes of violence, arrests and beatings of individuals belonging primarily to Muslim and Dalit communities (Parikh and Miller 2019).

In the context of nationalist rhetoric and state-building by the ruling Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Muslim communities face increasing criminalization as India implements neoliberal reforms and promotes new citizenship policies. The Citizenship Amendment Act recently triggered nationwide oppositions as a discriminatory law excluding Muslim minorities from citizenship rights. During lockdown for the Covid-19 pandemic, Muslim communities faced hundred police arrests and wide-spread stigmatization, as Delhi authorities accused Muslims of spreading the virus across the nation with a "Corona-jihad" (Ellis-Petersen and Rahman 2020). In 2006, the governmental survey of the Sachar Committee had unveiled the poor socio-economic conditions of Muslims in India and their lack of political representation, especially in the state of West Bengal. The question of what are the key dynamics that lead to the criminalization of Muslim communities in contemporary India has been contested. Scholars of South Asia have focused on historical factors (Alexander et al. 2019), on economic and social marginalization of Muslims (Alam 2010; Jeffery and Jeffery 2006; Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Blom Hansen 2001) and on Muslims' low levels of education and access to welfare (Alam and Raju 2007; Williams 2012). Recently, scholarship on South Asian urban development has noted that the emerging neoliberal land regimes, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and real estate booms often exacerbate the marginalization of agrarian populations and caste minorities (Paprocki 2020; Levien 2018; Cross 2014). This thesis constributes to the analysis of the criminalization of Muslim communities by focusing on low-class Muslim dispossessed farmers within the neoliberal land regimes of New Town. I argue that the criminalization of Muslims is reproduced, on one side, through exploitative and coercive

mechanisms of protection between political leaders, Hidco state officials and Muslim dispossessed farmers within the syndicates. On the other side, Muslim criminalization is sustained via state plans for the Hinduization of the modern township of New Town, through targeted development of Hindu areas, state patronage relations with Hindu refugee communities, and exclusion of Muslims from opportunities of investment and secure employment.

Recent studies have highlighted that the Italian words *mafia* and *Mafioso* have been incorporated into the South Asian context. In its South Asian usage, "the term mafia refers to . . . business enterprises that seek to monopolize particular trades through extralegal and violent means, and crucially with political protection" (Michelutti et al. 2019: 5). Indeed, a central concern of recent studies of South Asian mafia has been that of moving away from narrow definitions of criminal organizations as autonomous, internally cohesive, and bounded systems (Harris-White and Michelutti 2019; Ruud 2019; see also Schneider 2018; Ben-Yehoyada 2018). Recent studies of the mafia in South Asia (Harris-White and Michelutti 2019; Michelutti et al. 2019) have pointed to the relevance of the concept of *intreccio*, intertwinement (Civico 2015). In the South Asian context, *intreccio* points to the fact that "mafias" don't develop as parallel states, where the absence of local governmental authorities has left voids of security and welfare – as in the case of the Sicilian mafia – but rather mafias are "deeply politically institutionalized and socially embedded" (Harris-White and Michelutti 2019: 7; Sanchez 2016).

These studies provide rich accounts of how criminal bosses have climbed the social ladder; they sometimes come from a lower caste and class. These anthropological studies have illuminated how bosses develop relationships of protection with powerful politicians and police officers (Michelutti et al. 2019; Martin and Michelutti 2017; Sanchez 2010). I thus take from these studies the attention to the relationships and interdependence between mafia members and politicians and state officials. I show that the syndicate mastans of Ghashi simultaneously are *politically protected* and *protect* their clients in the construction business sector. I unpack these two different forms of protection and their implications for low-ranking Mafiosi. I show how these mechanisms of protection lead to unequal access to wealth and resources within the syndicate group. Yet, paying attention to the intertwining of mafia and politics should not distract us from considering the unequal positions and differentiations within these networks. The particular lives of those at the very bottom of the mafia hierarchy have rarely been the focus of ethnographies on South Asian mafia. Literature on those who manage to gain wealth from mafia activities has little explanatory power for those who don't make it up the ladder, even though the mafia relies on their labour. Ultimately, ordinary people like Mahafuj make between 1000 to 1500 rupees per month, have a

precarious and unstable source of livelihood, and bear the majority of the risks in their daily activities in the syndicates.

The literature on the mafia in South Asia has paid scant attention to those who are criminalized and poor, who cannot access the accumulation of wealth and resources like the bosses, and who remain at the bottom of the behind-the-scenes activities of the land mafia. Recent studies describe mastans as making quick money and gaining power and monopoly in the syndicate mafia (Ruud 2019; Sissener 2019). However, an analysis of only the top levels of the "mastan raj" (Sissener 2019) has little explanatory power for understanding who the mastans are, how they operate and why, and their often precarious positions in the land mafia. In his recent study on New Town Rajarhat, Ritanjan Das (2019) crucially draws attention to the fact that lower castes and Muslim villagers have been put in a disadvantageous position by land dispossession. However, Das also argues that the emergence of syndicates brought economic opportunities in every village of the area, especially "for groups of young men – largely low-caste and Muslims – who did gain quick financial benefits from the urbanization process" (2019: 18). Unlike these studies, my thesis addresses the perspective of men like Mahafuj who are not mafia bosses, who work for the syndicate mafia but don't make much money from it, and whose experiences have been disregarded by the literature. I thus contribute to the literature on the mafia in South Asia by foregrounding the perspective of those who are the poorest.

The structural position of the thousands of syndicate workers like Mahafuj is limited in terms of the possibility of wealth accumulation and upscale mobility. The relationship of syndicate workers with politicians and state officials fluctuates, and it is perceived as precarious, ambiguous, and volatile. This system of protection allows for new inequalities to emerge. By foregrounding the perspective of syndicate workers, I show how they are offered the protection of the state and yet are exploited and criminalized when this protection evaporates. Ultimately, party leaders and local political bosses accumulate wealth by exploiting the work of the syndicate workers.

The next section details the historical process of patronage relations, state-endorsed land dispossession and development of New Town, with a focus on how these dynamics unfolded in the Muslim area of Ghashi village and in the Hindu refugee colony of Jolergram.

Political Activism and Relations of Patronage: Resettlement Policies and Rights to Land For Hindu Refugees, 1950s to 1980s.

In order to contextualize the different outcomes that were experienced by my Hindu and Muslim informants since 1999 and the building of the township of New Town, this section traces the relationships of patronage between the ruling political parties in West Bengal and the Hindu East

Bengali refugees of Rajarhat in the 1960s and 1970s. This history sheds light on how the Hindu refugees of Rajarhat, belonging to the Dalit caste, were embedded in long-standing patronage relations that led to entitlements to state welfare schemes, rehabilitation policies and ultimately land rights in the area. This history formed the basis for the betterment of Hindu refugees' social and economic positions since the late 1990s. As the section below illustrates, Hindu refugees settled in Rajarhat served as vote banks and played a part in the coming to power of the Left Front in the 1970s with the community's participation in the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) movement (Deb 2000).

From the 1950s, the government of West Bengal had resettled East Bengali refugees that escaped East Pakistan in the vacant plots along the Bagjola canal in Rajarhat (Report on Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal 1956: 18). In her historical study of Partition, Joya Chatterji explains that the East Bengalis who settled in northern and eastern peripheries of Kolkata were of low caste, low class background, mostly Dalit peasants and fishermen with little or no possessions in East Bengal. In contrast with wealthy East Bengali *bhadralok* (gentle-folk) or the educated middle classes, who took advantage of their family networks or housing properties in South Kolkata, East Bengalis of lower status saw the northern and eastern fringes of the city as a place where to start a new life, despite in unfamiliar, often uncomfortable places (Chatterji 2007: 127).

The government of West Bengal, with the Congress party in power, took advantage of the vast spaces in the wetland environment of Rajarhat, in the north-eastern periphery of Kolkata, to provide for a refugee resettlement and rehabilitation colony for a group of more than two thousands refugees from the Barisal district in East Pakistan (Report on Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal 1956: 18). Beginning in 1962, refugees were resettled on the marshy lands along the Bagjola canal in Rajarhat (Deb 2000). As a typical state strategy, Bengali refugees were thus given refuge and rehabilitation in exchange for their employment in the development of the area (Das 2000: 18). In the rhetoric of the rehabilitation programs, "[I]mprovement of the landscape was part of the improvement of the people, the gradual insertion into the Indian nation" (Das 2000: 17). The plots along the Bagjola canal thus became a theatre of several working camps, where refugee men could find employment in drainage and excavations, embankment work and roads construction (Das 2000: 17).

The state legal regime of refugee rehabilitation was, however, caught up between the need to provide social protection and the necessity to guarantee individual private property to local inhabitants, as stated by the newly born Indian constitution (Bose 2000: 3; Sen 2000). Prior to the coming of East Bengali refugees, Rajarhat, as most of the North 24 Parganas district, had historically been inhabited by a majority Muslim population, mostly agricultural labourers and owners of small

plots of land (Bose 1968; Das 2000; Dey et al. 2011). As the area was part of the of East Kolkata wetlands, its Muslim inhabitants depended for their livelihood on systems of sewage-fed fish farms and ponds, and vegetable cultivation (Dey et al. 2013: 6; Kundu et al. 2008). Since the 1960s, tensions arose between the Muslim villagers and the Hindu refugees who had come to live just next to Muslim settlements in Rajarhat (Dey et al. 2011). The lands along the Bagjola canal were close to the Muslim village of Ghashi, the biggest settlements in the area, and the local inhabitants considered those lands as belonging to the local Muslim population. But there was little that Muslim villagers could do to prevent state acquisitions. The Congress state government was empowered to acquire any tract of land for the "public purpose" of refugees' rehabilitation (Sen 2000: 52-3). Scholars of Partition have recognized the significance of the welfare measures that, however vacillating, served to stimulate a dialogic struggle for recognition between the refugees and the state (Chakrabarti 1990; Bose 2000; Sen 2000). A key concern of the state legal framework for rehabilitation, land rights became a crucial battleground through which the refugees gained access to state institutions and welfare measures (Sen 2000: 52).

The area of Rajarhat has thus a long history of political engagement by the local Hindu communities. The Communist Party consolidated its power in the area since the 1960s, and some of the early Communist leaders in Rajarhat were low-caste Namasudras, belonging to the East Bengali refugee community, who organized a caste mobilization in the area (Dey et al. 2013: 213; Das 2019: 7). In 1967, the refugees and members of the local Hindu community were working in the fisheries (*bheri*) of Rajarhat and organized into the Bheri Labourers Organization under the CPIM banner, demanding a better pay and land rights (Dey at al 2013: 2013).

Fighting for land rights was the primary goal that led the emergence of the refugee movement in the state, the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC). The movement made petitions to the courts, dealt with the police and local leaders, and claimed for the right to be represented at municipal and state level through elections (Deb 2000). During the sixties, the regularization of refugee colonies and granting of land rights became possible through the growing influence of the Communist Party, who took up the the cause of the refugees (Deb 2000: 77-8). "It was the beginning of a process of the refugeeization of the Party. […]. The refugee became the striking arm of the CPI and subsequently of the CPI(M)" (Chakrabarti 1990: 405), which ultimately came into power in 1977.

Throughout the 70s and 80s, refugee colonies received basic services along with health and educational facilities, and technical training programmes were set up to create employment (Sen 2000: 56). It was in 1986 that, after a series of negotiations with the Central Government, the state of West Bengal could provide freehold title to all the refugees living in unauthorized colonies (Deb 2000: 78). It has to be noted, however, that even the granting of land titles did not solve the perennial

problem of refugee land rights, as the titles prevented the residents from selling the land legally to others (Sinha 2000: 147). As a result, the state could keep control of any land transaction on the part of the refugees, a fact that became important with the implementation of the New Town project in the 1990s.

Neoliberal Land Regimes and Dispossession in Rajarhat, 1990s to 2000s

This section traces how, since the 1990s, for Ratan's community of East Bengali refugees, the process of dispossession and resettlement led to access to new forms of livelihood and rights to land in a lucrative area of New Town. Rajarhat, in the district of South 24 Parganas, was composed of 55 mauzas, 25 of which were notified for land acquisitions in 1999 under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Among the most important centres for cultivation that fell under the acquisitions were Ghashi and Jolergram. Muslim and Dalits, according to the census of 2011, constituted the majority of the Rajarhat population. The literacy rate of Rajarhat population was 74.83 per cent as reported in the census of 2011, representing a relatively high literacy rate .

Until 1999, when land acquisitions for New Town began, Ratan's family, like many other East Bengali Hindu refugees, lived on the southern side of the Bagjola canal, in a village called Narkel Bagan. Since 1999, Hindu refugees lived in clusters of 20 families, formed of extended relatives. They lived in small huts with thatched roofs. Before New Town redevelopment, the Hindu refugees were landless, sharecroppers or small land-holders. Despite improvements to the area, the Hindu settlements were still isolated from the nearby urban areas due to the lack of roads and municipal services. Health services and schools were scarce and too far away.

In contrast, the Muslim community in Ghashi village was formed of smallholders. Ghashi was the oldest and biggest Muslim village in the Rajarhat area, and families lived in cemented houses of one or two rooms each. Most families owned between 15 to 30 bighas of land, with the wealthiest families owning up to 60 bighas. Muslim families were able to produce the necessary quantity of rice and fish to sustain their families. The rest of the crop used to be sold in the popular Ghashi market, where villagers across Rajarhat, both rural and urban, would come and buy fresh vegetables and fish.

This situation changed with land dispossession by the state. In 1999, Both the Hindu refugee area of Narkel Bagan and the Muslim village of Ghashi fell under the territory of the New Town project. As a consequence, the Hindu and Muslim lands needed to be acquired and redeveloped. Making use of the Land Acquisition Act, the same legal framework through which land titles had been given to the Hindu refugees, the Left Front legitimized the privatization of land use for the development of a high-tech commercial and residential township, New Town Rajarhat. At the centre of textual state promises and publicity was a planned, eco-friendly township that could solve

the problem of the urban sprawl and guarantee transparent and updated land titles (Dey et al. 2013: 6). In contrast to promised plans, in 1999 the government declared the complete eviction of the East Bengali community from their village in Narkel Bagan. The Hidco report identified 527 families of East Bengali origins to be displaced and resettled (Hidco 1999: 37). Similarly, in Ghashi, the great majority of Muslim fields and ponds were acquired and demolished. Muslim houses were left intact, however, as it was a densely populated village with strong opposition to land acquisitions.

Compensation Through Labour: From Land Cooperatives to Syndicates

The compensation policies for Hindu refugees reflected the paternalistic logic of the West Bengal government from the 1960s. Instead of compensation in cash, the refugees received compensation through employment in construction work. In a process similar to the one the refugees had experienced in the 1960s, they were offered resettlement and compensation in return for their work in construction.

When Hidco was founded in 1999, the institution had little capital available to implement urban development of the promised high-tech township. Hidco officials had the specific aim of raising revenues for the New Town project by selling developed land at high rates to foreign investors and speculators (Hidco 1999: 7). This meant that land needed to be developed quickly and at reduced costs to keep the New Town project going. Since Jolergram was one of the first areas to be developed, Hidco chief Subir Sen designed a compensation policy for East Bengali refugees as a "self-financing scheme" (Hidco 2000: 12). Refugees were employed in a "land cooperative" (Hidco 2000: 13). This scheme offered refugees training programmes and employment in construction work (Ibid.). The compensation scheme was aimed at reducing the costs of land redevelopment along the canal by hiring refugees at low salaries. This strategy allowed the state to avoid the higher costs of development that would be demanded by external labour contractors and land developers. Hidco middle- to low-level officials were in charge of quickly generating revenues, triggering speculations and investments in Jolergram, while maintaining vote banks among the East Bengali community.

Informal activities in construction were made possible through involvement in the cooperative itself. On one hand, refugees negotiated their roles in the cooperative in such a way as to claim rights to work and permanent housing in the colony. Work in the cooperative still allowed refugees to receive subsidies and materials for construction of their own cemented house in the colony. Hidco had set up a warehouse for construction materials near the RR colony, where all building materials and machineries could be stored and managed by the cooperative. With the change of state government from the Left Front to the Trinamool Congress Party, the cooperative

program gradually transformed into several smaller syndicates groups. This left space for the growth of syndicates for real estate that had already been active for some time outside and around the cooperative itself.

The Marginalization of Ghashi Village

How can we explain the criminalization of the Muslim community of Ghashi within the neoliberal land regimes of New Town? This question has no straightforward answer, and this thesis contributes to the literature on the emergence of criminality in neoliberal land regimes by showing that Muslims' engagement with the syndicates – the historical process that led to this engagement – is deeply entwined with Muslim projects of self-making and class aspirations, moral self-evaluations, and kinship values. In order to understand how Muslims make sense of their present precarious and marginalized situation, it is useful to trace the historical facts that led to drastic changes in the geographical, social, and economic positions of Ghashi village beginning in the years before the project of New Town was implemented.

When one looks at updated New Town maps and planning documents available at the Hidco archive, the spatial marginalization of Ghashi village from the up-and-coming modern areas and connecting roads emerges clearly. The distinction between the lucrative, developed plots of land in New Town and the remaining rural wasteland is starkly defined. Today, Ghashi village is not officially part of the New Town territory; in fact, the Muslim settlement is separated from the adjacent, newly built Eco Park by a 30-km-long "demarcation boundary", as it is called on official Hidco maps. New Town land was developed all around Ghashi village, excluding the Muslim settlement from it. There is no sign indicating the presence of the village, and there is no public transport, no cemented road connecting Ghashi village with what is now the main Universal Bengal Highway of New Town. The only way for villagers to reach the New Town territory is via a dusty, narrow road that, as my informants always lamented, is still "nameless".

The same spatial binary division between lucrative lands for investment and speculation on the one side and rural, undeveloped village areas on the other reflects popular moral judgements about the two spaces. Especially among the middle and upper classes of Kolkata and New Town itself, the presence of Muslim villages is associated with criminal, dangerous areas, a disturbing presence contrasting with the shiny world-class buildings of New Town. During my first visits to Ghashi, when I was still negotiating my presence in the village and looking for a place to stay, I encountered several difficulties in reaching the village. I would take a taxi from the nearby Jolergram area or, on the weekends, from the upper-class area of Salt Lake to reach Ghashi. Every time, with no exception, when it was time for the driver to leave the Universal Bengal Highway and

turn towards the nameless road to Ghashi, the driver looked at me with a worried face, as if I had just had a very bad idea. The driver, often a lower-class Hindu man, would make a comment about how he had heard that the interior areas were inhabited by immoral individuals, criminals, mastans. I soon realized it would be best to get out of the car on the main road and just walk into the village.

But it hasn't always been this way for Ghashi. The village saw a gradual transformation from the main inhabited settlement in the rural Rajarhat area to the most hidden and marginalized village in New Town. In historical maps dated 1930, Ghashi figures as the most densely populated, oldest village in the area, and it was connected by a dirt road with the main municipal centre of Baguihati in Rajarhat. Ghashi's inhabitants were initially sharecroppers and leaseholders, cultivating small plots of land. With the gradual dismantling of the zamindari system in West Bengal, Muslim villagers were slowly able to buy a few kathas of land per family. At the onset of liberalization in the 1990s in West Bengal, families in Ghashi owned 5 to 30 bighas of land, while the poorest landless families were still working as sharecroppers.

Since 1999, when the impulse to liberalize the economy and attract foreign investments in West Bengal became the main agenda of the ruling Left Front party, the process of land dispossession, land speculation, and the booming real estate market in Rajarhat dramatically changed the lives and livelihoods of Muslim villagers. For the vast majority of dispossessed Muslim farmers, life in Ghashi felt marginalizing and uncertain.

Land acquisitions in the whole Rajarhat area were legitimized by the state with a discourse of long-term benefit for all local villagers, both for lower-caste Hindus and lower-class Muslims. In the original reports, it is worth noting that Ghashi village figured in the list of local settlements identified as "service villages". This label indicated that local villagers would have priority access to service jobs coming up in the new township, such as call centre employees, low-level administrative jobs, cleaners in Hidco government offices, security guards, watchmen, and domestic workers in the new residential buildings.

In 1999, the Muslim inhabitants of Ghashi organized themselves in the anti-dispossession movement Rajarhat Jomi Bachao Committee which protested against the plans for the acquisition of paddy fields and ponds in Ghashi. As resistance was stronger in Ghashi than Hidco officials had anticipated, plans for land acquisitions were delayed and with them the coming of foreign investment to the area. Hidco lacked the financial capital to implement acquisitions and development work to prepare land for construction, and the limited initial investment in New Town led Hidco to envisage a way to acquire land, develop it, and compensate villagers in one go. Hidco manager Gautam Sen designed and supervized the land losers' cooperative scheme as a state-led compensation package that included the offer of jobs in development work.

The cooperative scheme in Ghashi

The cooperative scheme became the way the West Bengal state implemented land acquisitions in Ghashi and was the beginning of the neoliberal land regimes in the area. My Muslim informants consistently used the cooperative scheme to explain the origin of their current criminalized and precarious positions. The cooperative scheme came up in our conversations whenever my informants referred to their negative self-judgements and their inability to understand state plans for New Town. It is thus useful to analyse the governmental reports describing the land losers' cooperative scheme, which was the state program that effectively led to the acquisition of Muslim lands in Ghashi by Hidco beginning in the early 2000s. By comparing state project reports with Muslim accounts of the same process, I will highlight the ways my informants experienced the process differently from the official accounts.

A comparison of the governmental plans with their actual implementation reveals how the long-term benefits outlined in the written reports contrast with the short-term goals of state actions. I detail the gap between state compensation plans, conceptualized in Hidco offices, and the practices on the ground in the villages identified for compensation. The Hidco rehabilitation report illuminates the state's plans for different compensation packages for the Hindu refugees and for the Muslims of Ghashi. This different treatment highlights the plans for the Hinduization of the area that led to the marginalization of the Muslim community from access to lucrative lands and relatively stable jobs in real estate. The rehabilitation report identified two categories of "Project Affected People", that is, the communities who would be dispossessed from their land by Hidco. The first category refers to the Muslim communities whose agricultural land would be acquired but who would be able to keep their houses in their village. The other category refers to the Hindu refugees who would suffer the loss of both land and houses because of state acquisitions. While the report outlines the compensations in cash, land, and subsidies for the Hindu community, it justifies the lack of compensation in cash and financial loans for the Muslims given that "they would not suffer from homelessness because their dwelling units have not been acquired" (GoWB 1999: 4). The report acknowledges the loss of livelihood for the Muslims of Ghashi yet claims that the "agricultural yield of these lands were not high, and presumably the landholders have other avocations also" (GoWB 1999: 4).

The different compensation packages led to different access to social mobility and jobs for the Hindu and the Muslim communities. The latter received minimum compensation for the loss of their land, and most of the compensation was presented as the offer of jobs through the cooperative

scheme. In governmental reports, the cooperative scheme was presented as offering long-term employment, skills, and training to the Muslim villagers who would lose their small plots of land:

> A cooperative program has to be launched for imparting skills for which there would be an expanding demand for the next 2 to 3 decades. There will be demands for thousands of masons, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, welders for 20 to 30 years. Project authorities will open skill development centers . . . to train up land losers and their children in various such skills/trades. (GoWB 1999: 4)

The long-term vision of the cooperative scheme emerges clearly in the governmental report. The offer of training and jobs was presented as benefiting at least two generations of dispossessed villagers. Yet, the actual implementation of the scheme turned out to be quite different from the written report and its long-term offer of opportunities for local Muslim farmers and fishermen. The cooperative scheme was implemented in Ghashi village beginning in 2001 under the supervision of the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPIM) leader and Hidco manager Gautam Sen. This was a time when Ghashi villagers were still protesting and organizing occupations of the lands identified for acquisition (Arnavas 2011; Dey 2011). Protests had reached the news (Sanhati 2000), and private investments had slowed down considerably, limiting Hidco's ability to carry development work forward. The cooperative scheme in Ghashi lasted for only two years, until most of the Muslim agricultural land had been acquired. This process was not dissimilar to the one Ahasan and Gardner (2016) describe as "development by dispossession" (2016: 2), whereby the promise of development emerges as a means to dispossess. The short-term duration of the cooperative scheme in Ghashi was also related to the way New Town development was being planned. Hidco reports for these years (Hidco 2000; 2001; 2002) show that the development work was concentrated in the Hindu area of Jolergram, which became the epicentre of booming real estate, a new modern residential area, and the location of Hidco's huge headquarters complex. In Ghashi, however, development work stopped after two years. Ghashi disappeared from Hidco maps of New Town, and Ghashi was depicted on other maps as separated from the New Town area by a 30-km-long demarcation boundary. Dey et al. (2013) argue, in their political manifesto against the construction of New Town, that the cooperative scheme was a way to suppress farmers' resistance in Muslim areas, create consent, and speed up the acquisition process. The brief duration of the cooperative scheme in Ghashi meant that Muslims were left behind and were denied access to the land and real estate markets of New Town. The vast plots of Muslim land acquired by Hidco remained vacant and unused for ten years after the acquisitions. It was only in 2011 that Mamata Banerjee, after her election as the new chief minister of West Bengal, announced the creation of Eco Park, an environmentally sustainable amusement park on former Ghashi fields.

In 2007, the West Bengal Ministry of Housing released an audit report assessing Hidco's rehabilitation and compensation schemes for local villagers in Rajarhat. The report revealed a lack of proper compensation and opportunities for employment for the Muslim communities in the cooperative scheme. The cooperative scheme was deemed "inadequate" as "even after a lapse of eight years, [Hidco] had rehabilitated only 17% of identified project affected people" (CAG 2007: 27). In the Muslim villages, only some 3000 persons had been trained and employed in the cooperative scheme (CAG 2007: 27), which was a very small number given the population of the Muslim areas. This was due to the cooperative scheme lasting only a few years and its not offering enough contracts to the Ghashi villagers, given that their area was not undergoing massive development as was the rest of New Town.

The temporal aspect of the cooperative scheme wasn't the only discrepancy between the state's plans and their actual implementation. How the Muslim villagers would be recruited into the scheme, for example, wasn't described in detail in the rehabilitation report of 1999. The document only claims that the cooperative scheme had a "pro-people attitude" (GoWB 1999: 3) and that "consent [for the scheme] was obtained through discussion and meetings between project authorities and villagers" (GoWB 1999: 3). Yet, as the ethnographic sections below will show, the recruitment process for Muslim villagers was much more complex than it appeared in the report. The program involved the offer of jobs to one member of each family that would suffer land dispossession. One member of each family was hired in a development program to measure and identify plots for acquisition, plant iron plaques as markers of acquisition, do embankment work, and engage in land-filling, tree-felling, and excavations. In Ghashi, workers were assigned construction work in their own neighbourhood. As a result, farmers ended up working on their own family land or on the land of a neighbour, effectively contributing to the process of acquisition of their own family plots. As we will see, the harnessing of kinship ties for recruitment was a key aspect of the program, which led to tensions within the households and complex moral dilemmas for Muslim villagers.

As has been noted, the rise of the syndicates, while it was consolidated with the coming to power of Mamata Banerjee and her TMC party, was deeply connected with the cooperative scheme (Das 2019). The period following the end of the cooperative scheme in Ghashi left the Muslim villagers without employment and in a very precarious situation. Families lost their source of livelihood because investments and contracts never came to the Muslim areas. In order to access employment, Muslim villagers had to be involved in a behind-the-scenes, mafia-like system of protection from local political leaders and powerful CPIM and TMC politicians. Jobs in

construction could no longer be accessed in Ghashi through the cooperative system, so syndicate groups were formed by local *panchayat* (village council) leaders with political connections by recruiting villagers who could perform a threatening show of muscle to obtain the orders for materials and who could serve as voters in elections and give a hand during political campaigns. As this history shows, the line between "syndicate criminality" and the legality of the New Town development is not as sharp as popular discourses and state maps assume it to be.

Methodology

While this thesis focuses on the low-class Muslim community of Ghashi village, it also offers a comparison with the pespectives and experiences of East Bengali refugees in the Jolergram colony. The purpose of this comparison is to illuminate the different structural positions of the two neighbouring communities.

I first conducted fieldwork in the villages of Jolergram and Ghashi in New Town Rajarhat over three months in summer 2011. I was a research associate for the Calcutta Research Group (CRG), and I conducted ethnographic research on the anti-dispossession movement Rajarhat Jami Bachao Committee (Save Rajarhat Land Committee). My MRes thesis (Arnavas 2011) and my London School of Economics project proposal explored concepts of rights, practices of claim-making, and self-representations among the two communities of East Bengali refugees and Muslim villagers of Ghashi in New Town Rajarhat. I returned to Kolkata in August 2014 to conduct my 18-month anthropological fieldwork, and I wanted to answer this research question: To what extent do dispossessed citizens' concepts of land rights challenge the stability and inequality of neoliberal notions of rights?

I dedicated my first three months to becoming fluent in Bengali. I committed to an intense program at the American Institute of Indian Studies in Kolkata city. While I was attending my language training, I was also able to reconnect with the wide network of local and international researchers and academics, as well as journalists and activists, with whom I had built strong relations in 2011. When I arrived, everybody in Kolkata and the researchers and activists that I had met in 2011who were supporters of the movement told me that the resistance of the Jami Bachao Committee had failed and the movement had dissolved due to the presence of the syndicate mafia, whose members gad managed to threaten local villagers into selling their lands. My informants among the academics, researchers, and union activists told me to avoid the Muslim village of Ghashi as it had become a volatile area. When the sad news arrived of the disappearance of the director of the movement, my informants among the intellectuals and political activists who had participated in the movement were sure that Suhit Dutta had been kidnapped by syndicate mastans

from Ghashi. The discourse of Ghashi as a volatile place was present in the media and in political debates, and the term "volatile" was used to refer to the dangerous syndicate men and their violence, which mostly occurred after sunset. As chapter 4 illustrates, my informants in Ghashi didn't have the same idea of volatility in their village, and what was most troubling for them was the ambiguous coming and going of protection from the local state authorities. But, I wasn't yet aware of this in 2014. So, in December 2014 I decided to settle and live in the East Bengali colony of Jolergram, in the geographical centre of New Town, where I knew a few refugee families who had been active in the social movement.

My fieldwork was divided into two parts. For the first seven months, I lived in the Hindu colony of Jolergram with an East Bengali family. Finding a place to stay wasn't difficult in Jolergram. Every family had been busy enlarging their new, cemented houses, and spare rooms, or even spare flats to rent out, were a common feature in the majority of the houses. I was introduced to Ratan through Pratip, a union activist who knew Ratan from his participation in the social movement. I thus rented a small flat on the ground floor of Ratan's family house. The house was a new three-storey building, and the first floor, right above my flat, was being rented out to a Catholic family. As I soon realized, it wasn't uncommon for the Jolergram area to attract middle-class families from Kolkata who had heard of the real estate boom and wanted to live in the area.

As a foreign woman who was constantly wandering around the village, in my first period in Jolergram I was often approached by young refugee men asking me if I was interested in buying a plot of land or a flat in an area adjacent to the colony. Refugee men introduced themselves as promoters, explaining they had small businesses in construction. If I needed their help, I was often told, promoters in Jolergram would provide the construction materials, the workers, and all that was necessary to build a house for me. As my fieldwork unfolded, refugees got used to the fact that my reason for living there was to understand their lives and livelihoods, but they never fully let go of their opinion that I should have invested part of my research funding in a house in Jolergram.

Ratan was one of the many refugee men working as a "promoter", as he defined his occupation. This work had allowed many refugees in Jolergram to improve their living standard and gain a good, stable income. Ratan was a well-known person in the refugee colony as his father used to be a CPIM local panchayat member in the village of Narkel Bagan, where they lived before they were dispossessed of their land. Ratan, his father Ramoni, and his wife Priya introduced me to their neighbours Asha and Badi, to their friends, and to other promoters in their section of the village. Through these connections, I was soon able to immerse myself in the lives of families whose income mostly came from promoting work.

At the same time, I was aware of the risks of associating mostly with the relatively wealthy refugee villagers. I thus started hanging out in the poorer sections of the refugee colony. Here, it wasn't long before I was able to become friends with Anima's and her neighbour Shuli's families. Another useful way to expand my connections in the colony was to help women out with their *balaposh* (duvet) stitching work. Especially in the winter months, the central court of the colony and the narrow lanes are covered in cotton and sarees, which women stitch together to contribute to their family's new expenses. Before being displaced, refugee families could only send their children to the public Bengali school in Jolergram. After resettlement in the new Jolergram colony, however, every family I met was aspiring to send their children to English-speaking schools, which were more expensive. This was also true for the less wealthy families I became close to, such as Chonchola's family, Purnima and Shonjoy's family, and Shuli's and Anima's families. These families welcomed me into their homes and their lives and enabled me to get a closer picture of the lives of poorer people in Jolergram, both men and women. While richer promoters such as Ratan and Badi lived in heavily decorated three-storey houses that were completed, the poorest families lived in smaller houses of two floors, with the second floor almost always under construction.

For the first part of my fieldwork, I spent most of my time in the Jolergram refugee colony, hanging out with Ratan, Asha, Chonchola, Purnima, and Anima and their families. I followed women in their everyday tasks of taking care of meals and children, and I became a frequent participant and guest at meals and afternoon tea chats. I actively participated in the most important village Hindu festivals, such as Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, and Kali Puja, and celebrations in honour of RadhaKrishna. Weddings were also an occasion to observe village dynamics and participate in conversations about work in construction, children's education, and house-building. I noticed there was one particular ritual, that of *dhalai*, that had special meaning to my interlocutors. The ritual of *dhalai* refers to the practice of curing cement by pouring water on the newly built floor of a house. *Dhalai* was done to strengthen the concrete floor and make it resistant through time as well as to check for potential leaks. The practice signalled to the community that the new floor was ready to be inhabited and furnished by the family. *Dhalai* was followed by a big family celebration. I attended *dhalai* in Anima, Purnima, Asha, and Chonchola's house and paid attention to who was invited in the community, who was in charge of meal preparations, what was cooked and how, and the money spent by the family. In listening to my informants' accounts, I realized that these practices signified a huge success in building a new part of a house. These rituals and celebrations were also an indicator of family status and permanent settlement. It was by attending these rituals that I started realizing that, for my refugee participants, there wasn't a qualitative difference

between their rights to land in the form of documents and their rights to land in the form of solid concrete houses and of cemented roads, which they built with their own work in construction.

Whenever refugees talked about their rights, they referred to these as the visible product of their labour in construction. I realized that rather than conceiving of land rights as lease documents or property papers, refugee families in Jolergram were more concerned with, and willing to talk about, how they achieved a sense of legitimacy in the Smart Green City through their labour in construction and as promoters (Gardner et al. 2012). I also noticed that refugees contrasted their own promoting work with "syndicate work", which was done by Muslims in the nearby Ghashi village. When I interviewed Hindu refugees and asked about the difference between their work as promoters and that of the syndicates, refugees associated being a promoter with good work, solid concrete houses, and being smart to live in New Town. In contrast, they expressed negative evaluations of Muslim syndicate men and their work in construction. I was thus led to focus more on these themes that related to my interlocutors' everyday concerns.

In the second part of my fieldwork, after an interruption of a few months due to visa issues, I settled and lived in the Muslim village of Ghashi, motivated by my curiosity to understand who syndicate men were and what they did in their work. Besides Ghashi village, I also conducted several visits and semi-structured interviews in the nearby Muslim villages of Baliguri, Pukurghata, and Mohishbatan. The village of Ghashi, extending along a small road, is formed of four neighbourhoods or *para* named Majher *para* (the middle neighbourhood), Mondal *para*, Molla *para* and Mollick *para* (the latter three are named after local versions of the term "Muslim"). Each *para* is formed of clusters of households in close proximity to each other, and its residents belong to the same extended family. In Ghashi, I knew Akhtar well, as he had been an active member of the social movement. Akhtar introduced me to his friend Mahafuj, the man profiled at the beginning of this introduction, and he in turn introduced me to Bappa and the entire syndicate group number 218. In Ghashi, each *para* had five or six syndicate groups, each with 35 to 50 mastans responsible to a syndicate leader, usually a panchayat member. Each group was identified by a number; I was able to collect data from group numbers 218, 220, and 221.

I lived with Bappa's family for 12 months, renting a room on the top floor of their house located in Majher *para*. I also rented a flat for myself in the nearby area of Salt Lake City, where I stayed when I needed some quiet time for typing fieldnotes, when I felt that Bappa's family was particularly busy, or in times of uncertainty due to lack of protection from the state. Living in Ghashi enabled me to understand the different positioning between my Hindu refugee and my Muslim informants. I was able to analyse the difference in their accounts of dispossession, of their work in the cooperative and in the construction sectors, and of their role in New Town. What was

striking was the different ways in which people in Ghashi village introduced themselves to me compared to my Hindu participants. In the Hindu colony of Jolergram, people would pay careful attention when talking of the syndicates. The word "syndicates" in itself carried a strong negative connotation, associated with something Hindu refugees despised. For this reason, I was quite surprised when in Ghashi Muslim villagers openly told me, from our very first encounter, that they worked for the syndicates. At the beginning of my time in Ghashi, I spent much time at the tea stall getting to know people. Most of the men I encountered between the age of 20 and 50 presented themselves as working for the syndicates. Indeed, when I got to know the men working for syndicate group number 218, my interlocutors performatively showed a mafia-like identity.

At the beginning of my fieldwork in Ghashi, my presence as a stranger coming from outside functioned as a reminder of the way the rest of the people in Kolkata saw the villagers: as criminals and Mafiosi. "I am a syndicate mafia guy", Aftab said to me the first time we met. Aftab was on his new motorbike, he had big sunglasses covering his face and a bandana on his head, and he was wearing a tight t-shirt and jeans. But he was not the only one dressed like this. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I realized that this was the "uniform" syndicate members wore whenever they ventured outside the village to do their work. In our first meetings, syndicate men introduced themselves to me as mafia mastans. When they heard I was Italian, they referred to me as someone who was coming "from the country of Camorra". While I didn't find this a particularly flattering introduction to other people in the village, I was mostly curious as to why they insisted in making this unusual connection, often publicly, as we were having tea on the street. I was greeted as someone who knew what they were going through in their association with a mafia-like group. I soon realized that the performative identity of the mafia was common in the village.

As my fieldwork unfolded, I made sure my participants knew that I was there to learn, without any form of judgement, about their lives, their experience of dispossession, and their new forms of work. I found that being an Italian woman, a foreigner from a London university coming to live with them to do my graduate studies, was ultimately helpful in getting access to the village and building relationship of trust. It was easy for my participants to understand that I wasn't associated with any political party or local politicians, with whom they had a very ambivalent, precarious relationship. Ghashi villagers valued education above everything else, and as they helped me collect data for my studies, I reciprocated by giving them English lessons twice a week. Once we built a relationship of trust, I was surprised by the urgency with which Ghashi villagers wanted to tell me their experiences of dispossession, their perception of marginalization in access to construction work, and their ambivalent accounts of syndicate work.

Syndicate group number 218 was formed of 35 mastans and about 50 construction workers, all of whom were Bangladeshi migrants and poorer villagers who used to be landless agricultural labourers. Among the 35 mastans, I became quite close with Mahafuj, Nazrul, Aftab, Bappa, Mustafijur, and Akhtar and their brothers and families. These men introduced me to the Bangladeshi workers and their poorer friends and distant relatives who worked as construction workers. I also became close to one extended family belonging to syndicate group number 220 in Molla *para* (neighbourhood).

I conducted participant observation of women's lives. I helped with the cooking, going to the village market, the cleaning of the house, and taking care of elderly parents. Syndicate work required that men be out of the house much more than agricultural work had, so women had to work harder to keep the house running and take care of the children and the older generation. My male interlocutors often complained that syndicate work sometimes prevented them from going to the mosque as much as they used to. Agricultural work in the fields, they explained, was indeed heavier in terms of physical effort, yet they told me that it had a regular schedule and allowed for long pauses, naps, and sitting back in the home. Everyone always lamented that syndicate work, in contrast, required mastans to always be on the move. Collecting orders and payments from clients in real estate was a hectic occupation. For mastans, there was always a good reason for going around New Town in their motorbikes, protecting the territory of the Ghashi syndicate from competitors, patrolling plots of land and construction sites, visiting real estate investors and pitching land plots to them for investment, or acting threatening by a show of muscle (*gaer jor*) to reclaim an overdue payment from a company.

To collect data on their everyday lives, I followed my participants' life rhythms and participated in their daily activities within and outside the house. I was especially able to shadow my participants in their work inside Ghashi village. The days would start between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. with prayer and tea. Women and men observed the five-times-a-day prayer, the women in the house and the men at the mosque. Mastans' working day usually started with taking care of the orders of sand, brick, and stone. My participants would receive the materials from loaded trucks coming from Burdwan district. The truck drivers were men who were carefully selected by syndicate leaders; usually they weren't local mastans but men from Burdwan. Mastans unloaded the trucks and dedicated a great deal of time to sorting out the materials into carefully measured piles. Measurements (*napi*) of materials (cubic feet of sand, sacks of stone chips, and bricks) were a key part of the syndicate business, and sometimes cheating on the measurements meant a bigger profit. Piles of construction materials were a common sign of the presence of syndicate groups. Mastans stored the materials in different parts of the village, either on the street if the relationship with the

state was good or hidden in the interior of the village if they were afraid of being arrested. Stones often came whole, but to use them for construction mastans had to smash them into smaller chips. Smashing stones was another common morning occupation.

Between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m., fieldworkers began their patrols. “Fieldwork” was a key occupation that every mastan had to take a turn at doing. Patrolling involved the control of the territory of each syndicate group. Fieldworkers on their motorbikes protected and patrolled construction sites (chapter 4 and 5). At 11 a.m. every day, mastans had to report to the main office of the Ghashi syndicate, located just outside the village on the main highway of New Town. A few times, I was able to accompany the group to the main office, especially when they were collecting their payments. Afternoons were dedicated to more patrolling and construction work. In the late afternoons or evenings, I documented my participants’ interactions and activities in syndicate office number 218, the smaller office in the village. I observed interactions between brothers and the different members. Moreover, to supplement my observations and informal daily conversations, I also conducted semistructured interviews with syndicate leaders, panchayat members, Hidco officials, and both TMC and CPIM politicians. In more intimate conversations inside houses, I did open-ended interviews on the history of dispossession and how my informants had experienced it and what they hoped for themselves and their families.

In addition to these ethnographic methods, I systematically collected and studied four types of written documents that played a role in creating social relations and affecting how people performed and thought about syndicate work: (1) national and local newspapers, both in English and Bengali; (2) government maps and policies regarding land acquisitions and New Town planning, especially for the areas of Jolergram and Ghashi; (3) genealogies of the lineage of my key research interlocutors; and (4) maps of New Town drawn by my interlocutors illustrating how they saw their place in the township.

Researching the workings of syndicate mastans can be a stressful activity, and I was constantly alert to preserving my own safety as well as that of my informants. I minimized the risks in my fieldsite by exploring illicit and criminalized activities indirectly, through accounts and narratives of my interlocutors. This was possible because my informants were very open about their activities. Their use of bodily force, as well as their mafia performativity, were often the topic of everyday conversations. In Ghashi, I was offered the “protection” of my informants. My participants always made sure that I was safe, that I never accompanied them when their work was risky, and that I reached home safely at night. I never witnessed mafia methods in action, and I never saw any strong-arming in the village. Similarly, I never imposed my presence when I felt I wasn’t welcome. The issue of money was a particularly sensitive one; my participants were never

very open about how much their leaders were making, and they used vague terms such as “many crores”.

After I completed my long-term fieldwork in September 2016, I kept in regular contact with several key interlocutors both in Jolergram and in Ghashi through WhatsApp voice calls and text messages, finding out when their relationship with the ruling party and Hidco officials improved or deterioriated again and when someone married, became pregnant, or had a new child. A year later, in summer 2017, I visited Ghashi again for three months to keep myself up-to-date about my interlocutors’ lives. I am still in regular contact via WhatsApp calls, and my interlocutors have updated me about their situation during the pandemic caused by Covid-19.

Thesis Outline

In chapters 2 and 3 of my thesis, I show that, for the two neighbouring communities of Muslim villagers in Ghashi and Hindu East Bengali refugees in Jolergram, a similar process of state-led dispossession and compensation followed by an engagement in similar forms of livelihood led to a restructuring of class relations between these two Hindu and Muslim communities. Crucially, this process led to the empowerment of Hindu East Bengali refugees and the criminalization of Muslim dispossessed villagers like Mahafuj. The first two chapters of my thesis are therefore important in connection to each other because they illuminate how, in the context of neoliberal development, Hindu and Muslim communities understand their relation to each other as well as their right to be where they are. Specifically, chapter 2 focuses on Muslim syndicate workers’ accounts of the process of land dispossession and the development of New Town. I detail how Muslims’ retrospective accounts of this process focused on their self-representation as people lacking the ethical value of foresight. Foresight refers to the ability to envision the future, and it is an ethical value oriented towards the reproduction of the family. As villagers explain their precarious conditions through their lack of foresight, they also strive to find strategies for amending the wrongs of the past and reviving the ethics of foresight for their families’ sake.

Chapter 3 presents Hindu refugees’ own accounts of the same historical process of dispossession and development. While the thesis focuses on the experiences of Muslim syndicate workers in Ghashi, it is important to consider the outside perspective of Muslims’ closest neighbours, the East Bengali refugees of Jolergram colony. Both Hindus in Jolergram and Muslims in Ghuni constantly referred to each other to evaluate their situations in the context of New Town. Hindus defined their own legitimacy in relation to the perceived “criminality” of Muslims in Ghashi. Muslims, in turn, compared their precarious situations to the welfare and rehabilitation programs that benefited the Hindus. The first two chapters of this thesis are therefore important in

relation to each other, to examine how the process of land dispossession led to the empowerment of Hindu East Bengali refugees in Jolergram and to the criminalization of Muslim dispossessed villagers such as Mahafuj.

From the point of view of Hindu refugees in Jolergram, development was a productive process that led to the betterment of their conditions. Their right to land is visibly manifested in the products of their work in construction, which they call "promoting work" instead of "syndicate work". For Hindu refugees, land with a concrete house on it is better than land without a house. A land lease document stored inside a concrete house means much more than a land lease stored in a bamboo hut. Construction work thus provides a solid stake in the land, and it is valued because it helped them create a stable relationship with state authorities. Hindu refugees' hard work in construction, during and after their dispossession, is seen as proof of their legitimate presence in New Town, which they view as different from their Muslim neighbours. Hindu refugees' reclaiming of land rights through visible signs of construction work crucially signifies the fluctuating and ephemeral credibility of land titles given by the state in New Town. Ultimately, the instability of land rights and unequal access to new forms of livelihood created new oppositions between Hindu refugees and Muslims.

Chapter 4 illuminates that Mahafuj and the other syndicate workers in Ghashi do not really fit the image of dangerous, profit-driven criminals who represent an autonomous force against the state. Syndicate workers' experiences illuminate how the line between the land mafia and the state in neoliberal land regimes is not as sharp as public debates assume it to be. As my ethnography shows, low-level syndicate workers are embedded in wider networks of protection. For the syndicate mafia to function, a series of different actors are needed: Hidco state officials, local politicial leaders, syndicate dons, police officers, and real estate agents.

In chapter 4, I describe the mechanism of protection by which poor dispossessed Muslim farmers are included in the land mafia with the promise of work while they exploited for their cheap labour and engage in the daily risky activities on which the land mafia relies. I thus underscore the exploitative relations that this system of protection within syndicates sustains. In chapter 4, I make two main points. The first is that the relation of protection between syndicate workers and state officials is a relationship of dependency and is perceived as coercive by the syndicate workers. The second point is that this protection is volatile, that is, it continuously comes and goes. The "volatility" of protection explains how the poor are employed by mafia organizations and yet excluded from profit and criminalized as the most visible perpetrators of extortion practices. Political leaders and Hidco officials get rich while syndicate workers are criminalized and remain poor.

Chapter 5 considers what syndicate workers do with the protection they receive from the state. The dispossessed farmers become the risk-bearers of illicit, behind-the scenes activities of extortion and land grabs while being criminalized and excluded from profit. Protection as *tolabaji* (extortion) is one of the main tasks of the syndicate workers themselves, and the central part of the chapter traces these protection practices. By focusing on the visibility and performativity of tolabaji, I argue that the inequalities between the common people like syndicate workers and the *bhadralok* (gentlemen) like wealthy politicians are reproduced and exacerbated.

To sum up, this thesis foregorunds the experiences and motivations of low-level syndicate workers, who are at the very bottom of the syndicate hierarchy. Muslim syndicate workers are embedded into precarious networks of protection with state officials and politicians, and their work is criminalized by their Hindu neighbours, syndicate leaders and state officials. At the same time, syndicate workers navigate their precarious conditions by finding strategies to sustain their families, keep their houses and gardens, and reclaim their place in the area.

CHAPTER 2

Ethics of Foresight:
Muslims' Accounts of the Process of Land Dispossession and Development

Introduction

Mahafuj invited me to the Eid lunch that he was hosting in his house on a sunny, humid day in July. Mahafuj, 46 years of age, is the syndicate worker who opened this thesis. He was living in the Muslim village of Ghashi. His family house had remained untouched by land dispossession, like the vast majority of houses in the village. At the time, Mahafuj was staying in his ancestral home with his parents and brothers, but they were "staying together, separately" (*ekshathe thaka alada hoye*), as he explained. This vernacular expression was very common in the village; it described the situation where brothers lived under the same roof but were no longer sharing cooking and eating practices. The occasion for the joint family lunch at Mahafuj's was the day of Eid al-Fitr, literally "the festival of breaking of the fast", which is an important day in Islam marking the end of the month of Ramadan. In Ghashi, everyone was looking forward to Eid day, even long before the holy month of Ramadan started. Everyone anticipated with joy the eating and praying together among extended families and friends that Eid day would bring. Mahafuj made sure I kept myself free for the entire day for the big lunch he was hosting in his house. Mahafuj and his wife Jorina had prepared a table just next to the entrance door, on the ground floor of the house. His three brothers Ashim, Masud, and Isak were invited with their wives and children, and Mahafuj's elderly parents would join too. In addition, all the other syndicate workers in Mahafuj's syndicate group had been invited. Not everyone could come, as they were also busy with their own families. But Aftab and his elder brother Malik, Bappa, and Nazrul, all workers in syndicate group number 218, joined the Ali family for lunch before going back to their house to eat there, too.

As we all sat on red plastic chairs around the table, Mahafuj's wife served us the typical festive food of Eid, which Mahafuj had bought in the Ghashi market stall. We were served *shimai*, toasted, fine syrupy vermicelli noodles with milk and dried fruit, *lacha*, a kind of sweet semolina, and then *ghugni*, spicy chickpeas. As I grabbed the plastic bowl with my *shimai*, I commented on how beautiful the table was, with all the festive food sitting on top of the bright yellow tablecloth. Mahafuj disagreed and said: "It isn't what is on top of the tablecloth that is beautiful. What really is

beautiful (*sundor*) is what lies underneath the tablecloth". He then lifted the yellow cloth to reveal an old wooden container. He explained this was the most valuable possession of his family. The container had been used to store the rice crop when the family livelihood was based on agriculture. "The time of agriculture was the golden time of our family", he asserted.

When I asked what he meant by this, he told me that in the time when their livelihood was based on cultivation, it was easier to predict what would happen every day. "We had the foresight (*durodorshita*) to store the extra crop in the container". The harvest used to take place twice a year, in December or January and in May or June. In the months in between the two annual harvests, he, his father and his brothers knew they needed to place the rice in the wooden container so the family would always have something to eat. Mahafuj waxed nostalgic as he explained that it was the quality of *durodorshita*, foresight, that allowed the family to eat together on the same ground every single day when they were farmers. This referred to the ability to act according to a long-term vision of what might occur in the future. For Mahafuj, foresight was born in a good mind and heart (*mon bhalo*). In previous conversations, I had asked Mahafuj why he and his brothers were not eating together anymore. He explained that it was because they didn't have foresight at the time of the cooperative scheme, when Hidco took away their lands (*Hidco amader jomita nie nieche*). He had told me that he wanted to support his family, at least during the festivities, by buying food for everyone else. The family didn't have land anymore that they could rely on for rice, fish, and vegetables. But he at least hoped that, with the little income he had from his syndicate work, he could regain foresight by saving some money and providing more for the family. His desire (*iccha*) was to have the foresight to support his family, he concluded.

I was intrigued by the way Mahafuj referred to the erosion of the quality of foresight since the land dispossession and by his desire to revive it in the present in the way he supported his family. As I spent time with other Muslim syndicate workers in Ghashi, I realized that Mahafuj wasn't alone in his views. Whenever people in Ghashi talked of the process of land dispossession and the development of New Town, they referred to their own lack of the quality of foresight. In contrast, the agricultural past, when the family livelihood was based on cultivation and fish farming in ponds, represented an idealized time when villagers had possessed foresight in the way they met kinship responsibilities in their homes. In the present, Ghashi villagers both lamented the consequences of their lack of foresight and sought to amend these in their everyday activities within and outside the house.

This chapter examines how Muslim villagers in Ghashi accounted for the process of the land dispossession and development of New Town. I detail how they narrated this historical process by focusing on their past actions as lacking foresight (*durodorshita chilo na*). Muslim villagers thus

had an ambivalent account of the process of dispossession and the development of New Town as well as of the events that had led to their engagement in syndicate work. On the one hand, people framed this process through negative moral evaluations of themselves based on idioms of shame, temptation, and uselessness as a consequence of their lack of foresight. On the other hand, lacking foresight was also associated with their low structural position in terms of levels of class and education, which were aspects that were beyond their control. People in Ghashi explained their involvement in syndicate work as the result of their lack of foresight in the past. Yet, syndicate workers also aimed to regain foresight with multiple strategies in their everyday life, within and outside the family house.

For my informants, foresight allows an ethical, practical approach to time that is oriented towards their ability to sustain their families. Erik Harms' (2011; 2013) discussion of the social reproduction of the family in the context of land dispossession and neoliberal urbanism is helpful to understand my informants' perspectives of foresight. Following Terence Turner's (2008) concept of social reproduction, Erik Harms (2011) argues that for those living at the peri-urban edge of Saigon city in Vietnam, time orientation is never fully urban or rural, but people prioritize their ability to reproduce themselves as social persons belonging to the family. In the context of rapid urbanization and neoliberal land regimes, people at the edge have a "time orientation linked to one's position vis-a-vis one's household" (Harms 2011: 140). Harms defines this temporal orientation as prioritizing the "social reproduction of the family" (Harms 2011: 143). Similarly, the quality of foresight underlies the importance of kinship values and patriarchal roles for syndicate workers, even in the rapidly changing context of development they faced. Literature on the effects of land dispossession in Asia has foregrounded the fact that rural families are the first to suffer (Hall et al. 2011). Kin members are seen as often becoming predatory and calculating against each other. Michael Levien (2015) argues that new opportunities for profit in booming real estate and speculative land markets turn a kinsman into a broker who often utilize his networks of trust and blood for his own profit. Yet, seeing foresight as merely the capacity to see into the future for capitalistic gains and land speculation, and thus for making a profit, would miss the complexity of this term in its vernacular usage. Foresight for my informants is the capacity to see into the future, often a future different from the present, that is oriented towards the social reproduction of one's family. Unlike these studies, foresight for dispossessed Muslim farmers relates to kinship values of patriarchy and of family members supporting each other even in uncertain, changing times. I argue therefore that Muslim villagers' engagement in the syndicates is not simply due to the neoliberal ethos or capitalistic attitudes; it is related to Muslim attempts to account for their marginalization and regain agency for themselves and their families.

In the first section, I examine Ghashi villagers' idealized accounts of the ethical quality of foresight. My informants associated foresight with Quranic principles and with their ethical actions towards family cycles of social reproduction in the time of agriculture. The second section details how syndicate workers account for the disruption of foresight since the process of land dispossession, which they frame through their participation in the cooperative scheme. By analysing the aspects of participation in the cooperative that were at odds with Muslims' own self-aspirations and with other people's expectations, I offer insights into the Muslim value of foresight and their ethical dilemmas. My informants distinguished between the idealized foresight of their agricultural past and the foresight that they needed in the time of development. The latter is associated not only with the ability to foresee the future but also to envision a future radically different from one's present. The last section illustrates how syndicate workers attempt to regain foresight in the present. I consider the ways in which syndicate work is or is not in line with the complex and ambivalent motivations of male Muslim workers. I show the role that the desire for foresight plays in the way they evaluate syndicate work.

By analysing syndicate workers' accounts of the past, I thus illustrate how they evaluate their past actions as at odds with their own ethical aspirations for themselves and with family duties and expectations. I therefore reveal insights into their ethical values in relation to themselves and their family. I then illuminate the dilemmas that emerge when people in Ghashi navigate the desire for ethical action while being involved in work that they considered immoral.

Although I spent time with many Muslim villagers in Ghashi, this chapter focuses on Mahafuj Ali, a syndicate worker and 46-year-old eldest son in a family living in Majher *para*, and Akhtar Islam, another syndicate man who is 35 years old and works for a different group than Mahafuj and lives in the adjacent neighbourhood of Molla *para*. Mahafuj's generation and older men participated in the cooperative scheme as heads of their families. Mahafuj lived in his family house with his elderly parents and his three younger brothers, Masud, Isak, and the youngest, Ashim. In almost every family I visited and surveyed during my fieldwork in Ghashi, all the male members of the household, in their 20s to 50s, were working as "syndicate boys", which is how they referred to their low-level rank in the syndicates regardless of their age. Akhtar was a syndicate boy, and so was his elder brother Zaikur. Akhtar also had two younger sisters who had both married and moved to the Muslim village of Baliguri, not far from Ghashi. Younger men like Akhtar found it a bit easier to work in the syndicates. Young men were recruited for their strength and ability to fight and display a show of muscle (*gaer jor*). Syndicate work was physically very demanding and required constant vigilance and sometimes long hours of patrolling at night in the darker areas of New Town. Younger men like Akhtar thus found it a bit easier to get called to do a job, and they

were able to earn a bit more even though they still couldn't save much or predict how much they would earn because they were dependent on the syndicate leaders and their changing moods.

Men of Mahafuj's generation and older, those in their late 40s, 50s, and 60s, were particularly nostalgic about the time of agriculture. Like Mahafuj, the more mature men in Ghashi were very nostalgic about how they were able to foresee what was coming for themselves and their families in their agricultural past. Younger men too, however, expressed nostalgia for this time. Akhtar always lamented that people in his family were not able to help each other as they used to when they were cultivating the land, and it was easier then to start a family and have children. He liked the independence that the quality of foresight allowed in their everyday lives and wished he didn't have to depend on political leaders and other people and their moods and needs like he had to in syndicate work.

Muslim men were not all the same in their nostalgia about the past and how they related to their syndicate work in the present. There was, however, a shared narrative of self-blame for not having had the quality of foresight to envision what would happen to their village, their land, their community, and their family relations within the home. Everyone referred to their lack of foresight to indicate their immoral attitudes of the past. People always connected the ability to have foresight with kinship expectations. Within their positions and different structural limitations, people in Ghashi aspired to revive the quality of foresight in the way they approached their everyday lives.

Accounts of the Ideal Quality of Foresight

The term "foresight" was invoked by Muslim villagers when referring to a person's ethical approach to time and their actions in accordance with that vision. For Muslims in Ghashi, ethical actions always involved acting in accordance with Allah's vision. Everyone in Ghashi always referred to the fact that in the sacred Quran "there is everything, past, present, and future", as Mahafuj put it. Everyone asserted that, by reading the Quran closely and acting according to it, a person would get rid of a short-sighted view of time and would maintain faith in Allah. When one's mind and heart are imbued with the quality of foresight, one acts in accordance with the Quran and with Allah. Foresight was thus considered a quality of a good Muslim person. Ethical action embodied faith in Allah's plans. For Mahafuj, like for many other Muslim villagers, ethical action could never be oriented only towards one's temporal moment in the present. Rather, ethical action was always in accordance to Allah's all-encompassing plans for the past, present, and future. Acting with foresight thus was associated with ethical projects that could receive Allah's help. In contrast, when one's hopes didn't come true and one's condition worsened, this was the sign of a short-sighted, unethical action. Foresight was associated with submitting oneself to Allah's long-term

vision rather than being tempted by short-term benefits. Everyone in Ghashi told me that they were striving to be a good Muslim. Bappa, Mahafuj's friend from the syndicate group, told me: "It is not a person's name that make one Muslim. It is one's actions and good deeds that make him or her a good Muslim, in accordance with Islamic precepts".

Like many other Muslim men in Ghashi, Mahafuj, his brothers, and everyone from the syndicate group were also active members of the village branch of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind organization, the Islamic community of India that has branches all over Kolkata. Once, I accompanied Mahafuj and his friend and fellow syndicate boy Bappa to an event dedicated to the month of holy Ramadan and its role in the transformation of one's soul towards the greater good. The event was held in the Ghashi primary school. There were speeches from local Islamic scholars who had been invited as respectable people who were making an impact on society, as the presenter explained. After speeches on the role of praying five times a day, there were readings of passages from the Quran on the cultivation of a good soul. The poster in the room read in Bengali: "During the month of Ramadan, we can make a change. There is development in our society, and there is also self-development" (my translation). On our way back, Mahafuj told me that he was hoping for self-development during this month and the ones that followed. He was committed to extending and sustaining the benefits of Ramadan even after the end of the holy month. When I asked him what he meant, he said that for him a good soul was one that didn't aim at the good "of the moment" or at selfish actions, like many people did in New Town today. For him, a purer soul could be seen in one's actions that took into consideration everyone's good, in the past, present, and future. "If you seek help from Allah, your actions will speak for you", he asserted. To make his point, Mahafuj gave me an example of a good deed he aspired to achieve in the present as well as he had in the agricultural past. He said that when a person takes care of his family as commanded by Allah, ensuring the well-being of the family, this person acts as a good person with good moral values (*noitik kota bhalo*).

My informants drew connections between acting in accordance with Quranic principles and acting in favour of one's kin. For Ghashi villagers, an ethical vision of time, such as the one allowed by the quality of foresight, translated into an action oriented towards family cycles of social reproduction. Muslim men's projects of ethical personhood are deeply entwined with household relationships, patriarchal duties, and mutual expectations among kin. For Ghashi villagers, the household is the central site for relations of support and welfare. The household (*ghor*) is constituted by a network of relationship of mutual responsibility and intergenerational care, as studies of Bengali kinship have highlighted (Lamb 2000; White 2012). Moreover, houses in Ghashi are the only physical element left intact in the ever-changing environmental, social, and economic

contexts of New Town. As villagers strive to adapt to the new situations within and outside the house, Muslim men maintain that the house is a consistent site that can allow for security, stability, and ethical actions. At the same time, everyone laments that when they were farmers and fishermen, the quality of foresight was much easier to achieve, and thus it was easier to provide for one's family.

On the day of Eid, when he referred to the wooden container for the rice crop, Mahafuj stressed that he always made sure to keep some extra rice for the months when cultivation stopped. That way, his family could always count on some rice to eat. Mahafuj emphasized that he could foresee the possibility of longer rains in the monsoon season or of a flood which could potentially ruin the vegetable plants in the fields and submerge the paddy. He stressed that he was the one who needed to foresee these eventualities of not having a crop for a longer stretch of time than usual. Mahafuj was proud of his ability to make sure his family had something to eat throughout the year. It was easier to have foresight then because, as he put it, "I knew where life would take us". Mahafuj idealized the time of agriculture as "the golden age of his family" because he could rely on a kind of foresight that allowed for stability and security and the meeting of kinship expectations. In the ideal model of my informants' patriarchy, the eldest brother is the person in the family who has more foresight compared to other family members. In the agricultural past, he anticipated when the family needed to save money or eat less because the floods were coming, and he made sure in times of crisis or difficulty that everyone was fed and taken care of under the family roof. In the past, as is typical of Bengali patriarchal families and moral systems (Lamb 2000; Cohen 1998), the major responsibilities of debt repayment to elderly parents and as provider for the family had fallen upon Mahafuj. These narratives centred on an idealized quality of foresight associated with the specific, cyclical temporalities of agriculture. The references to these temporal rhythms of agriculture were always associated with the ability to reproduce one's family based on a future that people could easily grasp and face. My informants valued the quality of foresight precisely because it was associated with the meeting of kinship expectations and ethical personhood vis-à-vis one's family (Huang 2020; Harms 2011).

Having foresight allowed people to know what was coming (*ki ki hobe*) for oneself and one's family. Like many men in their 20s or 30s, Ashim, Mahafuj's youngest brother, expressed ambivalence between his desire to do something other than agriculture and the fact that he was able to help in the family more thanks to the stability of agriculture. He admitted that it was difficult to be a farmer's son and that he didn't like working in the scorching heat in the fields and amidst the mud in the monsoon. As plans for New Town began when he was only15 years old, he became hopeful about development and new possibilities for work. Ashim said, however, that as his hopes

didn't come true in the current situation, he now valued helping his father and brothers in the fields and the peaceful independence that foresight allowed during the time of agriculture. He compared the agricultural past and the foresight it allowed for families with the current situation, where he and his brothers were constantly dependent on politicians and their needs and moods.

The very name of the village, Ghashi, was associated with the quality of foresight that was long gone. Akhtar explained that the name Ghashi came from a tool for catching fish. The *ghashi*[1] was a kind of box-like wicker trap the villagers used to catch fish in the village ponds. Whenever I enquired about the history of the village, everyone in Ghashi mentioned that people in the village would place this tool in every irrigation canal or in the ponds. They would catch fish by leaving the trap there for the night. As Akhar added, on the downside, people didn't know what kind of fish they would catch – it could be ilish, betkhi, tilapia, or, if they were unlucky, just a carp. On the upside, however, people would know that in the early morning they would wake up, and they would have caught a fish with the ghashi trap. This was something people could count on, Akhtar stressed. Akhtar's comment pointed to the foresight that the traditional trap allowed for family sustenance. Ghashi villagers often made a connection between the fish trap they used and their ability to provide daily food for their family. Moreover, Akhtar took me to see the cow dung that was pasted on the walls of the house. He explained that cow dung was what they used to use during cultivation times as a cooking fuel, and they knew they could always find it in the fields. Everyone in Ghashi always stated proudly that they used to be fully independent in their food needs as the fields were fertile and they could catch many species of fish. They often framed their previous condition with the statement: "Whatever we had was sufficient. It was enough for us to live on".

Idealized accounts of the agricultural past were frequently contrasted with the time when people in Ghashi suffered land dispossession and everything that came after that. Whenever my informants talked of how their land was acquired and they could no longer work in agriculture, they referred to their family's involvement in the cooperative scheme. As the following ethnographic sections will show, Muslims in Ghashi saw evidence of their lack of foresight in their actions during the time of the cooperative scheme.

Accounts of the Cooperative Scheme and the Villagers' Lack of Foresight

The quality of foresight is the function of a good heart and mind and also of class and education. Everyone in Ghashi framed the past land dispossession in a narrative focused on their lack of foresight. In their retrospective accounts of the events that had occurred since the

[1] The actual name of the village, which has been changed for anonymity, referred to the tool for catching fish.

cooperative scheme, my informants revealed an ambivalent narrative in referring to their lack of foresight. The ambivalence regarded the tension between their own responsibilities and their structural limitations. On the one hand, they spoke of their lack of foresight due to their low level of education and low class, elements that were beyond their control. On the other hand, however, they always emphasized that their lack of foresight was manifest in their own unethical approach to time in the past that was harmful, analogous to vultures on dead meat, and was subject to temptation (*lobh dekhano*) and led to shame (*lojja*). It was their lack of foresight that led to these unethical attitudes, to the worsening of their family conditions and their unmet hopes. Moreover, as we will see, people in Ghashi considered the foresight that one needed in agriculture as being of a different kind than the foresight they deemed essential in the present time of development.

The next section considers how Muslims in Ghashi claimed responsibility for their lack of foresight and evaluated their own actions as unethical. The section that follows details how villagers also acknowledged that their inability to envision the future was related to their structural positions of being lower class and marginalized by the Hidco authorities.

A lack of foresight leads to harmful work

The accounts of Mahafuj, his brother Ashim, and Akhtar help illustrate how Muslim villagers always referred to the cooperative scheme as the clearest evidence of their lack of foresight. My informants expressed negative moral evaluations of their own past actions. They asserted that their lack of foresight had led to harmful work in relation to family sustenance, temptation, and shame.

Everyone in Ghashi insisted that if I really wanted to understand how Hidco had taken away their land, I had to see for myself the place where everything started. They referred to a site known as the "demarcation boundary". This is a long dividing boundary at the very edge of Ghashi, where the village land ends and the territory of New Town starts. Muslim villagers told me that it is a place associated with bad memories. The site made manifest their lack of foresight in the past. When Eid day arrived, Mahafuj and his syndicate fellows Bappa, Aftab, and Nazrul took me to this place filled with nostalgia for a lost "golden age". On Eid day, syndicate group members were celebrating their brotherhood, they told me, by going to the demarcation boundary together. This had become an Eid custom among family and friends in Ghashi – to go to the boundary and share a typical Bengali sweet or a date after the morning prayer at the village mosque.

As we reached the place, I noticed that the boundary was marked by a fence, and there was a canal running all along the fence (see Figure 2). On the other side of the canal, beyond the fence, was Eco Park, the West Bengal chief minister's recent creation, which had almost 600 acres of

green lawns, lakes, fountains, and attractions swarming with tourists. Ghashi village bordered the western edge of the park. A vast, artificial "Eco Lake" lay just a few metres from my friends and me. The sun was burning; our bodies barely cast a shadow on the uneven, stony soil, counteracting the attempts of our feet to find balanced, comfortable terrain on the small hill.

"Do you want to know what it was like to work in the cooperative scheme?" In his white festive blouse, which was too large for his small body, Mahafuj wanted to tell me the story connected to this place of bad memories. He paused for a moment, then said: "In Bengali we have a saying, *Jar shil, tar nora, tater gora*. This is how the system was". The proverb literally means, If the chopping board is mine, then the stone to smash the spices is also mine. Mahafuj's choice of words is important here. To speak about his work in the cooperative, he referred to the typical tools used in traditional Bengali ways of preparing food, typical of rural villages. The chopping board was commonly made of stone or wood. In Ghashi, as in the other Muslim and Hindu villages in the area, all food preparation started with the practice of chopping and smashing onions, ginger, garlic, chili, and turmeric to create a paste. Women used a traditional heavy stone to chop the spices and vegetables together, first by crushing the ingredients with the stone and then by rolling the stone over the mix several times to make a smooth paste (see Figure 3). Mahafuj elaborated on this point and went on to describe his work in the cooperative. After Hidco announced the implementation of the cooperative scheme in Ghashi, he felt it was his responsibility (*dayitto*) as the eldest son to enlist himself as the "land loser". He managed the family fields, and he wanted to find a way to help his family in the face of dispossession.

Figure 2. The demarcation boundary on the edge of Ghashi village, with Eco Park in the distance. Photo by the author.

The cooperative scheme promised employment as a construction worker, so this seemed like a good deal for Mahafuj. Yet, he hadn't anticipated that the construction site he would be assigned to would coincide with the area of his own family fields and those of his neighbours. Together with his fellow villagers who were also part of the program, Mahafuj was given a shovel and taught to drive a bulldozer by Hidco engineers. With these tools, just like his wife's stone on the chopping board, he had "chopped off" (*shob kathiechi*) his rice plants and aubergines and tomatoes and all the other vegetables he and his brothers were cultivating. Mahafuj described his work in the cooperative in these terms: he dug ditches with the shovel, he extracted soil from his fields with the help of the bulldozer, and he gradually helped create an artificial canal cutting across his family's fields. The pond was destroyed, and the water was channelled into the new watercourse. The new canal served to demarcate the boundary of New Town and to separate Ghashi village from it.

Mahafuj had learnt an important lesson from his work in the cooperative. His work had turned into great harm (*shorbonash*) for himself and his family. He had taken responsibility for his family land by saying "this land is mine and I am a land loser", and yet he soon realized "what a calamity (*shorbonash*) had befallen us", as he put it. Work in the cooperative scheme was associated with the failure to meet the patriarchal ideal of the eldest son caring for his family and his patrimony as he was expected to. This failure is described by the word *shorbonash*, which is a strong term in Bengali that refers to utter ruin and great harm falling upon someone. This narrative was very common in the village. I heard many Muslim men presenting a narrative of self-reflection

and negative moral evaluation for having done harm and brought a calamity upon their families. In Mahafuj's view, his work involving the chopping away of his rice and vegetable plants didn't produce any more food for his family. In fact, as he explained, "Hidco did the work with us, we did the work among ourselves, and the result was that there was no development for us. We just took away our family land and food".

Mahafuj went on to lament that as soon as the canal and the boundary were built, he didn't have any other work. Hidco ended the scheme after Ghashi's cultivable fields were acquired. The Hindu area of Jolergram had been identified for development first. Mahafuj saw his former fields lying vacant as wasteland for almost 10 years before the construction of Eco Park started in 2011. Mahafuj felt his own harmful work had destroyed his family inheritance and patrimony. The demarcation boundary represented the shortfall in his providing for his family. This narrative makes clear that Mahafuj represented himself as involved in a process that felt like chopping spices, but there was no eating afterwards.

Figure 3. The traditional chopping board with the stone and spice paste on the side. These tools were used by women both in Ghashi and in the Hindu colony of Jolergram. Photo by the author.

Mahafuj wasn't alone in his view of the cooperative scheme. In earlier conversations with other Ghashi villagers, I had heard the same proverb being used to invoke the idea of their involvement in a process that ultimately led to waste and the ruining of family fields and nothing generative for family sustainance. Akhtar, who lived about a kilometre from Mahafuj in Molla *para*, shared a similar narrative about how his land was taken away by Hidco (*Hidco jomita nie nieche*). Akhtar belonged to syndicate group number 220. He himself didn't participate in the

cooperative scheme because he was the second brother in a family of two brothers and two daughters, so it had been his elder brother Zaikur who worked in the scheme. Akhtar referred to the same proverb as Mahafuj, *Jar shil, tar nora, tater gora*, when he spoke of how his family lost the land. He also explained that the cooperative in Ghashi was divided into small groups so that each neighbourhood had its own collective of workers. Villagers were assigned specific excavation sites corresponding to the fields in each neighbourhood.

Akhtar had welcomed his brother's enlistment in the program, hoping he could get a job too in the future due to his brother's connection and the possibility that Hidco would extend the participation to more people. Echoing a common narrative in Ghashi, he then claimed that he as well as the other people in his family had not had the foresight to see into the future and act accordingly. "It was a very harmful work", Akhtar concluded, "*Kata die, kata tolacche*". This expression can be literally translated in English as "They [Hidco] used us to get rid of us". This sentence refers to the action of using one thing to get rid of that very thing. He recalled having to find ways to help his younger sister to find a suitable partner while they had no income and nothing certain in terms of livelihood, and he remembered struggling to feed his wife and children. For Akhtar, too, the most troubling effect of the harmful work in the cooperative was his struggle to meet kinship expectations.

Lack of foresight leads to temptation and shame

In retrospective accounts of the cooperative scheme, lack of foresight was not only associated with harmful work and calamities (*shorbonash*) but also with temptation (*lobh dekhano*) and shame (*lojja*). Muslims' accounts of their lack of foresight in the past were filled with strong moral judgements towards their past selves for being tempted by the short-term benefits that came with the cooperative. The following accounts illustrate Muslim villagers' self-representations of their past selves and the negative moral judgements by which they evaluated their actions to explain their present conditions.

"I've been tempted like a vulture on dead meat (*shokun-ke manghso dekhie*)", Mahafuj admitted as he spoke about his work in the cooperative. Mahafuj and I were sitting in his room one late afternoon. In private conversations he often talked about how he was unsatisfied with the life his family was conducting. He sometimes felt helpless to change things for his family. Like many Muslim villagers, Mahafuj explained his frustration in the present through strong moral evaluations of his own attitude in the past towards the cooperative. He especially referred to negative idioms of temptation. "I was tempted (*lobh dekhie*)", he often confessed as he looked for an explanation for his and his family's gradually worsening conditions since the cooperative scheme. As with many

other villagers I encountered, whenever he described his conduct in the past, he used the words *lobh dekhano. Lobh* in this context means "temptation", "allure", or "cupidity", and the verb *dekhano* refers to the fact that he was tempted by someone else, in this case Hidco and the cooperative scheme. "The cooperative seemed like a tempting compensation package" he continued. "To receive 4000 or 5000 rupees per katha of land, I thought, how beautiful. But money, or new work in development, meant nothing without a joint [undivided] family", he concluded sadly. He explained that his family had enough to live on for only a very short time. His job in the cooperative lasted for a year or so, and then nothing came out of it. He went on to lament how short-sighted he had been. He had focused only on the moment in the past, acting and thinking like a vulture. Vultures in Bengal and in Islamic culture are associated with greediness. But Mahafuj also wanted to convey that, like vultures, he had satisfied his appetites on something that was already dead and thus couldn't produce any fruit in the future for other people in the family.

For Mahafuj as for many other Muslim villagers in Ghashi, work in the cooperative was evidence of their lack of foresight because they were tempted by short-term benefit. This shameful focus on the short term prevented a moral orientation towards time, which for my informants was always aimed at family reproduction and meeting kinship expectations. As Mahafuj put it, "Temptation makes you blind towards the future". The greediness wasn't related to the compensation money or job per se but to the money being for oneself only, which didn't produce anything good for the rest of the family in the long term. Mahafuj had a negative moral evaluation of his work in the past because it contradicted Islamic idioms of solidarity and union in the family presented in the Quran. His lack of foresight in his vulture-like attitude ran against his moral responsibilities and lineage-based moral duties.

Ashim also drew on idioms of temptation, not only to refer to his brother but also to himself and the rest of the family. "We were all tempted (*lobh dekhano holo*), that you will be given money, at the time 4000 rupees was a big thing". Ashim's desire (*iccha*) for himself back then was to open a small grocery shop. Together with the offer of employment for one member of the family, the cooperative scheme also included a cash compensation for each katha of land it acquired. The family had 20 katha, and they received 3000 rupees for each katha of land that Hidco obtained. With his share of the compensation money, Ashim set up a small grocery shop on the main Ghashi road. He was tired of agricultural work and was hoping that "with development, I could also develop", as he put it. He was hopeful about the cooperative scheme, where his brother Mahafuj worked. His desire was for his brother and the other workers to build a proper road in the village, which was only a narrow dirt path at the time. With a proper road, buses and rickshaws and cars would come to the village, he hoped, and his shop would be at the forefront of development in the

village. He would have many customers and be successful. Ashim told me he was ashamed (*lojja*) now for the desires (*iccha*) that he had at the time of the cooperative. He told me that clearly these hopes and desires were not in line with Allah's all-encompassing vision as they didn't come true and only brought shame to his family. He firmly claimed that he was just tempted by Hidco and the cooperative scheme. Ashim told me he spent most of his compensation money in setting up the shop, renting the room, painting the walls, buying the groceries. But he soon realized he wasn't making enough money to provide for his future wife and children; he was only getting by. The road never became a *paka* road, a proper cemented road.

Ashim struggled to convey the difficult situation he found himself in. He searched his mind for the best way to express his thoughts. "After all, how could I go against my brother?" Then he said, "How could my fathers and uncles protest against a member of our own family?" He acknowledged that he was obligated to respect to his elder brother's management of the family patrimony. He had done what he was supposed to do, honouring the family hierarchy and being a good younger son and brother. "The work was done by my brother, so we didn't protest. Our whole family was made a part of it, so that we didn't protest". He saw his and his family's acts in the past as marked by temptation and shame.

For Akhtar, too, what was most troubling about this story was his inability to foresee a clear vision of the future. This led him to become a *bekar*, a useless person, a word that my informants often used to refer to someone who didn't do anything with his life. In his accounts, Akhtar opposed his evaluation of himself as a *bekar* and subject to the temptation of money (*lobh dekhano*) to the ideal of himself as providing help (*shahajjo*) to his family members in the agricultural past. The quality of foresight was connected to the ideal of the righteous Muslim person who acts while keeping in mind the best possible future of everyone they care about. While people who thought of short-term gain were considered selfish in Ghashi, those who offered their help to family, neighbours, and friends were considered generous, reliable, and morally respectable.

Akhtar narrated how the structures of help within the family were affected by his lack of foresight. As the younger brother, Akhtar was expected to help his elder brother in the heavy work in the fields. In return, Zaikur was supposed to help Akhtar with money for his studies until middle school, as well as with food and marriage. This was typical of the structure of inheritance and patrimonial management in Ghashi; while brothers would equally inherit a part of the fields, the management of the crop and family money, coming from the sale of extra fish in the market, was managed by elder brothers. Structures of help within the family sustained relationships of mutual support and obligations within the house. Akhtar waxed nostalgic as he recalled how he used to have a more active role in helping out in the house. "I used to help a lot in my family (*onek*

shahajjo korechi), and my father and my elder brother helped me with money for school and I was supposed to get married". He explained that, after the land was gone and his brother lost his job in the cooperative, there was nothing he felt he could do in the house, nothing he could help with. "I became useless (*bekar*)", he repeated. Having an attitude of helping, *shahajjo*, is seen as an ethical conduct of foresight that is collectively oriented to the overall well-being of the family. In contrast, individual desires, such as for money or less tiring work, were motivated by short-sightedness.

My informants interpreted their precarious conditions in the present as evidence of their lack of foresight in the past. In the present, they could not find a way to justify their participation in the cooperative in a way that was morally justifiable and in accordance with kinship expectations. Both brothers evaluated the past of dispossession and the cooperative scheme as at odds with their kinship ethical values of *shahajjo*, caring for their parents, and being a reliable provider of food and support for the family. Both brothers explained their failure to fulfil the ideal ethical personhood as related to their short-sightedness and not prioritizing the long-term collective benefits for family reproduction. Foresight represented the essential quality for an ethical orientation to time aimed at the reproduction of the family and one's ethical self vis-à-vis the family.

Lack of Foresight: Narratives of Class

My informants acknowledged that there were things beyond their control related to their lack of foresight. Narratives focused on the structural limitations of the Muslim community help illustrate this aspect. First, my informants had a narrative of the state's deception of their community. Muslim villagers often stressed that Hidco authorities had "tricked" them out of their lands by devising the cooperative scheme. The second structural element that Ghashi villagers used to explain their lack of foresight was their class and their low level of education.

Ghashi villagers distinguished between two kinds of foresight. One was associated with the agricultural past and its foreseeable temporal cycles related to the fields and the fish farming. The other was the kind of foresight associated with development, the one they felt they lacked. In the context of development, foresight implied having insight into the future as different from one's present.

"We have been tricked by Hidco": Narratives of marginalization

Mahafuj claimed that he and his fellows had been tricked by Hidco due to their lack of foresight. He firmly asserted that "the cooperative scheme was a trick to fool us out of our family lands". For Mahafuj, the program had been done with the use of a trick, *koushol kore*. This Bengali expression carries the meaning of deception, and it refers to something artificial or make-believe

with the purpose of devising something clever and artful. Aftab and Bappa immediately emphasized this by repeating that they it had all been a trick, "*koushol kore, koushol kore*". In previous conversations, I had heard Muslim villagers refer many times to Hidco's trick in taking away their lands with the cooperative scheme. People in Ghashi shared a narrative of state deception towards their community, and they all insisted that it had been their lack of foresight that had prevented them from understanding the state's plans.

"We were mentally tricked", Mahafuj continued. When I asked what he meant by this, he explained that foresight is first of all a quality of the mind. He claimed that villagers didn't have the ability to understand what would happen in the future. They were used to understanding the present only. So, Hidco made them focus on that very moment in time, on what seemed real and yet was just a trick. He and his fellows in the cooperative believed the promises of Hidco engineers and CPIM politicians when they said that they would develop their lands and that villagers could find work in construction jobs. New Town development for Muslims in Ghashi represented the opportunity to join in the development, and be actively part of it in that moment when the cooperative was implemented.

Aftab interrupted and stressed this point further:

> We were common people (*shadharon manush*), and Hidco gave us hopes (*asha dieche*) for that moment in time, but the hopes didn't come true. Hidco said that they would develop the drainage system and the whole area, the water supply, the electrical supply. But nothing like that happened. Hidco took it all away from us through a trick.

Foresight and education

Mahafuj praised education because it allowed a person to go beyond the present moment. After seeing his father and grandfather suffering from back-breaking work in the fields, he thought that he had had enough and that giving away their land and work and becoming a construction worker would be a good thing to do. Yet, as he put it, "I was not able to understand what would happen because I wasn't educated". Foresight, for my research participants, had to do with having a sense of where life will take you and acting on that sense.

Everyone in the village associated being able to study at school through a good level with the possibility of acquiring foresight. Mahafuj's educational trajectory exemplifies the kind of access to school that was typical of Ghashi villagers of his generation. During his childhood, there was no school available in the village or in the vicinity. The closest primary school was in Ultadanga, 30 kilometres from Ghashi. There was obviously no public transport in the rural Rajarhat area as the only road was the one in Ghashi village. Mahafuj recalled that as a kid he woke

up at 5 a.m. and walked along the road to get to school, which at the time was narrower, bumpier, and muddier than today. Mahafuj regretted that he was only able to go to school until the fifth grade. After that, his father needed help in the fields, cutting the crop and carrying it to the storage huts. Not having had access to middle or high school was a clear sign of a lack of education for Mahafuj as well as for his three brothers. Ashim, who was 10 years younger than Mahafuj, explained that in his childhood things were no different; in the village there still weren't any "good schools", by which he meant middle and high schools. Access only to primary education was common among villagers in Ghashi. In addition, Ashim told me that their primary school was made of *math*, soil, and he recalled that as young students they helped their teacher keep the school hut intact, and sometimes lessons consisted of repairing the thatched roof or the bamboo walls that the humidity had damaged. "The school was covered the best as we could do", he narrated, with *tali* and bamboo sticks. The humble buildings commonly represented a symbol of lower-class life in the village. In Ashim's narrative, the schools exemplified the low level of education they could access as poor people. These narratives focused on signs and shared idioms of the lower classes in the Muslim communities of Rajarhat. Villagers in Ghashi often explicitly represented the limitations of their own community through idioms of class and caste.

My informants saw evidence of their lack of foresight in the fact that they didn't understand the value of their land. Many villagers claimed that they didn't understand how low the amount of money they were offered for the land was because they lacked education. Whenever my informants talked about their land, they often referred to how little they had accepted as compensation compared to the value that the lands that they used to own currently had in the market. Mahafuj's family was given 5000 rupees per katha, while today, in the area near the highway and the shopping malls, Hidco was selling their land for 50 to 70 thousand rupees per katha. What was common in the Ghashi residents' narrative was that their lack of foresight was never simply related to the money they could have gained. They always associated foresight with the possibility of reproducing their families. For example, Jafar, Mahafuj's neighbour, referring to the compensation he received of 4000 rupees per katha, once said to me: "How can this little amount of money be of help for your family? This amount of money would just finish in a go". He claimed that they were into one kind of livelihood, agriculture, and then they came into another one, the syndicates, but that took a while and for a long time were useless for their families. As part of their narrative of low-class life in their Muslim community, people in Ghashi often lamented that their lack of education was a cause of their present precarity. As Jafar explained, "Education can give foresight. We lacked education in this village", Jafar asserted, "so we lacked the foresight to understand what would happen to our motherland, to our fields and ponds".

The Muslims' limited access to in education was compared with the possibilities available to the East Bengali refugees in Jolergram, living just a kilometre away. Everyone in Ghashi village lamented that, although the Hindus in Jolergram had also been dispossessed of their land, they were now better off. These narratives focused on the signs and shared idioms of the lower class of Muslim communities of Rajarhat. Villagers in Ghashi often explicitly represented the limitations of their own community through idioms of class and caste. "Muslims are lagging behind in education compared to the Hindus", Mahafuj commented when he was comparing his family's level of education with that of a family of East Bengali origin he knew. "I can see young Hindu boys waiting on the main highway for the bus that takes them to their English-speaking school. The Hindus in Jolergram will soon have master's, while here in this village many people haven't even finished their high school, so how can they aspire to enter a master's program?" Mahafuj often wished that Muslims had something like the Ramakrishna mission available for them, claiming one could develop the quality of foresight by attending courses at the Ramakrishna institute. The reference to this Hindu educational institution, located in South Kolkata city, is exemplary because in popular discourses the mission represented access to education in many disciplines at very low rates. Mahafuj often made the point that such educational facilities and institutions weren't available for Muslims, who thus stayed behind in terms of education.

Akhtar too wished he could be better educated like the Hindu community in Jolergram because education would facilitate his ability to help his family. With education, he felt he would have a different attitude towards his work in the syndicate and towards his daily choices of how he spent his time. His support of the family would be more consistent and stable. At the moment, Akhtar and his brother were making 1000 rupees each per month with syndicate work, and this was not enough to repair the house which needed refurbishments, to care for their elderly mother, and to plan for a family. As the examples of Mahafuj and Akhtar above illustrate, the Ghashi villagers' desire for social mobility and class improvement through education was always centred on collective ends and not individual gains.

Despite the different adjustments and challenges that families faced within their homes after land dispossession, the ethical values of kinship still informed the way people imagined their ethical selves and their actions. The question therefore is not whether family values and ethics were "cannibalized" (Levien 2015) by joining syndicate activities. Rather, the question is, How did the persistence of these ethical values of family reproduction colour the fact that they were working as criminalized syndicate workers?

Syndicate Work: Wrong Values and Ethical Projects of Foresight

"To live in heaven with our families, we need to work for the devil". Akhtar was telling me of his work in the syndicates. This double meaning of syndicate work as both morally wrong and yet offering new possibilities for sustaining one's family most clearly defined the ambivalent, contradictory situations that Muslims in Ghashi faced every day. Like Akhtar, many other syndicate workers described their work in similar terms. Everyone had an ambivalent account of the work as morally wrong and yet necessary to sustain families and future generations.

The way Muslims in Ghashi accounted for their syndicate work illustrates how they navigated moral dilemmas between judgements of their actions and the ethical motivation of amending the wrongdoings of the past. The ethnographic evidence that follows shows how Muslim men in Ghashi strived to regain foresight for themselves and their families in their daily activities within and outside the house. Whenever Muslim villagers spoke of their engagement in syndicate work, they expressed the moral dilemmas and ambivalent accounts of "wrong ethical values" on one side and their ethical attempts aimed at foresight on the other. On one side, everyone claimed that their precarious and deprived (*bonchito*) conditions were due to their lack of foresight in the past. And, this had left them with no choice. My informants claimed that they *had* to get involved in the syndicates. On the other side, people made the point that they were striving to regain foresight for the sake of their families in the present. This section first explores the negative judgements expressed by my informants of their wrong actions, and then it considers how Muslim men attempt to regain foresight in their present activities.

Syndicate work as devil's work

Every syndicate worker I spoke to in Ghashi conveyed that syndicate work was demeaning and frustrating work. The vast majority of Ghashi men I encountered, from 18 years old to about 50 years old, occupied only the very low ranks of the syndicate hierarchy. They told me that their rank was that of "syndicate boys", regardless of their age. The term "syndicate boy", which my informants preferred to the criminally charged term *mastan*, was still a diminishing title, and it indicated their position at the very bottom of the syndicate hierarchy.

Muslim villagers expressed self-critical evaluations in relation to their work. When asked why they were unsatisfied and frustrated with this business, everyone explained that the moral value (*noitik kota*) that the work carried with it made them unsatisfied. Mahafuj explained that the business of supplying materials in itself would be no problem if people did it in the right way. But "when you are left in between a village and a city, what happens to your moral values?" Mahafuj asked me in tone of regret. "When we work as syndicate boys, our moral values are wrong (*noitik*

kota wrong hoe geche)", he admitted. Like Mahafuj, both Ashim and Bappa described their actions in the syndicates as "misbehaviour" (*durbeabohar kora*). Bappa told me that for people with self-critical views, syndicate work was not appealing. "We don't like it. I do not like it. It is related to *durniti* (bad work; corruption) and *tolabaji* (extortion)".

As chapter 3 develops further, Ghashi villagers perceived their relationship with politicians and syndicate leaders as coercive. All of the syndicate workers I spoke with in Ghashi expressed the limitations of their structural positions in terms of coercion and shame. As Bappa told me, "Those who wish (*iccha*) to do something different from the syndicates, they have to face some kind of problems with leaders. If nothing, then definitely shame". He told me of his cousin that tried to set up his own small business as a supplier of materials. He had then faced many problems, and he was told by political leaders: "It is only because of us [the political leaders] that you are able to earn and eat (*Arre tui to amader jonne kore khachish*)". This sentence, which Bappa reported as uttered by leaders to someone who had tried to get away from the syndicates, used the Bengali informal *tui* form of the verb, highlighting the condescending tone that a leader used towards a syndicate boy of Ghashi. Politicians, as everyone stressed, were controlling the syndicates to keep the syndicates' power under their control. "They are using the syndicates when and how they please", Bappa claimed. "Syndicates are just a way for them to create vote banks", Mahafuj claimed, expressing his critique of a politically dominated system that he had to accept if he wanted to support his family.

Muslim men in Ghashi couldn't morally justify their syndicate work. They all expressed strong negative moral judgements on their work and themselves. These moral evaluations made working in the syndicates even more taxing and exhausting. My informants couldn't withdraw their moral judgements on themselves because their work implied a criminal persona they needed to embody. Chapter 4 delves into this performance of criminality that Ghashi men enacted in their daily work. The daily media attention describing Muslim syndicate members as criminals in political debates and public discourse all contributed to my informants' own sense of doing immoral work. Everyone in Ghashi was very much aware of the way public opinion depicted their work and actions. Yet, they needed to sustain their families, and they had few alternatives for earning money in a morally justifiable way. This situation, however, didn't prevent Muslim villagers from finding strategies for ethical actions, at least for their children if not for themselves. Syndicate workers attempted to identify strategies to regain agency within syndicate activities, to regain foresight for their families.

Projects for regaining foresight

One day I was chatting with Mahafuj in his house. When I asked whether he had any aspiration for the future, he replied: "moral values (*noitik kota*) for my kids and my community, foresight, and kindness". Like Mahafuj, syndicate workers straddled the line between doing a kind of work that is considered "wrong" and being ethical by reviving foresight for their children. It's a moral dilemma that they face in their everyday activities within and outside the family house. There are several strategies that Muslims in Ghashi enact to achieve heavenly life for themselves and their families in the present while simultaneously working as syndicate boys. Mahafuj's hopes for a better future were in contrast to his present situation of precarious syndicate labour and criminalization. He longed for security and a stable, permanent job that would allow him to sustain his family, which he felt was appropriate for the eldest male of the house. He talked of this attitude as striving to regain foresight for his children and future generations. He was hoping to save enough money to send his sons to an English-speaking school so that they could have foresight for themselves.

Living together and dying together

Having a joint family living under the same roof is intimately connected with Ghashi villagers' ethical personhood. Despite their suffering land dispossession, changes in livelihood, and shifts in family structures of power, families in Ghashi haven't become nucleated. Brothers haven't leave the family house but continue living under the same roof. While families have become separated by "staying together, separately", people still strive for ethical values of kinship such as living together in the bounded space of the house, where the patriline can be reproduced within one's structural limitations. As Erik Harms (2011; 2013) notes, in the context of neoliberal land regimes and land dispossession, people don't simply embrace "modern", individualistic modes of living as opposed to "traditional", more collective household modes of life. Rather, in Ghashi, people navigate the gap between the ideal and the real in their homes, too, facing the consequences of the intimate form of dispossession that they associate with the eldest brothers' participation in the cooperative scheme. Everyone in Ghashi valued and spoke proudly of the fact that families were still staying under the same roof. Both Ashim and Mahafuj longed for stability and saw the house, despite its internal separations, as a site of security. They were able to relax after a long day of exhausting work as syndicate workers within the space of the house. They could still count on the emotional support and on the social relations connected with the space of the house and its related networks of friends and neighbours. Brothers were all striving to find ways to compensate for their lack of foresight by helping out in different ways. Most of all, everyone was committed to not

letting anyone take away their house so that the brothers' children could grow up together in a familiar space of solidarity and sociality. The family house in Ghashi retained its role as the index of family cohesion and mutual help, despite structural transformations restricting the ability of brothers to fulfil ideal roles and obligations. In practice, Ghashi villagers maintained their sense of not being able to live up to ethical ideals of kinship and structures of help while also enacting pragmatic strategies to adapt to the actual family structures and precarious conditions they lived in (Harms 2011). People found new, practical ways to orient their everyday actions towards the social reproduction of the family and themselves as ethical members of these families.

One of the main strategies Ghashi villagers implemented to regain an ethical orientation to time is manifested in shifts in burial practices. Everyone often lamented that participation in the cooperative scheme led to Hidco acquiring part of the old village cemetery. Hidco manager Gautam Sen had compensated for this loss by offering a bigger plot of land where villagers could bury their dead. Yet, this event was narrated by my informants as evidence of their own lack of foresight for not being able to care for the dead of their families. Both Ashim and Mahafuj told me that they were committed to finding a place for their dead that was in line with their regained foresight, that is, their ability to foresee what would happen to their dead in the future. Everyone firmly asserted that they didn't trust burying their dead in the plot offered by Hidco. Truly taking care (*dekha shona*) of the tombs of the ancestors required foresight, and they were all attempting to find ways to achive this goal. As a result, in Ghashi burial practices have undergone a significant change in the last five years or so. Before, the members of one's *gotra* (lineage) were buried in the Muslim graveyard (*khoborstan*) located at the very edge of the village along a small road. Today, because Hidco acquired most of the old graveyard, the dead were being buried in small gardens in front of houses. Mahafuj, in one of my first days in his house, proudly showed me his family burial ground right in front of his house. It was a small plot of land covered in all sorts of plants and bushes. Mahafuj had told me that his *jetha* – his father's eldest brother – had been recently buried under the tallest tree in the garden. "My brothers and I are all going to live and die here in our ancestral house. Just like my father and uncles, we are going to be buried in our house garden". As the day passed and I got to know many other villagers, I realized that even families with the most humble houses would find a small space and make room for their dead, usually beside trees or bushes. As Akhtar put it, "We tend the graves of our ancestors near our houses now".

My Muslim informants expressed a common emphasis on reasserting a spatial relation of proximity and connection between the space of the house and the space where the dead are buried. These rituals, as I have shown, have a structure of lineage preservation and an ethical approach to time. Bappa stressed that staying together with the family in one house allowed him and his

brothers to take care of the dead. He explained that if they didn't die together and take care of the dead, there would be even more separation in the family. He stressed the importance of staying in one house to be able to care for each other through death, something that would not be possible if they lived separately. As is typical of rural Bengali Muslim communities, people placed importance on the deaths of family members happening within the house (Gardner 1998). Tending the graves of one's ancestors is a practice common amongst Bengali Muslims as a way to pay respect to one's patriarchal lineage and position oneself inside that lineage (Alexander et al. 2016: 86). For my informants in Ghashi, caring for the dead became crucially important to reasserting their ethical selves and regaining foresight for the well-being of the family.

Syndicate work: The possibility of foresight for future generations

"Syndicates have a future", Mahafuj claimed. "It is our own future we are uncertain about". Conversations about what the future might bring had become common among my informants as they attempted to find ways to play an active role in the future of their families. They had varying ability to ensure that their source of income, syndicate work, would be more secure in the future. Eldest brothers and people above 40 years old or with illnesses or injuries found it particularly difficult to envision long-term participation in syndicate work, let alone the possibility of increased income. Mahafuj explained that to be a syndicate boy, you needed to be strong and make a show of muscle (*gaer jor*). "One needs to show that he can fight", Mahafuj told me. And, he was worried because being in his mid-40s and suffering from back pain meant that he had not been able to use bodily force for a long time. In contrast, younger men with strong bodies like Ashim were more positive about the possibility for syndicate work being a long-term income source. This also was the reason why younger brothers in the house generally could afford better living conditions. Younger men were able to work more, show more muscle, and earn a bit more.

But, there was a strategy that everyone, despite their differences, referred to as a way to foresee how things could be in syndicate work and regain foresight and ensure income. They explained the dishonest practice of selling materials of lower quality as a way in which syndicate work could offer them the possibility of foresight. Although cheating per se was not ethical, my informants valued the possibility of foreseeing what their clients would need so that their work would be guaranteed and needed. Everyone often mentioned that the buildings that were being constructed would also require remodelling and repairing work. This is how syndicate workers ensured their work would continue in the future in order to sustain their families – by selling lower-quality sand and stone, they gained the foresight necessary to preserve their jobs. This way, they were able to turn syndicate work into something that could give them a sense of where life was

taking them and then act on it. “It’s demeaning work. We need to cheat”, Bappa conceded. “But we can gain some money to send our children to school so that they can have foresight for themselves”. By cultivating their capacity of foresight as syndicate workers as a means for fulfilling kinship aspirations, Muslim men upheld the ethical values that they thought they hadn’t lived up to in the past.

Mahafuj explained that the foresight he needed today didn’t involve the ability to know when the rains would come or how much rice to store for the months without harvests. Rather, he gave an example of the kind of foresight that is needed for syndicate work. Mahafuj was now working as a fieldworker, finding vacant plots on which the syndicate group could invest and collecting orders for cement, sand, and stones to construct buildings or offices. But this work would not always look like this, he argued. “Now they need sand and cement, but what about tomorrow? What material will they need tomorrow?” Once the exterior of the building was done, people would need iron for the windows and for the pipes. They needed to have foresight to know what would be the next material in most demand and make sure the leaders could call on them to collect orders for that material. Only with this kind of foresight they could keep their jobs in the syndicate and find the money to buy food for their families. As these examples illustrate, people in Ghashi are striving to reproduce their families and their family duties even within the context of radical changes in their livelihood

Conclusion

Vernacular narratives about foresight provide an important lense onto syndicate workers’ perspectives on their current marginalization and involvement in the syndicates. Like the Ali brothers, many other syndicate workers and their relatives in Ghashi explained how they lost foresight since they were dispossessed from their lands. Everyone stressed how it was important to revive the quality of foresight in the present of development, in order to sustain the family.

Villagers’ accounts of the historical process of land dispossession and development centred on both moral evaluations of their unethical attitudes as well as on their structural position of being lower class. My informants employed the term *durodorshita* to refer to the capacity to see into the future. This is a capacity that is oriented towards the social reproduction of one’s family and one’s self within the family.

This quality of foresight thus underscores the importance of kinship values and patriarchal roles for syndicate workers, even in such a rapidly changing context as a rural wetlands livelihood having to adjust to a modern city-in-progress. Literature on the effects of land dispossession on rural families has foregrounded the fact that families are the first to suffer. Kinspeople are seen as

often becoming predatory against each other and having a calculating attitude (Hall et al. 2011). New opportunities for profit in booming real estate and speculative land markets turn one's kin into brokers who often utilize their networks of trust and blood to make their own profit. Yet, seeing foresight as merely the capacity to see into the future for capitalistic gains and land speculation, and thus make a profit, would miss the complexity of this term in its vernacular usage. Referring to one's self-maximizing practices alone does not explain the way my informants evaluated their syndicate work and the process that led to their engagement with it.

Foresight for my informants is the capacity to see into the future, often a future different from the present, that is oriented towards the social reproduction of one's family. Unlike other scholars (Levien 2015; Hall et al. 2014), I argue that foresight for Muslim dispossessed farmers carries the kinship values of patriarchy and of family members supporting each other even in uncertain, changing times. My informants' accounts reveal a vision of themselves as oriented towards the reproduction of their family. Accordingly, syndicate work is not aimed at making money per se but at making money for one's family. As ethnographies of Bengali kinship reminds us, Muslims in Bengal value the reproduction of patriarchal roles and patrilineal descent. As has been noted in the context of land dispossession and real estate markets, kinship values remain the priority. People adapt to new circumstances with strategies oriented to supporting sociality within the family. Yet, as Muslim syndicate workers strived to regain foresight and sustain their families, they also reproduced their criminalization by engaging in syndicate work.

CHAPTER 3

Rights Earned by Labour:
Hindu Refugees in the Neoliberal Land Regimes of Kolkata

Figure 4. Bagjola Canal in New Town, peri-urban environment in northeastern Kolkata, India. Photo by the author.

Hindu Refugees in the Real Estate Syndicates

Things look different from the perspective of the Hindu neighbours. Ratan, a Hindu East Bengali refugee, is 35 and lives in the Hindu Refugee Rehabilitation (RR) colony of Jolergram. By the time I started fieldwork in 2014, Ratan had been able to set up his own business in real estate

and invest in several buildings and renting opportunities in the booming Jolergram area. Ratan and Mahafuj lived in peri-urban villages just a few kilometers from each other. They both suffered land dispossession by Hidco state officials, they both subsequently worked as construction workers in the land losers' cooperative program run by Hidco, and they engaged in similar livelihoods in the construction sector of the emerging township. Yet, the living conditions of these two men were radically different. With his considerable earnings from his independent business in construction, Ratan was able to build a three-storey house for his wife, Priya, his two young sons, and his elderly parents. In contrast, Mahafuj was still living in a small, modest room on the ground floor of his family's house with his wife and his two sons. Mahafuj's family had entered a phase of uncertainty, economic difficulties and social stigma.

As most of the Hindu refugees I met in Jolergram, Ratan never mentioned the term syndicate worker or syndicate chele to define his occupation. He had a fancier title for himself: using the English word, he defined himself as a 'promoter'. As he explained, being a promoter meant taking responsibility for building a house, taking care of construction materials and labour for construction. Policemen, local politicians, and low-level bureaucrats were aware that Ratan was a successful promoter and paid him respect. Ratan was able to count on an established network of connections with private developers and Marwari real estate agents for his business.

This chapter explores the perspectives and accounts of East Bengali refugees like Ratan. Neoliberal land regimes brought a restructuring of power and class relations between Ratan and Mahafuj's communities. Specifically, this chapter shows how for Ratan's community of East Bengali refugees, the process of dispossession and resettlement led to access to new forms of livelihood and rights to land in a lucrative area of New Town. Hindu refugees were empowerd by Hidco's plans of the Hinduization of New Town.

For the Hindu East Bengali refugees of Jolergram, labour in development work was deeply entwined with their own sense of identity. By emphasizing how their work was legitimate and recognized by the state, Hindus distinguished themselves from their Muslim neighbours. The opposition between being a *promoter* or a *syndicate boy* was constantly used by dispossessed farmers in New Town to explain and complain about different social experiences. For dispossessed farmers, becoming a promoter or a syndicate boy meant different lifestyles an living standards and social status, differential access to employment and stable income, to health care and state welfare. In this thesis, I argue that different structural positions reflect new forms of hierarchies and inequalities inherent in neoliberal land regimes and urban development projects. I show that land dispossession in New Town shaped dispossessed people's access to land and employment in an unequal fashion. Crucially, the process of land dispossession led to the empowerment of Hindu East

Bengali refugees such as Ratan and to the criminalization of Muslim dispossessed villagers such as Mahafuj.

Ratan was the first person I met who challenged my understanding of land rights in the aftermath of land dispossession. We were sitting in his personal office where Ratan spent much of his days, managing the supply of sand and cement to be delivered to construction sites nearby. Since the land dispossession of 1999, Ratan's family lost both the house and 10 bighas (1 bigha is 1600 yd^2) of cultivable land. Ratan, together with his wife Priya, his two young sons, and his elderly parents were subsequently resettled in the new Jolergram refugee colony in New Town, a few kilometres from their former village.

What was most troubling for Ratan was that refugees in his community were still called *baire gotro,* literally "those whose lineage comes from outside", by their Muslim neighbours in the nearby village. Ratan feared further expropriations could take away his house and land again. He was determined to give his family a permanent place to live, and he explained that it was because of his work as a promoter that he could do so. Ratan was mostly concerned that it would be Muslim dispossessed villagers, working in real estate syndicates, who could gain control of lucrative plots and ponds in the area. Ratan complained about Muslim work in the syndicates, saying that it was of poor quality and ruining the new township. In contrast, he was proud of his own work as a promoter in real estate. He told me: "They cannot take away our houses anymore. We are building this city; it is our work that is making New Town!"

I was initially taken aback by this comment. Ratan often told me that he had been granted land titles for his new plot of land in the Jolergram colony. Yet, for Ratan, this piece of paper stating his right to land meant very little without the work in real estate that made the title possible. Over the course of my fieldwork, I frequently encountered refugee men in Jolergram claiming that it was their work as real estate promoters that made their rights to land possible. For Hindu refugees, it was their work in construction and real estate that sustained their legitimate presence in the up-and-coming township of New Town.

In this chapter, I argue that East Bengali refugees assert their right to be in the place by evaluating their labour in construction as "promoting work" backed by the state. Refugees distinguish between their promoting work and that of their Muslim neighbours in the syndicates, which they depict as illegal and dangerous. Although Hindus and Muslims engage in similar forms of work, the refugees assert the legitimacy of their promoting labour by critiquing Muslims' activities in construction. This critique has its origins in the refugees' experience of dispossession and precarious livelihood, as well as in their long-standing relationship with the state.

Anthropological studies have illustrated that labour carries its own meanings and ethical evaluations (Bear 2015). Understandings of labour are deeply linked to people's sense of justice and mutual obligations (Hetherigton 2011, 2013; Subramanian 2011). These meanings of labour can connect past, present, and future imaginations (Bear 2007, 2015). Similarly, by stressing continuities between past and present forms of labour, refugees reflect on the essential role of their labour for the development of New Town.

In the first section, I focus on refugees' reflections on the process of dispossession, resettlement, and access to work in construction for real estate. Building on Kregg Hetherington's (2011, 2013) notion of the "materiality of rights through labour", I suggest that Hindu refugees understand their right to be in New Town by virtue of their labour. Through a close analysis of refugees' accounts, I show, in the second section, that refugees define their work in stark contrast to Muslim work, which for refugees has had destructive qualities and represents an impediment to development. In refugees' accounts, Muslims become the symbol of precarity and instability in their lives. As a reaction to their multiple experiences of dispossession, their precarious conditions, and their lack of clear roots to the place, Hindu refugees construct a narrative of Muslims as criminals whose acts of illicit work may bring destruction and threaten refugees' work of generating development. In contrast, to assert the legitimacy of their own work, I consider how refugees appropriate the terms *development* as well as *promoting* in an active way by asserting continuities between a past and a present in which they have worked in state-led development projects in Rajarhat.

In the last section, I analyse how, through worship of the Hindu goddess Durga, Hindu refugees express their aspirations for a better future and their right to be on the land.

Inside the Refugee Colony of Jolergram

An account of how the colony came to be, and of people's lives in it, illuminates both the overall improvement in refugees' conditions as well as the different structural positions within the community. I follow the lives of Ratan and Shonjoy, as these two men exemplify differences in life possibilities within the community. Although all refugee families were granted lease documents and resettlement compensation, the process led to uneven access to plots and benefits. The spatial layout of the colony reflects structural positions representing patronage relations, power structures, and class positionings. Community differentiations were triggered by the process of dispossession and resettlement.

Refugees were granted land rights in the lucrative plots of land of Jolergram *mauza* (territorial unit), where real estate market and speculation were booming. The new colony was

called the Jolergram Refugee Rehabilitation (RR) Colony, and it was constructed between 2004 and 2006. Refugees were gradually moved and resettled in different phases until 2008. The colony was designed to be in a strategic position in relation to the future township and its anticipated urban expansion. The new colony was part of the Biswa Bangla (Universal Bengal) neighbourhood of New Town, where land speculation, investments, and real estate projects were rapidly transforming access to and uses of land. In early 2000, the area thus became the focus of state plans for redevelopment, sanitation, and urban infrastructure. Strategically located just one kilometre from the main highway, the colony was built at an important intersection between New Town and the vibrant, densely populated Baguiati neighbourhood in the old municipal part of Rajarhat. In 2011, when construction of a new highway started in front of the colony, land prices in the entire neighbourhood rocketed. In Narkel Bagan, on the other side of the canal where refugee settlements used to be, residential blocks for middle- and upper-class IT professionals were constructed. A big exhibition ground, an English-style garden, and a plant nursery mushroomed along the canal. On the opposite side of the Biswa Bangla highway, a major real estate project by the multinational company Larsen and Toubro gave life to a huge convention centre.

The allotment of plots in the new colony was officially presented by Hidco as a fair and impartial lottery (RR Report 2000: 9). This process was meant to ensure that land plots and documents would be randomly assigned to all refugee families, so that no one could be accorded any preference of location (Ibid.). Hidco established a commission of 3 Hidco officials, chaired by the chief of Land Procurement Office and CPIM member Narayan Dasgupta. The commission was in charge of creating a list of beneficiaries participating in the lottery. To this purpose, the commission worked in collaboration with a refugee committee, who acted as a mediator between the state and the community. Refugees registered to the rehabilitation scheme through the submission of refugee slips and documents of homestead rights. Hidco officially provide lease documents for 20 to 35 mtr^2 of land in the new refugee colony. Hidco initially assigned lease permits so that land could not be sold by refugees to potential investors but was granted by the state for the sole purpose of resettlement. Land lease documents were assigned to the heads of each refugee family. Extended families, who had previously lived together in clusters, were thus considered different family units for resettlement and land documents. Hidco's Land Procurement Committee also granted the monthly rehabilitation allowance of 1000 rupees (10 GBP) plus 5000 rupees for moving costs (RR Report 2000: 12). As we will see, however, this lottery process didn't turn out to be as fair as Hidco presented it. Rather, having established connections with officials was crucial to being allotted a better plot.

The colony was designed as a place where refugees could maintain their rural lifestyle while also living in close proximity to the emerging middle-class neighbourhoods, English schools, and shopping malls. The colony has 527 households, all of Hindu East Bengali origins, that possess refugee slips to identify the refugee status of each family. East Bengali refugees in the colony belong to the Scheduled Caste, mostly the Namashudra Caste. The orderly layout of the colony remains distinct from the surrounding areas along the Bagjola canal (see Figure 4): new middle-class residential blocks, unplanned settlements of recent Bangladeshi migrants, and the crowded urban area of Baguiati. The boundaries of the colony are clearly demarcated by Hidco pillars. The layout of the colony is a neat grid of cemented lanes that intersect perpendicularly with each other. All along both sides of each lane are the cemented houses of refugee families.

Following the path from the Bagjola canal into the main entrance of the colony, one finds the central open ground, an area that was designed by Hidco for communal activities to recreate a sense of Hindu refugee community. The open ground hosts wedding celebrations, the festival of Durga Puja, and the annual village festival dedicated to RadhaKrishna. There are two big artificial ponds where fish are harvested every day with traditional fishing nets, women wash their clothes, and children yell in play as they swim. Facing the central open space, small shops sell groceries, toiletries, street food, and sweets.

The complete displacement of the refugee settlements on the south bank of the Bagjola canal turned into an opportunity for a better settlement and housing in the Jolergram colony for East Bengali refugees. Refugee houses in the RR colony are two- or three-storey buildings, often with one floor under construction. The family of Ratan, the refugee man who opened this chapter and is now a syndicate member, exemplifies the trajectory of upward mobility and welfare benefits enjoyed by many refugees in Jolergram colony. Ratan's father, Ramoni, lived in East Pakistan until 1964, when riots over the Hazratbal shrine forced him to leave and cross the border with India with his wife. Ramoni was an educated man and worked as a Bengali school teacher in East Pakistan. After a period in a refugee settlement in Nadia district in West Bengal, Ratan's parents arrived on the banks of the Bagjola canal with almost nothing in terms of possessions. Ramoni started working as a daily labourer in Rajarhat fisheries. With the help of a refugee relative, he was soon involved in CPIM party politics. In 2007, Ratan's family was resettled in the new RR colony and received lease documents for a 35-square-metre plot donated by Hidco.

Ratan's three-storey house is one of the first buildings one can see from the main colony entrance. The house faces one of the ponds in the central ground. Like the rest of the colony, Ratan's plot of land was initially prepared for construction by refugees working in the cooperative. The marshy parts of land were filled in and the terrain evened out. Hidco engineers then laid the

foundations for each refugee house to be built. Ratan's family first moved to the RR colony in 2007, temporarily into a small tin-walled hut while building their new cemented house. Ratan often spoke proudly of how his family was dispossessed from a *kacha* house (mud house) and was resettled with the opportunity to build their own *paka* (cemented) house. Ratan's father Ramoni, as the head of the household, received a compensation of 30,000 rupees (400 GBP) for the loss of their kacha house and small plot of land in Narkel Bagan. With this money, Ramoni and Ratan invested in the building of their new house, which now has running water and electricity. Afterwards, Ratan invested the money in the syndicate construction business. Ratan and his wife Priya were able to send their first son to an English-speaking primary school in New Town. Priya could stop working outside the house and instead take care of their younger son and work as a housewife in her home.

Reflecting differential positions within refugees, the colony is now divided into different sections that are delimited by the grid of lanes. The poorest refugee families live in the blocks to the right and the left of the main courtyard, where houses gradually become smaller and more modest. The house of Shonjoy, for example, was built on a much smaller plot of 20 square metres crammed between other houses of similar size and structure. Shonjoy is a refugee man who didn't have many connections to the party at the time of resettlement. His family was resettled in the RR colony in 2008, when the best plots had already been taken. Shonjoy's house had only the ground floor, made of two small rooms and a cooking space. The house was still without running water and electricity, so the family made use of the shared fountains and electric supply from the central ground. Whenever I met Shonjoy, however, he always pointed to the fact that they were adding another floor on top so that his family could have more space. Even though the house reflected a more modest living and less economic and welfare benefits, Shonjoy was proud of his family's change of conditions since their dispossession from Narkel Bagan or, as he called it, *khaler upore*, the previous settlement "on the other side of the canal".

Shonjoy's father came from Khulna in East Pakistan in 1964, escaping the riots and fearing for his wife's and his own life. He was a Dalit farmer and couldn't afford an education. Shonjoy's parents found refuge first in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, then in Bihar, and finally in 1968 they settled in the Narkel Bagan colony. In Narkel Bagan, Shonjoy's family used to own two kathas of land, which his father had bought for only 300 rupees per katha. After the New Town redevelopment, Shonjoy's father was compensated by Hidco with 5000 rupees per katha, plus another 5000 for resettlement costs. When they moved to the new colony, however, it took a long time before they were able to build the first floor of the house. Subsidies and help from Hidco were slow to arrive, and Shonjoy could only get a grant of 10,000 rupees from the bank. Yet, Shonjoy was happy (*khushi*) to finally have a stable cemented house for his family. He thought that a *paka* (proper,

cemented) house on a *paka* road would finally allow for a permanent settlement in the colony. Shonjoy worked as a construction worker and van driver for syndicates. He was a CPIM supporter, and he was grateful to party members such as Narayan Dasgupta, who gave him the plot in Jolergram and the possibility of a better income. Shonjoy's experience of resettlement echoes those of many others among the poorer refugees. Land documents and employment in syndicates in the RR colony were highly valued by poorer families, despite their different positions in terms of class and patronage. Resettlement in the new colony was seen as offering the possibility of upward mobility from previous conditions of extreme poverty and uncertainty.

Refugees' Reflections on Rights Earned through Labour

This section explores how Hindu refugees understood their rehabilitation as the outcome of a dialogic engagement with the state mediated by their labour in construction. Refugees in the Jolergram colony expressed an understanding of rights as "relationships of mutual obligation that bind institutional authorities and subjects" (Subramanian 2009: 18), encoded for refugees in the specific materiality of colony buildings. For Ratan and many other refugees I met in Jolergram, rights are sustained by and imbued with the quality of development work, which for them signifies state recognition.

Ratan's three-storey house is one of the first buildings one sees from the main colony entrance. The house faces one of the ponds in the central grounds. Ratan often spoke proudly of how his family was dispossessed from a *kacha* house (mud house), and when they were resettled they had the opportunity to build their own *paka* (concrete) house. Ratan's father, Ramoni, as the head of the household, received a compensation of 30,000 rupees (400 GBP) for the loss of their *kacha* house and small plot of land in Narkel Bagan. Ramoni and Ratan invested some of this money in the building of their new house, which now has running water and electricity. Afterwards, Ratan invested the rest of the money in a construction syndicate. Ratan and his wife Priya were able to send their first son to an English-speaking primary school in New Town. Priya stopped working outside the home, and instead she took care of their younger son and worked as a housewife.

Throughout my fieldwork, I frequently encountered East Bengali refugees reflecting on their right to be in the RR colony through idioms of work (*kaj*). Refugees often reflected on their *kaj* as producing development (*unnoyon*) and concrete, solid (*paka, pokto*) buildings. I came to see these reflections as complex commentaries on the cooperative scheme and the resettlement process which reformulated "not just *who* owned land, but *how* land was owned" (Hetherington 2011: 98). For Ratan and the other refugees, it was their labour in construction, generative of development and backed by the state, which made their rights to land possible. Anthropological studies have

illustrated that labour carries its own meanings and ethical evaluations (Bear 2015). Understandings of labour are deeply linked to people's sense of justice and mutual obligations (Hetherington 2011, 2013; Subramanian 2011). These meanings of labour can connect past, present, and future imaginations (Bear 2007, 2015). Similarly, by stressing continuities between past and present forms of labour, refugees reflected on the essential role of their labour in the development of New Town.

Hetherington illuminates how, for Paraguayan farmers, land rights are not associated with an abstract relation between people testified to in a paper document. Rather, land rights are "relations between people mediated by material things" (Hetherington 2011: 98). For my refugee participants, rights are the product of their labour in construction. Refugees reflected on their right to be in the new township as the result of their labour in state-led development projects and the solid, cemented buildings this labour produced. This also explains why refugees saw Muslim settlements differently; they did not view them as the product of the same labour recognized by the state.

Ratan was one of the first refugees I met, and in one of our first meetings he gave me a tour of the new RR colony. First, Ratan and I walked past an artificial pond and along the path from the main entrance to the central open ground. Ratan chose to take me to the Vivekananda Club, built on one corner of the grounds. It was a simple, unimpressive building of one room with not much inside apart from a few red plastic chairs, a foosball table, and an empty desk. Ratan explained that this was the very first building to be built in the colony. He said he was proud (*gorbito*) because this building was the result of good work which he himself and a team of 50 other refugees had accomplished under the supervision of a Hidco engineer. Good work, for Ratan, produced development (*unnoyon*), which was manifested in proper (*paka)* houses like the ones in the colony. He explained that two types of *paka* house existed. One type looked like a proper, cemented house but was not. This type of *paka* house would certainly be made with materials of bad quality that would make the house collapse at some point. Ratan gestured in the direction of the Muslim village of Ghashi, where buildings were of this kind. In contrast, true *paka* houses were resistant to rain and floods because they were built of high-quality construction materials that would prevent the walls from falling easily. These were *pokto* houses, meaning houses that were solid and not vulnerable to external agents. He added that it was this second type of houses that created development.

Moreover, for Ratan, having a smart mind (smart *mon*) was the way in which one could easily distinguish between good or bad materials and be able to build solid *paka* houses. He claimed that a smart mind allowed him to move forward in his life. He concluded that labour that produced development (*unnoyon*), created proper (*paka*) houses, and was guided by a smart mind was "promoting" work (*promoting kaj).* This was how Ratan defined his own work in the syndicate for real estate and construction materials. Ratan didn't see his labour in the cooperative programme as

simply the result of a top-down state welfare scheme. Rather, labour in construction had generative qualities visible in development (*unnoyon*) and in cemented buildings, and this labour could be sustained with a smart mind.

For Ratan, development (*unnoyon*) was a quality of labour that led not to buildings that were not only solid but also aesthetically pleasing. He claimed that if it weren't for the work that he himself and his fellow refugee workers put into the colony, the cemented buildings and roads wouldn't look so neat and tidy. He liked how every house had even small decorations and pretty details in the architecture. He contrasted the colony with nearby Muslim settlements, complaining that those villages were very messy, houses were poorly built, and walls were falling apart.

For Ratan, his right to be in the colony was manifest in very material objects such as the Vivekananda Club office that he contributed to build. The fact that it was made of cement and bricks was the material evidence that it could not be removed and would resist the pressures of time. The value of such a proper, durable office mirrored the value of Ratan's own building work, which in turn had made the granting of land rights possible. Ratan pointed to what anthropological research has identified as the materiality of rights (Hetherigton 2011, 2013), that is, the fact that land rights are not simply abstract legal documents but are manifested and ensured by worldly objects such as the cemented buildings in the RR colony.

Ratan's dislike of Muslim houses and messier settlements was a moral indictment of the fact that these buildings were not the outcome of labour in development recognized by the state. For refugees like Ratan, resettlement in the new colony was the material outcome of their labour to construct proper, solid buildings. Ratan's account reflected the rhetoric that was explicit in the CPIM compensation and resettlement scheme for East Bengali refugees. Refugees were not simply granted rights in the new colony; they first had to prove they were able to work in construction.

Labour in construction allowed Ratan to secure his father's safety and fulfil kinship expectations. When I asked Ratan in what ways construction work had improved his life, he stated that his labour and the development (*unnoyon*) it produced had saved his father's life. Ratan explained that when his family used to live in the previous settlement in Narkel Bagan, his elder sister had died of a heart attack on the way to the hospital. As he explained it, this happened because of the lack of developed roads and public transportation connecting the old refugee settlement with the rest of Rajarhat. He had to walk and then hire a van rickshaw to take his sister to the hospital, but by the time they arrived it was too late. The family's displacement from Narkel Bagan led Ratan to worry about his father's health because his father had been suffering from a lung infection. The better roads in Rajarhat, however, eased his worries. Being the only son, Ratan

was under pressure to support his parents. “Development work and *paka* roads saved my father”, Ratan stated.

Ratan’s wavering allegiance to the CPIM party is also noteworthy. He told me that he continued to vote for CPIM as everyone in his family had always been loyal supporters of CPIM. Yet, after the family’s dispossession from Narkel Bagan, he had parted ways with CPIM views and supported the party minority that was against land dispossessions. “Politicians are just like that, like many others, sometimes they help sometimes they don’t. . . . But then construction labour and proper roads changed everything for my family. Development work saved my father’s life!”

Ratan’s story reveals that land rights were not only achieved through labour in construction but were also sustained and reinforced through relationships that emerged through labour. Development work that generated proper, solid buildings led Ratan to a set of connections backed by power. Building a solid office in the colony was a stepping stone for Ratan’s own political engagement. Ratan went on to become an active member of the Vivekananda Club and an elected local representative who took part in negotiations over the architectural design of the colony. The club negotiated with Hidco officials, and refugees were able to choose between a few layout options. Development work gave Ratan access to state networks, which in turn secured his entitlements in the new colony and steady house-building work. Because they were immersed in relationships with CPIM low-level politicians, Hidco bureaucrats and engineers opened up new levels of engagement with the state. In this sense, labour in construction led to the expansion of refugees’ dialogic space with the state.

Ajantha Subramanian (2009) argues that “patronage can encode meanings and relations more complicated than the exercise of top-down authority circumscribing the agency of the client” (177). She argues that communities can mobilize patronage within their own lives to lay claim to a wider political space, to reassert certain ethical values, and to forge alternative livelihoods. East Bengali refugees draw our attention to these nuances of patronage. Refugees invoked Hidco officials in charge of rehabilitation as their loyal protectors who valued refugees’ labour and their long-standing relations with the community. Yet, refugees protested when plans for compensation and rehabilitation didn’t match their aspirations for the layout of the new colony.

As Laura Bear (2013, 2015) argues, acts of labour encode different kinds of obligations and have their own ethical necessities. People’s acts of labour don’t simply produce inanimate objects. Rather, labour connects to nonhumans through ethical values and signals mutual obligations between citizens and the state. The cemented buildings of the colony, the paved roads and lanes, the solid refugee club office, and the public facilities manifested recognized obligations and the state’s

recognition of the value of refugees' construction work in the making of New Town. Refugees understood their land rights as a result of this recognition.

Differential ability to earn and maintain one's rights through labour

Importantly, the labour refugees have to produce to maintain their rights in Jolergram is not equal within the community. A discussion of refugees' reflections about resettlement in the colony and the meaning of construction work illuminates how people inhabiting representative structural positions reflect on the same process. An analysis of the structural positions within the colony shows how rights through labour, as theorized by Hetherington, are actually a gradient of class, gender, and power. As by refugees' accounts show, the material domain within which certain rights are embedded may vary significantly within the same community.

The stories of my refugee informants add to Hetherington's argument the fact that people in the same community have differential capacities to maintain and perform rights through labour. For example, Ratan reflected that good building work, like what he did on his own house, was a function of education and connections with powerful people from the state. He was proud of his father being a teacher in East Bengal as he thought that education was what made construction work better. He didn't like studying at school much. He started as a daily labourer in the cooperative when he was very young. When it became clear to him that he could have made some progress in construction business, he started being tutored by a teacher in the refugee community to continue his studies. He believed that being educated had helped him be successful in his construction business. He explained he could understand more quickly how to use a bulldozer and other construction machinery. He gestured towards the bright yellow paint of his house and said that he could distinguish between good- and bad-quality paint just by smelling it because he was educated. He also said that education was important when dealing with state officials. It allowed him to be taken more seriously and not to be cheated with contracts and payments.

Ratan said one of the reasons he built his third floor and terrace roof was to be able to dream (*shopno*) about what he could achieve for himself one day. He wanted to be able to show to his two sons what they could achieve as well. He liked hanging out on the terrace whenever he was at home, observing what the colony and its surroundings had become and were still becoming. Looking from the terrace at the view of the colony and pointing to the nearby middle- and upper-classes residences, he observed: "We were behind before as well as now. We are still scheduled caste. Even if we have improved a lot, we are still not like them. But we were able to improve and give our family more opportunities thanks to Bengali Brahmins, who gave us work here". Ratan referred here to distinctions in social and economic status as well as to the role of caste and

patronage position vis-à-vis members of his community, the politicians he knew, and the people living in more expensive residences nearby. He also valued the fact that he was able to meet kinship expectations thanks to patronage relations. In speaking of the Hidco politicians that helped him get his work and build his house, he added: "I learnt a lot from Chatterjee, Banerjee, Bhattarchaya, Dasgupta, Dutta . . . they are the bearers of development and growth. They are like God to me. They helped us move forward".

Thanks to his connections in the party and with Hidco officials, Ratan's house was one of the first to be built in the colony, and Ratan's family soon became a point of reference in the community for help. This was crucial for Ratan's sense of himself, as he was able to fulfil the role of provider for the community and enhance his family's status. He explained that his extended family, his cousins, were able to get electricity through his house. As Gardner (1995) notes, patronage relations between kin are key to differentiating the "givers" and the "receivers" of help, and the ability to give help is central for one's position and status within the extended family. In building his house, Ratan was able to significantly improve his own and his family's social position. Ratan was able to earn enough so that his wife could stay at home and not have to work. Ratan's father, Ramoni, after being involved for a long time in CPIM party politics, was now active in religious festivals in the colony. Ramoni told me he was proud of his son's achievements in construction. Ramoni was happy he could now sit back and enjoy a quieter life focusing on religion. He confessed that politics required too much work and energy for an elderly man.

Thanks to his work and the cultivation of a smart mind, Ratan said, many opportunities opened up for him and his family. Ratan always referred to his ability to navigate relationships and ensure construction contracts as the result of his smart mind (smart *mon*). He said he didn't have such a quality of mind initially. He had to develop it to survive the competition and criminality in the area and do promoting work. With the money he got from the construction business as a supplier of materials, he was able to start his own construction business. He defines himself as a promoter, rarely mentioning the word "syndicates" due to its criminal connotation that Ratan attributed to Muslim work.

Ratan often described his work as a promoter in these terms. He supplied labour and construction materials to real estate companies by recruiting workers from the colony. He also received construction contracts from Hidco for road construction and small buildings in New Town. He commented that he had powerful connections that would ensure contracts. When I asked him whether he thought that was fair, he said: "Hidco trusts our community's work as they know it is good and it brings development (*unnoyon*)". Ratan also added that with the money he made in the construction business he was able to build two guest houses in New Town, just a few kilometres

from the RR colony. In total, he had 16 rooms that he was renting to call centre employees for 1500 rupees per month. Like Ratan, many refugees invested the money they made in constructing new buildings and renting them out. This was seen as the most secure way to ensure a future life in booming Jolergram. Ratan's trajectory of life and work was typical of refugees who managed to cultivate powerful connections over time.

Shonjoy was also investing the money he earned from construction work in expanding his house. Reflecting on the importance of the house as a material sign of rights, he often stressed: "Only this property belongs to us now. Where we live now, only this belongs to us, this is ours". Like many other refugee men in the colony, Shonjoy often performed the role of a man who had been able to improve his own and his family's condition thanks to his work in construction. However, he had to do many jobs to achieve and sustain his position and expand his house. Similar to Ratan, Shonjoy also considered himself a "promoter", using the English word. Yet, Shonjoy's promoting work was not as secure as Ratan's, and it entailed different kinds of activities to obtain a stable income. For example, Shonjoy worked for some time as a broker providing security guards and watchmen in the new buildings and malls of New Town. He would recruit the poorest refugees and also Bangladeshi migrants settled near Baguiati and receive a commission from their employer. The most common work he did was supplying construction materials such as sand, chipped stones, bricks, and cement. When I asked whether he was able to ensure a good income, he asserted: "Where there are buildings, there is work. I can work as a construction worker, a broker, a van driver, a supplier of construction material".

He described his work as a supplier of materials in these terms: "Whatever the material I get from the dealer, I transfer it to the person who has placed the order, the developer or real estate company. I go to the construction site and supply the construction material, or to the house or location where the construction will happen". At times, he said, when contracts were scarce he also worked as a construction worker.

One day, as I was shadowing Shonjoy on his work day, we went to meet Ratan at the Jolergram office. Ratan was putting him in touch with a company in need of construction material as Ratan was in charge of the supply of materials and labour. As we passed Ratan's house on our way to the office, Shonjoy gestured to the big house and asserted that the plots in the colony had not been really randomly assigned to families. "The lottery was not really a lottery", he complained. Referring to Ratan, he lamented that some people were able to get the best plots thanks to their connections. "Ratan knows all the Chatterjees in the construction business. He used to do politics a lot, he knew politicians. Instead, we don't have any backing, if we lose our jobs, no politician now can really help".

Shonjoy contrasted his position with Ratan's, claiming that Ratan benefited from his connections with real estate agents and politicians while he had none. He then pointed to Ramesh's house, just a few houses from Ratan's. Ramesh's house was also in an enviable location in the colony, according to Shonjoy. He showed me that the back of Ramesh's house was facing the main highway, and he said that for this reason his plot of land had high value in the market, together with the surrounding vacant plots. Shonjoy told me that Ramesh had been able to set up his own business in construction and build a residential building with five small flats on one of those vacant plots just outside the colony. Shonjoy said that living in a better location in the colony close to those lucrative plots had made it easier for Ramesh to be able to buy land before others. Shonjoy attributed the status difference to having been assigned a certain plot and having control over a certain territory in Jolergram, which was crucial to being able to ensure contracts. Shonjoy's labour in multiple jobs could not compensate for his lack of connections and his peripheral plot farther from key development sites. As Erik Harms (2011) has argued, space matters for dispossessed people to be able to benefit from neoliberal development and real estate booms. In the colony, plots don't have the same value for refugees. Proximity to New Town urban expansion and infrastructure makes it easier to get contracts and buy land. A more strategic position allows for a more effective performance of one's labour through having a house that is visible to everyone. Space in the colony reflects different social and economic positionings. Being confined to a back lanes where space is less and houses are smaller and crammed next to each other reflects different access to opportunities in real estate.

These reflections on labour and life circumstances in the new colony illuminate differences in the ways people in the colony are able to earn and maintain their rights through labour. Shonjoy's and Ratan's accounts reflect different amounts of work needed to maintain land rights in the colony. Compared to Ratan and Ramesh, Shonjoy had to work harder by engaging in various tiring activities in order to provide a good house for his family and maintain his right to be in the RR colony. Supporting Hetherington's (2011) argument, these refugees' accounts signal variations in class, rights, and possibilities for the future within the same dispossessed community (Huang forthcoming).

Hindu Refugees and the Muslim "Other" in Neoliberal Land Regimes

This section explores how East Bengali refugees create an oppositional relationship between themselves and their Muslim neighbors, who are depicted as "others". My participants reflected on the difference between Hindu syndicates for real estate, sustained by productive labour in construction, and the Muslim syndicates in the nearby village of Ghashi. As this section shows, in

coping with their lack of *desh* (home country) and in their attempts to reassert their land rights in the area, East Bengali refugees reflect on the poor quality of Muslim labour in real estate and on the perceived Muslim threat to their own work.

In private conversations with my refugee informants, an anxiety about their lack of roots and sense of belonging to Rajarhat emerged. Family histories revealed this sense of lack of *desh* and the fact that they did not view Rajarhat as their place of origin. Whenever I asked my informants to tell me the history of their families, the refugees always referred to the several displacements and dispossessions they had suffered in the past and how difficult it had been to settle along the Bagjola canal. When I asked Chonchola, a young refugee woman, about her family history, she replied: "We have no place. This is why the government helped us with land here".

Like Chonchola, many Hindu refugees in Jolergram struggled to present a continuous narrative of their place of origin because of their experience of recurrent displacements. These struggles unsettled their sense of stability in the present colony, in which they also had to cope with the insecurities of living in the midst of neoliberal land regimes and booming land speculation.

What was striking, however, was that refugees condensed these different challenges into the image of a Muslim threat. As refugees told more intimate stories about their previous village in Narkel Bagan and their transition to the RR colony in Jolergram, the source of their anxiety became clear. They associated Muslim villagers with a threat to the stability of Hindu settlement. My participants often complained that Muslim villagers called them *baire gotro*, literally "those whose lineage comes from outside". In their accounts, refugees made a connection between the time of Partition, when Muslims had symbolized forced displacement, and the present situation. These anxieties are clear in the account my Hindu interlocutor Shonjoy gave me one evening when we were sitting in his house drinking tea.

"My family escaped East Bengal and arrived in Orissa first. Then he had to move to Madhya Pradesh, and then again to Bihar. I was born in Orissa. My younger sister was born in Bihar. We moved a lot; we suffered a lot because we didn't have a place that was our home. When we arrived here in Rajarhat, we struggled because this was not our home and we didn't know anyone. We had to build our huts again."

Labour was crucial in refugees' accounts of how they coped with their sense of insecurity about their lives. Past uprootings and displacements had stimulated a longing for permanence in the Jolergram colony. Refugees longed for long-term social and economic stability in Jolergram. Their sense of insecurity and lack of *desh*, often expressed in private conversations, led to claims regarding the value and legitimacy of their labour. On the one hand, refugees speculated that Muslims represented a threat to the products of their labour and therefore to their right to be in

Jolergram. On the other hand, these speculations imbued the refugees' labour in real estate development with an aura of legitimacy and legality.

Refugees often contrasted their work as promoters with the illicit, polluting activities of Muslim syndicates. For example, Ratan and Shonjoy both claimed that the neighbouring Muslim village of Ghashi was dirty and full of construction waste because people there didn't know how to do sand work. Shonjoy spoke of Ghashi villagers in these terms: "I hardly go to that side, in Ghashi. There are *Mohammedan* there, who don't build good constructions. Those who die in their families are buried in graveyards; they are called *khoborsthan*. Muslims put soil on bodies and water on land! Why would I go there?"

Shonjoy was referring with disdain to Muslim practices of burying the dead and also of covering existing plots of land with water. As we will see in the next chapter, the practice of enlarging existing rivers to cover vacant plots with water was a common strategy among Muslim syndicate members designed to prevent further land acquisitions by others. For Shonjoy and my other refugee informants, these practices were causing the land to be dirty and once again subject to floods. Refugees often spoke of Muslim syndicate "goons" (criminals) who were acting against the state and development. In contrast, refugees described their own work as "promoting" development and as backed by the state.

Dislike of the construction work by Muslims was a recurrent theme among East Bengali refugees. Refugees expressed concerns about the poor quality of Muslim labour because they used sand that had not been properly cleaned, which they felt would constitute an impediment to refugees' promoting work and development in New Town. Refugees associated Muslims with poor-quality construction and believed they were impeding the refugees' work as "promoters" in real estate. As we have seen, these judgements and worries had their origins in the refugees' attempts to assert their right to be in this place due to their long history of dispossession and engagement with the state. By reflecting on the quality of their work compared to that of Muslims, the refugees were claiming the legitimacy of their construction businesses in syndicates for real estate.

Memories of Partition and the refugees' experiences of flight were connected with their present experience of Muslim syndicates, which became the symbol of the potential destruction of what refugees had built with the help of the state. Refugees connected this anti-Muslim political discourse with recent public narratives on Muslim syndicate mafia aiming to gain control of the most lucrative plots in New Town. Muslims emerged from Hindu refugees' narratives as a violent Other, representing destruction and acts that contrasted strongly with refugees' acts of construction and development as "promoters".

As a reaction against this instability, refugees were constantly engaged in preserving what they feared was ultimately unstable. Refugees felt their insecurity could be countered by constant improvements to their houses and the other buildings in the colony. Houses were the most important markers of refugee families' right to be in the place. Houses represented refugees' personal imprints on the area. My Hindu participants in Jolergram felt that the state recognized the refugees as rightful occupants of the colony precisely because they were capable of making these imprints. Refugees therefore attempted to reassert their security and ensure a stable life for themselves through house-building. Laura Bear describes how, for Anglo-Indians in railway colonies in Kolkata, "Their lack of *desh* leads them to feeling politically illegitimate and irrelevant" (Bear 2007: 270). For East Bengali refugees, even though they felt a lack of *desh* in Jolergram, having state entitlements to work in the colony allows them to feel politically legitimated.

Durga Puja in the East Bengali Colony

In this section, I explore how, through the annual ritual of Durga Puja, refugees reasserted their right to be in New Town and their aspirations to participate in urban development. The ritual of Durga Puja connected different temporalities. In the Durga temple, refugees represented their acts of work in the past as being in close relation with the present and the future.

Hindu refugees' narratives of their aspirations illuminate vernacular understandings of rights and labour among dispossessed communities in the context of neoliberal land regimes. Dispossessed refugees in New Town are caught between different dreams and hopes for the future in relation to new forms of livelihood in construction. I foreground how refugees' aspirations as expressed through the Durga Puja are deeply entwined with ideas of work.

Everyone in the RR colony told me I had to attend the Durga Puja celebrations, claiming that it would be an important occasion if I wanted to understand more about their work in Rajarhat. In the days before the puja started, I witnessed the preparation of the *pandal* (marquee). I asked Shonjoy about the theme of the *pandal*, and he replied: "It is 'our work' (*amader kaj*)". Shonjoy explained that Durga Puja used to be celebrated in the old settlement in Narkel Bagan but in a much smaller *pandal*. He added that in the past, only people from the community celebrated the puja and came to see the idol of the goddess Durga. In contrast, Shonjoy seemed enthusiastic at the idea that now many people from New Town neighbourhoods and also from other locations were coming to see the *pandal* in the colony. In the past, money for the *pandal* had been collected by people in the community from selling fish in the market. This year, the Vivekananda Club committee, of which Ratan is a member, took care of the funding and organization.

Durga Puja is one of the most important religious celebrations in Kolkata in honour of the goddess Durga. Rituals have been described as key moments when people's attachment to land is reproduced and celebrated (Östör 1980). The ritual of Durga Puja expresses social relationships inscribed in the land (Östör 1980: 156–57). This ritual usually celebrates the relationship between the community living on the land and the deities whose *shakti*, or vital force, is imbued in the landscape. Importantly, "The pujas assert that flows of life (which generate fertility and productivity) can only be maintained if long-term ties of obligations are expansively created" (Bear 2013: 17). In the RR colony, Durga Puja aimed to assert relationships between the East Bengali community, their work in development, and the state (Bear 2015).

The *pandal* had a classic bamboo structure and was located on the main open ground of the colony, in the space between the two ponds. Ratan's roof terrace offered a perfect view of the *pandal* and the surrounding statues. Inside, the *pandal* was simply decorated. The idol of the goddess rested on a stage and was dressed in white and adorned with garlands of orange flowers. Outside, huts made of straw with thatched roofs symbolized the *kacha* houses of the old refugee settlement in Narkel Bagan. Inside the straw huts, there were statues of refugees engaged in their past acts of work. Among others, there were statues of a man working in the fields and harvesting rice, a woman carrying the harvest home, and a man in front of a small artificial pond.

My interlocutors had made all the statues themselves. Refugees explained this ritual as a recognition of their work and as a celebration of their active role in the development of the area. Durga, they said, was their mother, who imbued their work with the capacity to develop and promote the place. Shonjoy explained that the statues represented refugees' activities in the past.

On the day of Anjali, the eighth day of Durga Puja, refugees gathered at the pandal and chanted hymns in honour of the goddess. They first offered worship to Durga and then garlanded the statues outside of the pandal. When we approached the statue representing a refugee man by a pond, I asked Shonjoy whether the statue symbolized a fisherman catching fish in the pond. Shonjoy explained that the statue portrayed a man doing dredging work. This work involved clearing the pond of mud, dirt, and sand and using the sand to fill in marshy areas. Shonjoy claimed that dredging work was part of the story of the community. He told me:

> This is the work my father used to do, when he arrived here after Partition. It is something I learnt from my father. When my family settled down in Narkel Bagan, it was all muddy and dirty. My family found out that there were Muslims nearby who were fishing and cultivating rice in the lands the government had given us. My father was really good in dredging work, in taking sand and other things out from the canal. Without my father's and other refugees'

work, it would have been impossible to live here! It was all muddy and dirty. They cleaned the canal.

Shonjoy stressed the continuity between his work supplying sand for construction and his father's dredging work on the Bagjola canal. The area of Jolergram, according to Shonjoy, was still in need of sand, and he claimed this need was met by refugees working in the construction business.

Attached to a wooden fence, at the entrance to the pandal, there was a big sign that read: "New Town Smart City: My Aspirations". It consisted of a white board where refugees could write their aspirations on yellow sticky notes that had been attached to the board. The government was asking refugees for their aspirations, he said, because refugees contributed with their work to the building of New Town. In its entirety, the pandal celebrated past and new forms of work. It asserted idealized obligations and relationships between refugees and the state.

For Shonjoy, the possibility to express his aspirations was a function of his hard work in the development of the area. He had recently supplied sand and stones for a residential building built in front of the RR colony on the opposite bank of the canal. Ratan and other leading figures in the Jolergram syndicate had managed to strike a good deal with the real estate agent for the supply of materials. Shonjoy was employed to drive a van, deliver the sand on site, and then work in laying the foundations of the building. Shonjoy stated he was proud of his work as it was part of Hidco's project to improve the areas along the canal. He claimed that the state was happy with the work he and his fellow refugees did as *promoters*. "This is why Hidco asked our committee to put up a board on the pandal", he asserted. "Hidco want us to participate in New Town development. They want to hear what our dreams (*shopno*) are for the city". For Shonjoy, the very fact that Hidco and the New Town Kolkata Development Authority had asked people in the community for their "aspirations" was a clear sign of the state's recognition of their work. He added that a similar thing could never happen in Ghashi because Muslims were causing many problems for the state with their corruption and violent fights within syndicates. Muslim syndicates wanted to build in New Town, but they were doing it very badly, he asserted. In contrast to this image of the poor quality of Muslim work, Shonjoy stressed that it was the high quality of his construction work that gave him the ability to dream.

In line with anthropological findings on uneven distributions of the capacity to aspire between and within communities (Appadurai 2004; Cross 2014; Huang forthcoming), Shonjoy acknowledged that, within his community, people had different abilities to dream. He suggested that dreams were easier to achieve with education and the quality of mind that he defined as *smart* (smart *mon*) as Ratan had, using the English word. When we were standing in front of the pandal, he gestured to Ratan's house and said that people like Ratan could dream for more, both for

themselves and their family, because they had smart minds and were better educated. Shonjoy especially attributed to having a smart mind the ability to establish powerful connections with real estate agents and politicians, which in turn determined one's success in the construction business.

Jamie Cross's (2014) work is relevant to understanding Shonjoy's aspirations for himself and his community. Cross has shown that in the context of Indian Special Economic Zones, state visions of neoliberal development and economic growth are appropriated in ways that bring these visions into messy alignments with people's dreams and desires. When I asked Shonjoy where his note was on the board, he pointed to one that read "Make people smart in the smart city". Shonjoy was aware of the central government's initiative of developing "Smart Cities" all over India, and he knew that New Town had been identified as part of this programme. Shonjoy had imbued the state's narrative of Smart Cities with his own aspirations for himself and his community. None of his parents or grandparents was educated, and he had only been able to study till class 8 because his family was poor (*chotomanush*). Shonjoy acknowledged that education and a smart mind could help him navigate powerful relationships and be successful in the construction business.

Chonchola, a Hindu refugee woman in her early 30s, reflected on people's different abilities to dream. For Chonchola, dreams were nothing without a proper house. A *paka* house with solid walls, tiles, electricity, and water, in her view, could allow her family to have a better future with less precarity. She was happy that Hidco had given them the possibility of building a cemented house, but she was a bit worried about the constant shortages of electricity and water in the colony. When I asked her what it was that she wanted, she said that her written aspiration was "24/7 electricity supply". She admitted that, for herself, she would have wanted an education so she could be more aware of what was going out outside the colony, now that they lived in New Town. But for the moment, she prioritized a good house, as she knew it was too late for her to study because she was married and had two children. At the *pandal,* Chonchola met Salini, one of her unmarried friends in the colony, whose father was a successful syndicate member. Later, Chonchola told me that Maya had written "education" in her aspiration note on the board. "It's because Salini already lives in a big house with electricity that she can ask for that", Chonchola observed. "She knows she can marry someone with a house as big as hers now, so she can take more time to study". Chonchola's comment points to the differentials in abilities to aspire within the same community (Huang forthcoming). Like Chonchola, many refugees expressed the desire to further improve their houses, as well as the common areas and buildings of the colony. These aspirations mirrored local understandings of the house and cemented buildings as a tangible, stable product of their work that could guarantee their rights.

Engaging in various forms of construction work has affected refugees' ability to envision a future for themselves. In turn, their ability to imagine a future different from that of their grandparents and parents has motivated refugees to engage in construction syndicates and aspire to keep pursuing this work in the future and have more opportunities, especially in contrast to Muslim syndicates. As Jamie Cross (2014) has argued, sites of neoliberal urban development, such as Special Economic Zones and New Towns, are not structured by finance and speculation alone. Rather, these are "places of imaginations and aspirations, in which people construct and assemble possible future worlds for themselves and others" (Cross 2014: 424). Similarly, East Bengalis in the RR colony of Jolergram have incorporated narratives of Smart Cities and real estate development projects, as well as aesthetic ambitions and the provision of municipal services to the colony, to reassert their right to be in the place in contrast to their Muslim neighbours. The ethnographic examples above illuminate how East Bengali refugees' aspirations are deeply connected to their construction work in Rajarhat. They feel that they, the refugees, are contributing to the very development of the area.

Conclusion

As we have seen, East Bengali Hindu refugees feel their right to be in New Town is based on their labour and its material products. Their labour is also the basis for their relationship with the local government. Labour in construction within syndicates for real estate is understood vernacularly as manifested in development (*unnoyon*), and it is associated with proper (*paka*) cemented buildings that can resist the challenges of the weather and potential evictions. Good work in development can be achieved and further improved with a smart mind (smart *mon*). Refugees define their work in the syndicates as promoting work (promoting *kaj*).

This chapter builds on the understanding of rights as "material relationships of mutual obligation that bind institutional authorities and subjects" (Subramanian 2009: 18; see also Hetherington 2011), encoding specific "understandings of justice and accountability" (Subramanian 2009). I show that refugees associate their right to stay in the RR colony with the fact that they contributed with their labour to the making of the colony. Refugees feel the qualities of their work are manifested in the cemented buildings that fill the colony, in the lanes that connect each house, and in the bricks and stone chips they used for the roads.

Crucially, Hindu refugees define their work in stark contrast to the work done by Muslims, which the refugees see as having destructive qualities and as representing an impediment to development. In refugees' accounts, Muslims have become the symbol of the precarity and instability in their own lives.

Lastly, through their worship of the goddess Durga, my informants celebrated their past and present work in the area, which unified their community and sustained their relationships with the state. Through the ritual and celebrations, the refugees reasserted the qualities of their work that allowed them to sustain their right to be in New Town.

The next chapter moves back to the village of Ghashi to examine how Muslim villagers experienced their work in the syndicates in very different terms than the refugees did. While Hindus felt their work was legitimized by the state, Muslims were embedded in coercive and exploitative networks of protection with state officials and policians.

CHAPTER 4

Volatile Protection:
Rokkha, Protection Money, and Relations of Dependence in the Syndicates

This chapter explores the unstable and exploitative relation of protection between state officials and syndicate workers in the neoliberal land regimes of New Town. The chapter puts forward the concept of 'volatile protection' to nuance the understanding of the syndicates and the boundaries between the state and alleged Muslim criminality. The chapter provides insights into the exploitative and criminalizing relations of state protection in which Muslim dispossessed farmers find themselves. The land syndicate mafia and its extortion rackets are not external to local government efforts to implement neoliberal land regimes. Even so, the members of these syndicates are not state officials, as assumed by political debates and the media, nor do they fit the image of self-maximizing, dangerous entrepreneur-politicians (Michelutti et al. 2019). I first unpack the structure of the land mafia in peri-urban Kolkata. I then show that the majority of the mafia's risky activities on the ground are done by low-ranking mafia members who are poor and are excluded from profit. By detailing how low-ranking mafia members are offered protection by political leaders and state officials, I foreground the experiences of poorer syndicate members and their precarious conditions. Contrary to widespread images of syndicate mafia as opposed to the state and of Muslim Mafiosi as looting land markets and accumulating money, I argue that the land syndicate mafia is structured around a system of volatile protection whereby state officials and politicians rely on and exploit the work of poor dispossessed farmers at the bottom levels of the syndicates.

In this chapter and the next, I show that the syndicate workers of Ghashi simultaneously are *politically protected* and *protect* their clients in the construction business sector. I unpack these two different forms of protection and their implications for low-ranking syndicate workers. I show how these mechanisms of protection lead to unequal access to wealth and resources within the syndicate group. In this chapter, I focus on how syndicate workers are *politically protected* by Hidco officials, powerful politicians, and the police. In the next chapter, I consider the activities that syndicate

workers engage in with state protection. In particular, syndicate workers *protect* clients in the real estate business.

This chapter foregrounds the experiences of Mahafuj, Aftab, and Nazrul, who occupy structural positions common to thousands of Muslim men in Ghashi and in nearby Muslim villages. These men are all dispossessed farmers, ranging from 20 to 55 years old, who now work as *syndicate boys* for the land syndicate mafia of peri-urban Kolkata. *Mastan* is the vernacular word used to refer to low-ranking syndicate workers, such as the Ghashi lower-class and low-caste dispossessed Muslim farmers, who have now joined the "land syndicate mafia" of New Town. The term *mastan* is widely used by the public and by media pundits with a negative connotation. It is often translated by the English words "hired goon", "thug", "criminal", or "enforcer of violence". Using the same accepted meanings of the term, recent literature on the Mafia Raj (Michelutti et al. 2019) and criminal political economies in India (Harris-White and Michelutti 2019) and in Kolkata specifically (Das 2019) has drawn attention to the role of mastans as violent armed gangs. However, when I asked my participants about their specific role in the syndicates, the most common answers were "syndicate boy" (*chele*) or "fieldworker", the latter using the English word. My participants only referred to themselves as mastans when they were speaking of their relationship with Hidco officials or Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), when they told me of their "mastan work" involving threats and a show of muscle, or when they told me of the latest piece of news that came up in newspapers or TV reports about their own illicit activities. The word "mastan" carried an element of performativity. My informants in Ghashi preferred to called themselves "syndicate boys" in everyday conversations in the village. They often explained that they were only *boys* within the wider syndicate network, stressing the lower-level, marginal positions they occupied. Even men in their 40s and 50s like Mahafuj called themselves "syndicate boys", and they saw their role in the syndicates as particularly low and constraining.

Ghashi village was often described in the media as a *volatile* place. In these public accounts, the term "volatile" was used to refer to the explosive, dangerous activities of syndicate mastans. Moreover, "volatile environments" (Michelutti et al.: 25) is how recent studies on the Indian Mafia Raj often describe the tense and dangerous places where the mafia thrives. Unlike these studies, I use the term "volatile" in relation to protection as a way to foreground my informants' perspectives on their situation in Ghashi. The adjective "volatile" also refers to something that is there one moment and gone the next. What is volatile evaporates rapidly; it changes quickly from one status to another. For syndicate workers, what was most troubling was not the violence that could arise in the village. For my interlocutors, their problems were due to the coming and going of state

protection in a way that was beyond their control and that they perceived as constraining their ability to plan and live their lives.

Once I was having tea with Mahafuj and we were discussing the precarious condition of the villagers. Mahafuj gave me his perspective on the situation. He lamented that everyone in Kolkata and in news reports was always talking about the dangerous clashes caused by mastans in the village. But for Mahafuj this was not the real issue in the area. What was most troubling, for him, was precisely this appearance and disappearance of *rokkha* (protection) from Hidco and local politicians. He feared that this was what made the area volatile. He was concerned that this would cause serious problems for poor (*gorib*) people like him. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered many syndicate workers like Mahafuj, representing the category of low-ranking syndicate members, whose work was crucially embedded in networks of rokkha. Following Mahafuj's view, this chapter focuses on what I call "volatile protection". Here, I employ the term "volatile" to detail the precarious, unstable, and exploitative relation of protection between syndicate workers and state actors in the neoliberal land regimes of New Town. Looking at volatile protection is a useful frame for understanding, first, how dispossessed Muslim farmers perceive their involvement in the syndicates, and second, for shedding light on their precariousness and criminalization as mastans. I argue that the syndicate mafia is structured around a system of volatile protection that relies on and exploits the work of low-ranking syndicate members such as syndicate workers.

Rokkha Comes and Rokkha Goes for Syndicate Boys

"There is no work today. Let's call everything off". Mahafuj's tone was unusually curt. He looked worried as he cancelled our plans for the day. We had agreed to meet outside the village mosque that morning so that I could follow him and two other syndicate workers in their day at the construction site. Mahafuj was one of the many Muslim syndicate workers I encountered in Ghashi village. That morning, I was going to accompany Mahafuj to a nearby construction site for a new Harley Davidson megastore in New Town. The luxury motorbike store was going to be built on a plot of 50 bighas of land bordering the Universal Bengal Highway in the Jolergram area. Mahafuj's syndicate group had received an order for 20 trucks of sand from a contractor. Mahafuj and three other members were in charge of delivering two trucks of sand by 10 a.m. that morning. But, the news that Shibul, a fellow mastan in the Ghashi syndicate, had been arrested earlier that morning had quickly spread in the village. Shibul was one of the syndicate workers in charge of daily patrols of the construction site. As usual, he had taken his motorbike and driven outside Ghashi village to reach the site along the main highway. His role was to keep an eye on materials and machinery, making sure that no one had caused trouble overnight and everything was in order. Shibul was

arrested by local police of Jolergram at the construction site. The news of his arrest by the local police had come through Nazrul, Shibul's brother, who had managed to drive away from the police before being stopped. Shibul's arrest was the final consequence of a longer chain of events. In Ghashi that morning, and many others after that, everyone discussed the news that Mr Dutta, the MLA of New Town, had withdrawn his protection from Faquir, one of the Ghashi syndicate leaders, and as a consequence from Faquir's group of mastans.

The main Ghashi syndicate was divided into many smaller syndicate groups. Every *para* (neighbourhood) in the village had between five and six smaller syndicate groups of about 20 to 50 syndicate workers. For each group, a syndicate leader, often a panchayat member, had picked young, able-bodied men who were known for their hard work and good connections in the village. These young men, like Narzul or Aftab, allowed for the group to expand through kinship and friendship connections. As was typical of the structure of small syndicates, Aftab first recruited his elder brother, then his young friends and their elder brothers, and then cousins and uncles within the same *para*. In the other Muslim villages I surveyed in New Town, small syndicate groups sometimes reached 50 people, but the average was 20. Every group in Ghashi had its own small syndicate office tucked away in a hidden spot in the village. There was then the main Ghashi syndicate office, hidden behind the flyover along the main highway in New Town, where the different syndicate groups in Ghashi reported on their work and divided the contracts among themselves. The strategy of dividing syndicates into smaller ones for each village in New Town was useful to avoid paying taxes. All the smaller syndicates in Ghashi were controlled by the same MLA, Subir Mukherjee. To distinguish it from the others, each small syndicate was identified by a number. Mahafuj, Aftab, and Nazrul and the arrested Shibul all belonged to Ghashi syndicate number 218, run by Faquir. To be part of syndicate number 218 and to operate freely with impunity, they paid a regular sum as *rokkher taka*, protection money, to the MLA. As we will see, this is how powerful politicians expanded and maintained their control over syndicates in New Town.

For my informants in Ghashi, Shibul's arrest could mean only one thing. "Rokkha is off", Mahafuj stated as explanation for the sudden change of plans. Concretely, this meant that Mr Dutta had given instructions to Mr Kumar, a Hidco manager and engineer, to inform the real estate company agents who were building the Harley Davidson store to refuse syndicate materials at inflated prices. With the tacit acknowledgement of the MLA, syndicates for construction materials normally sold materials well above market price, two or three times above, and builders were forced to buy at these prices. Yet, that morning the New Town police post was alerted to stop and arrest any suspected syndicate man seen in the area. I had not seen Mahafuj looking so anxious and tired

for a long time. His attitude was in sharp contrast to the assertive behaviour he had shown when talking about his syndicate work in the previous months. He added: “We have troubles with the state (*sarkar*) now, so the work has stopped. Everything is off for us. Let’s see how long we will continue without rokkha. Nothing can be said before three months”.

In this context, *rokkha* is best translated by the English word “protection”, and it connotes a sense of defense and preservation from an external threat. When using the word “rokkha”, my participants referred to the protection they received from Hidco managers and officials, from powerful MLAs or MPs, and from their close associates in the local panchayat and council. These political and state actors usually “protected” the syndicate workers from police officers and the threat of being arrested, and thus they enabled (and turned a blind eye towards) syndicate workers’ extortion practices. For the Muslim syndicate workers to do their work, a visible and invisible net of state protection needed to be in place. Yet, my participants often stressed that protection was not a once-and-for-all kind of affair. Rather, for each order of materials, protection needed to be renewed daily for patrols to be carried out, for access to construction sites to be granted, and for payments and orders to be received.

The withdrawal of rokkha from the MLA and Hidco managers such as Mr Kumar continued for the following three months in Ghashi. After this period, local political leaders renewed their protection to the Ghashi syndicate. As a consequence, syndicate workers’ activities could resume. Shibul was released with no charges upon payment of 2000 rupees to police officers. However, the syndicate workers never received payment for their previous months of work. As Nazrul, another syndicate mastan, put it: “One day we are friends to political leaders, the day after we are bad people”.

Anthropologists have documented how the lens of protection is productive for understanding relations between the state and crime. Focusing on protection allows us to probe how categories of state actors and syndicate “criminals”, in this case syndicate workers, are entangled. In New Town, practices of protection are central to land and real estate markets and their profitable functioning. Practices of protection are key for preparing plots of land for investment, for securing sales of plots to big real estate companies, for the system of contracting for and supplying materials and teams of workers, and for the actual building of residences and business centres. Syndicate workers, Hidco officials, and local political leaders are central to the neoliberal land regimes of New Town for their ability to offer protection. I focus on two different forms of protection and their mutual relations. By considering the work of syndicate workers in the syndicate mafia, I underscore how practices of protection sustain and reproduce forms of inequalities and exploitation within neoliberal land regimes.

The social dynamics of 'protection' provide an excellent lens for analysing how states exercise control and pursue legitimacy. In this vein, Kelly and Shah (2006) unravel the state "as both a source of violence and as a provider of protection from violence" (Kelly and Shah 2006: 251). State violence has been central to recent analyses of processes of land dispossession. As has been noted (Levien 2018), states enact forceful and coercive means to acquire land from farmers in order to legitimize land acquisitions "for public purposes". In the contexts of processes of "accumulation by dispossession", the aspect of state violence has been highlighted, but little attention has been paid to poorer people's experiences of state protection in such situations. Focusing on protection allows us to see the connections between state actors and the syndicate mafia. In particular, focusing on protection illuminates how violence is enabled by and embedded within wider networks of different actors. In this regard, I agree with Alpa Shah's argument that unveiling mechanisms of protection "is central in contesting the boundaries between the state and its alleged enemies" (Shah 2006: 300), which in my case is the Muslim syndicate workers. I agree with Kelly and Shah's critique of Agamben's idea of state violence as a forceful exclusion of "bare life". Rather, state violence is perceived by the syndicate workers as "a comforting, if ambiguous, source of protection" (Kelly and Shah 2006: 253). My participants' experiences point to the fact that state protection allows their inclusion in the informal real estate business of syndicates. However, my ethnography highlights what Shah and Kelly refer to as the ambiguity of state protection, which for my participants is volatile and leads to precariousness and the suspension of their work and livelihood strategies.

Rokkha for my informants is not simply a calculated and opportunistic partnership with state officials (Ruud 2019; Sissener 2019). For them, rokkha is part of their claim for recognition by the state. It is deeply related to the mutual obligations between the dispossessed Muslim community and the local state represented by Hidco, the panchayat leaders, and local politicians. My participants have an ambiguous relation to the rokkha they receive from the state. On the one hand, they seek it in their daily practices and aspire to it as a way of recognition and access to work. On the other hand, they complain about the volatility of rokkha and claim that it does not have the element of care for their community and their lands that they had hoped it would have. They often stress that Hidco does not give as much rokkha to them as it offers to the nearby Hindu community. By exploring the structure of the syndicate group in its relation with state officials, I foreground the different positions and the inequalities between the syndicate poor and the bosses. The volatility of protection, as I argue, is the way in which differences and inequalities are reproduced.

Literature on the mafia in South Asia has paid scant attention to those who are criminalized and poor, who cannot access the accumulation of wealth and resources like the bosses, and who

remain on the bottom rung of the behind-the-scenes activities of the land mafia. This chapter addresses the perspective of those who are not mafia bosses, of those who work for the mafia but don't make much money from it, of those whose experiences have been disregarded by the literature. The structural position of the thousands of syndicate workers holds only limited possibility of wealth accumulation and upscale mobility. I contribute to the literature on the mafia in South Asia by foregrounding the perspective of those who are the poorest.

Meanings and Practices of State Rokkha

It is important to note that protection as state rokkha is not an abstract relation between citizens and governmental authorities. Rather, it is a relationship with the state that is incorporated and manifested in specific meanings and sense of justice (Subramanian 2009), as well as in specific places. Syndicate members, both older and younger, often drew on idioms of work (*kaj*) and access to it when they talked about state rokkha. Work, for my participants, was work in the construction sector as opposed to their previous source of livelihood as agricultural work (*cash bash*). When they spoke of rokkha in the past and in the present, syndicate members told stories of how they became involved in the syndicate business in the first place. These narratives were often centred on the fluctuating coming and going of state rokkha in their community in Ghashi. In one of our first meetings, which soon became a daily afternoon break at the village tea stall, Aftab told me: "Our livelihood has changed since land dispossession. Some people in this village got some money from politicians and became mafia dons . . . but mostly everyone else became a syndicate worker, a mastan. Our work is for the mafia dons". When I asked Aftab what this work implied, he said: "Our *kaj* is in the civil construction sector. We work in the syndicate business (*byebsha*) for building materials. We supply bricks, sand, and stones".

All of my mastan participants in Ghashi told me that rokkha from political leaders was necessary for them to get access to *kaj*, work. Syndicate members often told stories of the past and the present as a series of ups and downs in state protection for their access to construction work. Everyone in Ghashi told me that if I wanted to understand what state rokkha was for them in the past, before the new TMC party came to power, there was one place I needed to see for myself. This place was the old warehouse in the village. My participants explained that Hidco manager Gautam Sen had set up the warehouse when the cooperative scheme started in Ghashi. The machinery and materials for construction used to be stored here. Moreover, at the warehouse Hidco engineers used to run short training programs in construction work for dispossessed villagers. Everyone in Ghashi told me that a quick withdrawal of state rokkha had caused the warehouse to fall into disrepair. It was a place that people often described as "*gone bad*", like food not properly

preserved, because of the state rokkha being so precarious and unpredictable. Ghashi villagers associated feelings of disappointment and sadness with the old warehouse.

The political transition in West Bengal from the CPIM party to the TMC party in 2011 was associated with specific kinds of state rokkha. This was especially true for elder syndicate members like Mahafuj, in their 40s and 50s. For men of Mahafuj's generation, the warehouse represented the broken promises by the CPIM for work in construction made to the Muslim community. Mahafuj took me to see the warehouse during the period when his work was interrupted due to the withdrawal of Mamata Banerjee's party protection. The warehouse was a large yet crumbling structure in the interior of Majher *para* (neighbourhood), well hidden from the main road. Its walls were sheathed in rusty metal, and the roof was cemented but covered in green mold. The interior now served as a junkyard, with only a couple of old bulldozers, or what was left of them, lying there as memories of the past. While we were standing inside, Mahafuj told me: "You see for yourself, it has now all gone bad here. This place was given to us by Hidco and Mister Sen, for us to learn the job, a job we were not used to. But then nothing, this place was no more". For men like Mahafuj, the warehouse made manifest what state rokkha meant for Ghashi villagers at the time of the cooperative and of the CPIM party. He lamented that because of the lack of sufficient construction orders assigned to the Ghashi cooperative, the warehouse had been closed down and abandoned.

Older syndicate members, like Mahafuj, had an ambiguous relation to the warehouse and what it stood for. They recognized the warehouse as the place where they had gotten access to the welfare scheme of the Hidco authorities. Mahafuj confessed that, despite the serious problems of dispossession they faced, he used to like this place. At the warehouse, he first gained the skills in construction that he still used today. Before the warehouse, he had never seen a bulldozer, let alone maneuvered one. Like Mahafuj, many men familiarized themselves with bulldozers and other heavy machinery for construction and participated in daily training sessions for weeks. Akhtar, another syndicate member who was 43 years old, told me that at the warehouse he and his fellow workers had to work hard and sometimes encountered dangerous situations. Hidco engineers were not always present as the work was conducted, so Akhtar and the other cooperative workers sometimes had to learn "on the job". Injuries and accidents were not uncommon, Akhtar stressed, but as he put it: "Hidco officials gave us hopes (*asha*) with the warehouse".

Ghashi villagers who had participated in the cooperative scheme associated with the warehouse feelings of broken hopes and exclusion from the booming construction business of the time. The warehouse made manifest the volatility of the protection offered by the CPIM party and Hidco officials.

Mahafuj told me the story of the most violent episode of state repression in Ghashi. He narrated that the villagers were protesting land dispossession with a huge gathering and were throwing away Hidco pillars marking the plots to be acquired. At that time, in order to stop the villagers' resistance, the New Town Border Security Force (BSF) headquarters was established. A BSF army came to Ghashi and forcefully put an end to people's protests. Soon after this, Hidco manager Gautam Sen set up the warehouse as a sign of rokkha. The message was that village land would be acquired but villagers would be employed in the cooperative in exchange for no further violence by police and the BSF. Mahafuj explained, however, that despite Hidco's promise of work, villagers in Ghashi were employed for just a handful of projects through the cooperative. He narrated:

> The work we did in the cooperative was very little because we had no rokkha. No political party supported us during the cooperative scheme. We were just Muslim *grambashi* (villagers). The CPIM fooled us and gave us no rokkha. We had no political connections with the party, and we couldn't afford protection money at the time. We were left with very little to live with.

The syndicate members complained that the panchayat leaders of the Hindu refugee area were in alliance with Hidco managers, which meant that Hindu refugees were more protected and received all the orders for construction materials.

As these accounts reveal, specific places like the old warehouse can incorporate state rokkha and its promises. The CPIM party both implemented land dispossession and made villagers' hopes for work in construction possible. The project of acquiring compensation for the loss of land through work in construction structured the aspirations of older men like Mahafuj. The machinery represented their aspiration to sustain their families and regain social status as providers for their families in the village while being reinserted into village networks of help (*shahajjo*). Village men of Mahafuj's generation often confessed to me that they had hoped that work in construction would be less labour-intensive and fatiguing than working in the fields. Yet, access to work in the construction sector was not a given for the dispossessed farmers. It was only possible within networks of protection with Hidco officials. Because of corruption and protection between the Left Front government and the Hindu dispossessed farmers, the cooperative scheme set up by Hidco affected the Hindu and Muslim dispossessed communities differently (see chapters 1 and 2). Muslim villagers were mostly excluded from access to the construction business. The warehouse in its state of ruin represented the volatility of CPIM's rokkha and Hidco's broken promises of work. In Ghashi, the old warehouse thus manifested a diffuse sense of injustice about the cooperative scheme and the CPIM party.

Everyone in Ghashi often compared the warehouse and its decay with the *facilities* – they used this English word – that they had received since the TMC party came to power in 2011. When they spoke of facilities, syndicate members referred to the dozens of trucks for supplying materials and to the initial financial investments in the purchasing of materials that TMC-affiliated MLA Subir Dutta, his right-hand man Hidco manager Deep Kumar, and Ghashi panchayat leader Faquir offered to the Muslim community.

Subir-Da – he was referred to in the village with the honorary suffix – was a highly respected and yet controversial figure in Ghashi. Most of my participants told me that they had never met him in person but that he was now one of the main politicians who offered rokkha for syndicates in Ghashi. His right-hand man Mr Kumar was the person with whom syndicate members interacted in the village. Kumar made several visits to Ghashi, where he connected with panchayat leaders, especially a man called Faqir. Younger men among the syndicate members were the ones with whom Mr Kumar got in touch with in the village through panchayat meetings. Aftab and the other youths in the syndicate group explained that in 2010, the year before the huge victory of the TMC party, there were a few panchayat meetings calling for young, able-bodied, and strong men. Syndicate workers stressed that through Faqir as panchayat leader and the Hidco official Mr Kumar they were offered protection for job opportunities from which they had previously been excluded.

Through connections that reversed the traditional order of kinship (see chapter 1), Mr Kumar established his network in Ghashi with the purpose of finding trusted people to protect and expand his political power. Many villagers were offered help with the cases they filed for fairer compensation for their land. Aftab's father, for example, had filed a case against Hidco in 2008 to receive compensation for his loss of land. Until then, the family had received only 3000 rupees for their 3 bighas of land. Mister Kumar, through the panchayat, offered to help speed up Aftab's case through his political contacts. Aftab's elder brother and father were then successful in receiving 15.000 rupees as compensation, and Mr Kumar encouraged the family to invest the money in the syndicate group and construction business.

The several white trucks parked in the village represented TMC's protection. Nazrul, another syndicate member who was in his early 30s, told me that Deep Kumar offered to him and his friends a quick way to obtain truck-driving permits so that they could start driving the trucks and supplying materials. "I only drove my bicycle to the fields before, and in a short amount of time I was allowed to drive a big truck with TMC's rokkha", Nazrul proudly explained. In contrast to the CPIM's warehouse, TMC rokkha was manifest in the vans and in the materials for construction, such as sand (*bali*), bricks (*iit*), and stone chips (*nuri*). Unlike the warehouse and its abandoned, immobile building, TMC rokkha was manifested in the constant mobility and mushrooming of vans

and piles of materials everywhere in Ghashi: along the main village road, outside village houses or in the small yards surrounding the houses, and in vacant fields as well as in lots under construction. My participants reported that it was thanks to these trucks and materials that their access to work had become a reality. First the younger men were hired, and then the older generations joined in.

The TMC party's protection was also more inclusive. Mr Kumar and the panchayat leader Faquir promised access to work in the newly born syndicates for the poorer villagers in Ghashi as well as for those who had lost their land. While only "land losers" could enroll in the cooperative and be employed, the syndicates were established with an ideal of egalitarianism to include also landless villagers and sharecroppers. Iman, Aftab's second cousin, was a landless farmer who became involved in the syndicate after having been excluded from the cooperative. For him, as for many landless farmers in Ghashi, the syndicate was the place where they gained access to state protection and a new source of livelihood. TMC politicians and Hidco managers under TMC rule were the governmental authorities that syndicate members recognized as those who made their aspirations and their hopes for work possible. It was in these encounters that they felt protection was cultivated and nurtured.

Access to work through these facilities was part of the villagers' political aspirations as well. They connected TMC protection with their hope to reassert the place as Muslim land. They felt their religious values and hopes of access to work should be backed by the TMC government. TMC protection in Ghashi was deeply connected to the Muslim identity. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's rhetoric of welfare services and equality for the Muslim population of West Bengal was key to her party's victory both in 2011 and again in 2016. My participants felt that their sense of belonging, expressed through the idioms of 'locals' (*elakar lok*) versus 'outsiders' (*bairer lok*), was being recognized by the new ruling party. I heard many references to heroic stories from the time when Bengal was under the Islamic rule and its capital was Mirshidabad. Narratives were full of hopes that their patronage relations with TMC and their access to the construction business could turn the Rajarhat area into a Muslim area once again. Syndicate members often referred to the 16th-century emperor Shiraz-Ud-Dullah, for instance, under whose rule Bengal had been prosperous. My participants told melancholic stories of how Ghashi was then the only and most important settlement in the area.

Everyone in Ghashi saw access to work in the syndicates as a way of reasserting mutual obligations between their community and the state, obligations that they felt were neglected during the Left Front rule and its policy of land dispossession. Moreover, access to syndicate work was connected to their aspiration of reasserting their belonging to the place and their citizenship status. Mastans joined the syndicates, therefore, not only due to the prospect of quick money through

violence. Rather, work in the syndicates was part of dispossessed farmers' economic and political aspirations and hopes for recognition. Despite these aspirations and access to work through the protection of MLA Subir-Da and Hidco managers, the syndicates remain unequal structures.

Work in the syndicates and state rokkha

Whenever I asked my participants what the syndicate organization was, they replied that it was their *kaj*, their work. For Aftab, the main difference between working for the syndicate business (*byebsha*) compared to *chakri*, work with a stable salary, was that in business there was much more uncertainty of income for them. In Ghashi, every male member of each extended family was either an active mastan or it had been one in the past. Yet, when I asked them how much money they were making as syndicate mastans, they often complained that it was very little. As Mahafuj said: "Things are not moving smoothly for us". Mahafuj was making only 1000 rupees per project, and he received protection to work for one or two projects per month. His fellow syndicate workers Aftab and Nazrul, who were younger, were making a bit more, about 5000 per month.

Whenever I asked the Ghashi syndicate workers whether there were better employment opportunities for them in the emerging township, this was the common answer I received: "Hidco people said that there would be plenty of jobs for us who lost our lands. But now all the jobs of security guards and watchmen are taken by outsiders".

Aftab told me that he once had tried to apply for a security job in Axis Mall, one of the shiny, newly built shopping malls of New Town. The salary was set at 1200 rupees per month, which was considerably higher than what he was making as a mastan for the Ghashi syndicate. He managed to be hired, but in his first week of work he was accused of stealing merchandise from one of the mall shops. Aftab's supervisor fired Aftab the day after, without further explanation. Stories like Aftab's were not uncommon in Ghashi, reflecting the atmosphere of suspect and stigma towards lower-class Muslim workers in the new shopping centres or residential buildings of the new city. Stigmatization and moral accusation towards Muslims was manifest in their being denied of access to these more profitable jobs in New Town. I heard many accounts of how local villagers in Ghashi would be accused of stealing, misbehavior, or even harassment of young women when working in the service sector of New Town. Governmental efforts towards the Hinduization of New Town, especially its main attractions and luxury residential blocks, had led to the confinement of Muslim villagers to the shady, illicit, and risky activities of the syndicates.

The crucial aspect of access to work, as everyone in Ghashi always pointed out, was that rokkha from Hidco officials was needed to find employment. My participants framed their difficulties in finding employment outside the syndicate business as due to a lack of state rokkha in

the sectors outside construction. “There is no rokkha for Muslims in security jobs”, Aftab concluded. This was the way he explained being fired and accused of stealing: no rokkha. For my participants in Ghashi, access to work with a stable income proved extremely difficult, and it often meant being exposed to open stigma and sudden loss of employment.

Protection Money: Hidco, Politicians, and Syndicate Leaders

“Facilities” given by political parties, however, don’t come for free. For low-ranking syndicate members, paying a regular sum as “protection money” is how they try to make sure that party facilities will keep arriving in their village and that they can sustain their livelihood through syndicate work. As I was accompanying them to the Ghashi syndicate office one morning, Mahafuj stated: “In syndicate issues, all power is political power”. Mahafuj’s statement was a commentary on the fact that syndicate members were due to pay the regular “protection money” (*rokkher taka*) to the local MLA Subir Mukherjee.

Following the flow of money is key to understanding the different levels of the syndicate mafia and how these levels are connected through protection. By detailing how “protection money” is paid and by whom, the ethnography that follows highlights how the syndicate hierarchy is maintained and the inequalities between the higher levels and the lower ranks are reproduced. In particular, illuminating the flow of “protection money” is useful in untangling the relations between low-ranking syndicate members, big political bosses, and their local right-hand politicians. When syndicate workers talked of *rokkher taka* (protection money), they were referring to the money they paid to powerful TMC politicians every three months in order to be part of the Ghashi syndicate. In particular, rokkher taka was paid to the MLA Subir Mukherjee; his right-hand man, Hidco manager Mr Kumar; and the local political leader from the Ghashi panchayat, Faquir. In the ethnography that follows, I untangle these different levels and relationships with politicians centred around rokkher taka.

Mahafuj and the other syndicate workers stressed that rokkher taka was crucial to sustain their access to the syndicate group. My participants often told me about their need to maintain a relation with the New Town MLA Subir Mukherjee through rokkher taka as he was the boss and protector of the Ghashi syndicate. As was typical for the land syndicate mafia in New Town, at the apex of the syndicate pyramid was either the local MLA (Member of Local Assembly) or MP (Member of Parliament). Powerful politicians such as local MLAs or MPs offered syndicate members protection from police, provided funds to kickstart the purchase of materials and machinery for construction, and ensured that construction contracts would be assigned to the group

on a regular basis. In exchange for their cooperation and access to work, the MLA or MP asked each syndicate member for "protection money".

The syndicate workers routinely went to the Ghashi syndicate office with the rokkher taka wrapped inside a white envelope in their pocket to pay their fee for protection. For instance, one day I accompanied my participants to the Ghashi syndicate office as they paid their rokkher taka *to* the party. Mahafuj explained that they were contributing to raise the sum of 10 lakh rupees (approximately 10.000 GBP). As I learnt, about half of this sum was needed for Subir Mukherjee's political meetings and campaigning events in the following few weeks. The other half of the sum would go to police officers and to the syndicate leader in order to secure orders and work. Powerful politicians like Subir Mukherjee, who received the biggest cut of protection money, were rarely seen in the syndicate office where the payment occurred. Their absence was key for maintaining secrecy and making sure there was no trace of connection between them and the syndicates. Rather, it was men like Faquir, the MLAs' trusted affiliates from the local *gram panchayat,* who would collect the money from each syndicate member. Faquir was the president of the TMC's youth wing at the Ghashi panchayat. He directly ran Mahafuj's syndicate group in Ghashi and indirectly controlled the other four. Faquir was in charge of managing the money to be invested in the syndicate business in construction, but he was directly "employed" by Mr Mukherjee, and he made sure that each syndicate boy paid his dues and that the money reached the boss.

My participants viewed the protection money as necessary for their access to the syndicates, and thus crucial to their ability to support their families and generate an income. Yet, they also regarded the regular payment of rokkher taka as a difficult moment. The payment of rokkher taka was the occasion in which the differences between the syndicate workers stood out more than ever. These differences were made manifest in the payments for rokkher taka, and this was a topic that syndicate workers addressed with a tone of sadness and expressions of a sense of injustice. In my first visits to the Ghashi syndicate office, I was initially told that every member paid 1000 rupees (10 GBP) as protection money to the MLA. But as my fieldwork in Ghashi unfolded and I gained the trust of my participants, I realized that things were a bit more complex.

As I followed my participants from syndicate group number 218 to the main syndicate office on a humid summer morning, I was talking with Mahafuj and Faruk, another member in his mid-40s. Faruk was telling Mahafuj that this time he couldn't give much as he was saving for his daughter's college tuition. Faruk's daughter Irma was hoping to go to medical school; she was studying for her admission exam. Faruk felt he wanted to make sure he had enough to support her through her studies. Mahafuj turned to me, and in a tone of explanation, he told me that the syndicate work had some aspects that were more appropriate for younger workers than for him and

Faruk. “There is more work for the youths nowadays, who can do better muscle work than we do”, he admitted, “So, we can earn less and we can give less”. Mahafuj told me that he was giving 500 rupees this month, and Faruk was giving 300 rupees. Thoughout my fieldwork, I noticed that this was not uncommon for older syndicate members like Mahafuj and Faruk, for whom regular payment of rokkher taka often felt like a burden.

My participants were not at ease with the unequal economic positions within their own group and often within their own families. Men of Mahafuj’s generation often felt they had more responsibilities for their families, being the eldest male members of the household. Yet, they had access to less work in the syndicate group due to their age and their reduced ability to do “muscle work”. Rokkher taka was a sum that they struggled to afford, especially if there was a special family event coming up or some unexpected expenses to cover. These regular payments reproduced the differential positions within the same syndicate group and often within the same family. As I asked Aftab how much he gave that day for rokkher taka, he told me he could afford to give 2000 rupees. He added: “If I invest more, I would be given more work, and then earn more”. Aftab, being a younger man in his early 30s, could show more muscle power than his older friends. Overall, all syndicate workers stressed that they were often pushed by the syndicate leaders, who told them that if they gave more, they would be able to get back more. As Aftab put it: “Faquir and Mr Mukherjee tell us that if we pay more rokkher taka, then our money will be made to work, it will be given value and it will become productive (*takata khatie*) in the syndicates”. Yet, syndicate members often complained that what they earned in the syndicates was very little and that at best their expenses and earnings would be equal. Mahafuj told me that what he gave was all he could afford.

After the visit to the Ghashi syndicate office for rokkher taka, we headed back to the smaller office of the group. There, Mahafuj gave an explanation of how rokkher taka was taken from the members. He went to the blackboard at the back of the office, and using a tiny piece of chalk he explained to me that, when they joined the syndicate, they had hoped things would be different from the cooperative. Back then, because of the internal differences and privileges given to certain people with patronage relations with the party, some people earned much but most earned very little, barely enough to sustain themselves. So, syndicate members had hoped that the syndicates would be fairer environments. Syndicate members emphasized that, for them, joining the syndicates in the first place meant having the chance to have a fairer distribution of income compared to the cooperative. However, the demands of the leaders and political bosses were so high that people who could afford more gave more in the hope of receiving more. Younger men like Aftab, who could usually afford to pay a bit more, lamented that more work meant that more risks had to be taken on the job, more things could go wrong and they could be hurt or arrested by policemen who didn’t

respect protection. So, instead of an equal share for every member, payments were now given according to "ratio". The "ratio" method meant that rokkher taka was paid proportionately to what a member could afford. This method of payment for protection thus had the effect of reproducing differences between syndicate members. The families who used to own bigger plots of land had received more money from compensation that they could then invest in the syndicates compared to the landless and those with only a few bighas of land.

Unlike using protection money to buy their independence, syndicate members were caught in a relation of dependence to the political bosses and their right-hand men in the panchayat. Syndicate workers perceived this relation of dependence not as voluntary but rather as coercive. Indeed, syndicate members emphasized that the payment of rokkher taka was not an option for them. Everyone stressed that they felt compelled to pay. "*Dite hobe* (we have to give). If we don't give, there will be no orders for us, no work, no income whatsoever", Aftab asserted. *Dite hobe* was a sentence I heard many times throughout my fieldwork in Ghashi. The sentence construction of *dite hobe* signifies compulsion – the fact that giving wasn't an option; it was necessary. Whenever my participants used the expression *dite hobe*, the sentence carried a sense of coercion to refer to the extortion of money in exchange for protection from violence. *Dite-i hobe,* often with the emphatic postposition "i", was used to refer both to the practice by politicians towards syndicate members and to the syndicates' own operations with their clients.

Syndicate members expressed that rokkher taka put them in a position of vulnerability and pressure. "If the money is not given, then I would be in the bad books of the party", Nazrul lamented. Being in the bad books of the party, meaning in the bad books of the MLA and his associates, wasn't something anyone in Ghashi would want. Nazrul explained that getting in debt to syndicate leaders would put one in a worse position. Sometimes my participants would have to take riskier actions to repay their debts, and these might lead to arrests or injuries. So, everyone had to give at least some money. During the time I spent at the syndicate office, I was able to speak with Faquir, the panchayat leader who was also in charge of syndicate number 218. Once I asked Faquir what would happen if someone in the group couldn't pay. Faquir was often straightforward about his methods. He answered: "If I know that a certain person cannot give such an amount, I would discuss with them the ways in which they are to be convinced. I would suggest that if they don't pay, I will convince them in the usual way in which convincing is done". By the term "convincing", Faquir meant the use of force and violence. Although I rarely heard of episodes of violence by syndicate leaders towards their members, the very threat of it put syndicate members into a vulnerable and precarious position.

Amongst the poorest villagers in Ghashi are those who used to have no land and who worked as tenants and sharecroppers of other families. Imraz, Mahafuj's third cousin, for example, worked as a sharecropper for Abdul's family, another syndicate leader and panchayat member. The poorest villagers like Imraz cannot pay rokkher taka every three months. They can still work if the rest of the group pays, but if they are caught by police in daylight either on the construction site or as they are transporting materials, they can easily be arrested as they are excluded from protection. As the example of the payment of rokkher taka demonstrates, the syndicate workers were caught in a coercive relation with the politicians. For Mahafuj and the other syndicate members, "seeking protection as payment for performing services" (Ruud 2019) does not lead to freely operating extortion and illicit activities in the syndicate. It rather leads to dependency.

My interlocutors' experiences, on the one hand, challenge the public image of syndicate mastans as criminal actors and Muslim outsiders. The portrayal of syndicates as gangs of dangerous Muslim criminals suggests they operate independent of, or pitted against, state authorities. As we have seen, in reality these groups are deeply tied to the local government via relations of protection with officials and politicians. In Ghashi, mastans are embedded in exploitative and extractive networks of protection because of syndicate workers' need to work and sustain their families. The deals they enter with their 'protectors' are far from equal, and it wouldn't make sense to describe mastans as 'associates' or 'business partners' of local officials. The literature on criminal enterprises in Italy and Latin America presents the view of a "mafia-owned democracy" (Armao 2015), where there is an almost equally profitable cooperation between established criminals and entrepreneur-politicians. Unlike these studies, my participants' stories bring to the fore the uneven positions occupied by syndicate workers in relation to local politicians and big political bosses. Within the syndicates the line between the state and mafia is indeed blurred, but the obligatory payment of "protection money" increases the gap between poor, dispossessed villagers and the few politicians who are able to accumulate wealth. Protection money reproduces old inequalities between previous landowners and landless villagers in Ghashi. In addition, protection money creates new inequalities between younger and older members, often within the same family, given their uneven ability to afford the payment. In this regard, my participants' experiences illuminate a situation similar to the one in provincial Bangladesh depicted by Engelsen Ruud (2019). Here, "Instead of the criminals controlling part of the state for profit, it is the politicians controlling the *mastans*" (Ruud 2019: 266). My participants illuminate what it means to be a syndicate mastan and the specific relationship of control between themselves and the politicians. Whereas Ruud's Bangladeshi mastans need to be kept happy by politicians and "are allowed within limits to manage their own turf and income sources" (Ruud 2019: 266), thus significantly increasing their capital, the

ethnography that follows shows that this is not the case for syndicate workers in Ghashi. Now that we've seen how that syndicate workers pay protection money, the next section analyses what syndicate patrons such as politicians and Hidco officials do, and don't do, with the money they receive.

How Protection Works: Hidco, Syndicates, and Dons

What is rokkher taka paid for? This section explores the ways in which syndicate members are "protected" by Hidco officials and syndicate leaders, or "dons", as they are commonly referred to. Such an exploration allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relation between protection money and the actual benefits that this payment brings for syndicate members. As we will see, the flow of protection money is profitable for only a few within the syndicate hierarchy.

Hidco officials' protection: Negotiations between syndicates and real estate agents

Rather than creating opportunities for work for dispossessed farmers, Hidco sustained a behind-the-scenes illicit market in land and real estate. In New Town, there is a system of decentralization of land and real estate development through protection. Hidco outsourced to local mafia groups controlled by some of Hidco's managers in order to raise revenues. Protection of local groups allows setting up a business in land and real estate without the need for high initial investment and capital. The risk carried by this type of investment is low and the costs of management are low because the protection mechanism allows for the control of different levels of the organization and for the use of police force as a constant reminder of what could happen if people don't execute orders as planned. Money can be easily extracted as everything is localized. At first, in the years following the initial real estate boom and before the change of regime, CPIM Hidco officials also hired contractors from outside districts such as Malda and Murshidabad. These contractors brought in their own workers and construction materials from farther away. These external contractors were more difficult to control, the wages they set for their skilled workers were difficult to negotiate, and the materials carried high costs of transportation. Outsourcing to local land mafia groups was a much more convenient option for Hidco.

As I shadowed syndicate workers in their daily work in the construction business, I soon realized that Hidco officials were expected to protect syndicate members whenever issues with real estate companies occurred. For example, in one of the projects in which my informants participated during my fieldwork, a real estate company owner and his team of engineers had ordered several trucks of construction materials from the Ghashi syndicates. The order was large enough to have been assigned to several other syndicates from the neighbouring Muslim villagers of Baliguri and

Patarghata for a total of 1 crore rupees (100.000 GBP). My participants in Ghashi syndicate group number 218 were particularly pleased to have been assigned an order of 10 trucks of sand and stone chips. This was an unusually good deal for the group, and they were expecting to be paid a total of 2000 rupees each upon completion of the project. The Ambuja House, a new luxury residential building, was being constructed along the main highway in New Town. As was the usual practice, the Ghashi syndicate dons had received the initial payment for half of the entire supply of materials. Syndicate workers, like Mahafuj and my other friends, were being paid daily a small sum of 100 rupees (1 GBP), until the full payment was due to be received by the company. As a few months passed, the materials were delivered and the building was almost completed. The Ghashi syndicates thus demanded the rest of the payment from the company. The real estate company owner, however, refused to pay the remaining bill, claiming the syndicates had inflated the prices of materials and the cost of labour. Aftab was the first person who informed me of this development. "The company said that what had been already given was enough", Aftab told me. "So, we are not getting the rest of the payment. This is when Hidco is intervening", he continued with a mixture of alarm and hope. Aftab told me that it was usually Mr Kumar who dealt with these kinds of "payment issues", as he called them. Aftab explained: "When a payment is pending, Mr Kumar said he would make sure he gave us the rest of the bill". This was a key role that Hidco played. In return for the protection money, Hidco officials like Mr Kumar protected syndicates when payment issues arose.

Protection from Hidco, however, often wasn't a straightforward affair. A few weeks after the notice of lack of payment, I asked Aftab how the issue had been resolved in the end. He complained: "The final bill arrived, but money was taken by Hidco. They take it for themselves". Aftab wasn't willing to go into the details of the transaction between Hidco official Mr. Kumar, the real estate agent, and the syndicate don Faquir. What was evident was that part of the bill went into Hidco's revenues.

Mr Kumar was known in Ghashi for his diplomatic skills and his gentle manners. He was a real *bhodrolok*, a gentleman, someone knowledgeable and educated. In his Hidco office where we first met, he sat surrounded by New Town maps and maps of other real estate projects, new and old. On top of his desk was his nametag that read Mr. Kumar, Chief Engineer. He was a strong supporter of the TMC and a close friend of MLA Subir Mukherjee. When I asked Mr Kumar about his role when a real estate company refused to pay his workers and suppliers, he replied in a calm tone. When I mentioned the syndicates, he denied that there was any connection with the syndicates. He spoke of them as "contractors", giving a legal aura to the groups. He was more open about his ability to resolve any controversy, especially ones regarding payments. He explained:

> We are here, as Hidco, to make sure everything runs smoothly in New Town. We interact with the real estate company when a payment is pending. In some situations, there is the need for me to intervene in negotiations between the contractors and the company. I negotiate, but I don't decide the give-and-take issues.

The "give-and-take" issues was an expression often used to refer to decisions about money that was due and how much a supply of materials was worth. Hidco's role was to offer protection by negotiating with the real estate company and telling the agents to accept the syndicates' requests. Yet, when I talked with several real estate agents investing in New Town projects, they all stressed that negotiating with Hidco officials often involved some extra payment to get things solved quickly.

I was able to meet with the real estate company owner who was building the Ambuja House apartments. As was typical of many real estate agents I encountered during my fieldwork, he was a Marwari, a member of the high caste of Rajasthani traders who had settled in Kolkata. I met him in his big house in central Kolkata. He told me:

> To build anything in New Town, you need to go through the syndicates. As soon as I got the plot of land, I met with Hidco's manager. He told me that I had to avoid problems, I had to get in contact with the village panchayat and make deals with them, with the syndicate leaders. I was told I had to accept the syndicates' offers. Hidco told me that this was the way things are done in New Town and it would be best this way.

Mr Saraogi went on to complain that dealing with goons and mastans and their leaders was not easy and that he had been asked for what he thought was an unreasonable amount of money for the supply of labour and materials. When I told Mr Saraogi that I had heard of some payment issues regarding the completion of the Ambuja House project, he grumbled:

> Sometimes it is better to negotiate with Hidco; it saves time and money. I didn't want to bend at the syndicates' terms. So, when Hidco contacted me, we found a deal that worked for both of us. It is easier for my company, so I paid Hidco some of the money I owed the syndicates and closed the deal. Hidco said I was fine to go.

So, this was how, for the syndicates, protection from Hidco turned into negotiations that didn't pay off. In reality, protection becomes a way to intervene in negotiations and circumvent the syndicates. Solutions are often found in ways that don't benefit the lower-ranking workers. Hidco would negotiate with the real estate company, but instead of turning in the final check to the syndicates, the money would be submitted to Hidco officials, who would then share it with syndicate leaders such as Faquir and the MLA. Syndicate members like Aftab, however, would not receive full payment for their work.

These ways of finding more profitable solutions came up often in my conversations with real estate agents working in New Town. Shilpa, a young Marwari woman and owner of another real estate company, once took me on a tour of all her properties that had been recently built in New Town. We were sitting together in the back of Shilpa's car as her driver was taking us through different New Town neighbourhoods. Shilpa showed me her three newly built restaurants and a tall residential building in Sector 4 (New Town is divided into "Sectors"), situated on the opposite side of the crossing that leads to Ghashi village. Shilpa was very open with me about the "ways things were usually done", as she put it, in the real estate business of New Town. Unlike Mr Saraogi, Shilpa had already completed quite a few projects in the area, and she had become familiar with the process. She confirmed that to build anything in New Town "one needed to go through the syndicates". She added, however, that "there were ways to go past the troubles that could arise with the syndicates". Shilpa told me that it was becoming a common practice among real estate agents like herself to pay an initial "tax" to Hidco managers, the MLA, and the syndicate leader of the area. She added that she paid this tax to have less trouble in case syndicates became an issue with their pressing demands, especially towards the completion of projects. She explained:

> I still have to take the syndicate's orders because that's what Hidco people recommend. This is how things get done here. But then, if I pay the tax at the start of the project to Hidco itself, they assure me that there will be no headache for me. They told me that they would take care of everything, including syndicate goons. So, we met, and we decided on a sum for me to give to the Hidco manager in charge and to the syndicate leader.

Shilpa and her associates had met with Mr Kumar, Mr Mukherjee, and Faquir as representative of the Ghashi syndicates, and a deal was settled between these parties. In this case, Hidco's negotiations happened before construction started, and the supplying of materials was agreed to by the syndicates. The money that Shilpa paid to Hidco served as a form of insurance against syndicates' claims that were considered excessive by the company. Shilpa told me that this method gave her piece of mind despite being an "expensive tax". She concluded: "So, if afterwards there is an issue with the syndicates and they protest, I can say to Hidco, 'I have paid you, I've done my part, so I'm done here'".

In this example, the protection given by Hidco to syndicate members stimulated a profitable chain of relations and further need for protection. It stimulated the need for real estate agents to pay an insurance tax against trouble and damage to their real estate projects. The recipients of both "protection taxes" were Hidco and powerful local politicians like the MLA and panchayat leaders. Hidco's protection goes in two directions. Hidco's protection to the syndicate members sustains the illicit business of the supplying of materials based on inflated prices and threats. The syndicate

mafia, in turn, generates conflicts with real estate companies and thus the need for Hidco to come into the picture again and act as a mediator in negotiations. Moreover, this process sometimes stimulates the need for insurance to protect against syndicate activities where Hidco offers a "no-headache process" upon payment. This insurance takes the form of a preliminary contract between the parties. Syndicate workers are excluded from this preliminary deal while at the same time being the focus of the negotiations.

Syndicate members often complained that rokkher taka had a double edge. On the one hand, it allowed them to get access to the behind-the-scenes business in construction, but on the other hand it drained most of their income and prevented them from planning ahead for their families, as they had little to go by. Although orders might not come or payments might not be received in full, regular protection money still needed to be paid. When I heard my participants lamenting the little money they could make through the syndicate, it became evident that their experiences challenged at least one key aspect of the conventional way in which syndicate members are portrayed (Das 2019; Ruud 2019; Sissener 2019), that of quick money and a glamorous lifestyle. The system of protection was expensive and quite extractive, but syndicate members received little in return as there was no equal redistribution. It was a system of protection through payments that left syndicate members without control; the entirety of the money was managed by the syndicate leaders. Unlike common descriptions of mastans as Robin Hoods, protection money leaves syndicate mastans with little income. Rokkher taka does not often lead to "quick money" for syndicate workers in the lower ranks.

As the examples above show, the system of protection between politicians and syndicate members through protection money shows that syndicates are not redistributive systems à la Robin Hood and syndicate members don't get an equal share; in fact, they get very little money. There is no Robin Hood redistribution. The structure of state protection puts Muslim syndicate members inside a system where they have little control of the flow of resources while having to pay protection money in order to keep their jobs. So, there is no "Robin Hood system" in place for the syndicates as profits from mafia are not equally shared within the group. I argue that the mafia raj is based on a system that exploits the majority of the people involved in it and that only a few of the "goons" actually become rich. It is important to understand these differential positions and to show that the syndicates rely on the work of many people. It is a system of violence and extra-economic means that relies on the extortion practices on the ground by low-ranking syndicate members, while wealth is accumulated by only a few.

Conclusion: The Volatility of State Protection

On the hot morning at the beginning of August 2016 when Shibul was arrested on a construction site, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee revealed a crucial turn in her political agenda. For the very first time since she had come to power back in 2011, Mamata Banerjee allotted a 15-acre plot to a multinational IT company, Cognizant Technology Solutions, in New Town. This was the first allotment to a major technology corporation since 2011, and the area was very close to Ghashi village. In concrete terms, without state protection, this meant that the Ghashi syndicates could not find employment in construction as the company would certainly employ its own contractors. On the very same day, Chief Minister Mamata at a party meeting claimed that "it is high time that the police stop the syndicate goondaism and put an end to their businesses" (*The Telegraph*, [Kolkata] 3 August 2016). The syndicate group in Ghashi didn't have to wait for the local press to announce the news. Shibul was arrested without advance notice from any leader or politician.

From that morning on, for three months, the rhythms of life and the space of life changed radically. Everyone in Ghashi complained with fervor that Mamata Banerjee and TMC were, as they put it, "throwing police against them trying to stop their businesses". As Aftab said:

> Before, the TMC started this whole market . . . the syndicates. And now they are changing their attitudes to crack down the syndicates. I cannot go to the field anymore. There is no money, no source of income. My income was only from this, but now everything stopped. I cannot run my family with this little money. What a terrible condition for our companies! But they are government people, how can I argue with them?

The coming and going of protection is oppressive specifically because it undermines subsistence and income all of a sudden. It also precludes the ability to plan for better subsistence strategies. My participants were mostly concerned about how this volatility would severely affect their ability to make ends meet.

My participants explained that they had had this *jhamela*, this problem, before. "Let us see how long this will continue", everybody said, hoping that rokkha could be reinstated. The main problem everyone faced was that payments were delayed, and nobody knew when they would receive their next instalment for the work they had already done. A common lament was that syndicate work was not a *nirdishto* job, not a fixed job; it didn't allow them to plan their lives ahead. I heard my interlocutors struggling with finding possible ways forward. Mahafuj, during the time when rokkha was off, confessed to me:

> My wife feels a bit ashamed when she is asked about my occupation. I am not a teacher, I am not a doctor, I am not a farmer anymore. I don't have a fixed (*nirdishto*) occupation, I cannot say what I am.

Mahafuj added that it was easier during their agricultural past to plan their lives. They were able to know when to stop working and when to work, when to sell the crop to send their son to school and arrange their daughter's marriage. Like many Ghashi residents, Mahafuj was frustrated by the fact that the coming and going of protection affected his control over the daily movements and rhythms of life. Although the volatility of protection leads of course primarily to issues of money, people at all positions experience the volatility most profoundly as a set of ruptures in their ability to engage with their time and space. Indeed, the withdrawal of protection makes it difficult to use time and space in a way that leads to productive activities.

My ethnography illuminates how this system of protection allows for new inequalities to emerge. By foregrounding the perspective of syndicate workers, I've show that they are offered the protection of the state and yet put in a precarious, unstable position when this protection evaporates. Ultimately, the syndicate chele perceive the volatility of state rokkha as a form of control.

In this chapter, I have detailed the first cycle of protection, that is the protection offered by HIDCO to syndicate workers. But there is a second cycle of protection, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Tolabaji:
Extortion by Syndicate Workers

For syndicate workers, protection works two ways because they are involved in two circles of protection. The first is the one addressed in the previous chapter in which syndicate workers are the object of protection offered by Hidco and MLAs that gives them access to the informal, illicit supply of construction materials and construction work. It is this first form of protection, rokkha, that allows for the other kind of protection to be implemented. Syndicate chele refer to the second form of protection as *tolabaji* (extortion). This term related to the ways my informants protected their clients, such as real estate companies and their employers or contractors. It is this second practice of protection as tolabaji that this chapter explores. Syndicate chele extorted money and orders from clients in exchange for protection from the possibility of syndicate vandalism or physical violence. To protect their clients, my participants enacted a performance as "dangerous Others".

As we will see, syndicate workers were aware of the public visibility that tolabaji entailed for them. My informants acted as representatives of the syndicates in their interactions with real estate companies. As representatives of syndicate power, my participants had to act, be seen, and be recognized as such. This aspect of visibility inherent in syndicate workers' activities was in sharp contrast with the invisibility in the public arena of syndicate leaders, Hidco officials, and powerful politicians such as Subir Mukherjee. I argue that these elements of visibility and performativity of tolabaji on one side and of invisibility and secrecy related to syndicate leaders on the other reproduce the unequal positions between the *shadharon manush* (the common people) and the wealthy *bhadralok* (gentlemen) in the higher political spheres.

Fieldworkers with State Protection

As we have seen, my participants tended to avoid referring to themselves as mastans unless their intention was to cast a negative light on their actions or to speak of their negative evaluation by politicians and the media. When they told me of the threats or vandalisms they had committed, syndicate workers often said, "We did some mastans' work". But this term evoked a negative

evaluation for them. In daily conversation, they used the terms "syndicate boy" (*chele*) or the English word "fieldworker". In particular, the term "fieldworker" identified one specific set of tasks that syndicate workers were expected to carry out. Syndicate workers usually were expected to implement a variety of tasks: managing, sorting out, and delivering construction materials; smashing stones into smaller pieces to be sold for construction; and actual construction work when needed such as carpentry and masonry; and "fieldwork". The latter task was considered of particular importance as it was meant to represent the entire syndicate group to external parties. Fieldwork involved patrolling the area controlled by the Ghashi syndicate, making sure leaders' orders were respected, looking after cargos of materials, and identifying possible new plots to invest on. Fieldwork, most of all, implied getting new orders of materials from clients and collecting payments. Here tolabaji was essential for fieldworkers. Every syndicate boy was expected to take turns doing fieldwork. Usually, each small syndicate group would send five or six fieldworkers to join those assigned to the same task from the other groups. For example, five fieldworkers from syndicate group number 218 joined ten fieldworkers from groups 220 and 221 (five each). They all went to the field together as it was easier to represent and enact tolabaji in bigger groups.

For my participants, as for anthropologists, the term "fieldworker" highlighted work that was carried out *mathe,* in the field, as opposed to the work of syndicate leaders (Figure 5). The latter ran each group from behind closed doors, in their offices or on the phone. In contrast to the leaders, my participants described their own work as done *mathe*, in the field. By this expression, they meant that they were bringing syndicate activities to the public arena of New Town, with its lucrative plots of land and its construction sites. New Town was a city in the making. For syndicate workers, working in the field meant being aware of the plots that were being bought and constructed upon and establishing control over the supply of work and materials before anyone else. In order to establish control and ensure orders, working in the field required public visibility. For my participants, the idiom of fieldworker carried with it both the idea of getting their hands dirty with mastan work as well as publicly exposing the syndicates' power.

> As fieldworkers, we are representatives (*protinidhi*) of the syndicate group. Each small group has representatives like us. Hidco tells syndicate leaders that there is a company who wants to build something, and then we are sent by leaders to collect orders and payments in the field. We say to companies, 'You guys have to give us the money (*takata dite hobe*)'. Because we have rokkha from political bosses, leaders can send us in the field to do that. No one will bother us if we have rokkha.

Because syndicate workers like Mahafuj have been guaranteed protection from politicians, fieldworkers can act as representatives of power for the syndicates. State protection as rokkha

enables the syndicate workers to openly establish power in the field. Aftab described his role in the syndicates as a fieldworker, highlighting the "managing" aspect of the work in the field:

> Like me, some guys among us manage the field (*poricholona kora mathe*). We manage the plots that are to be built on and also those who are in construction. Besides taking orders and collecting payments, we solve issues with the company if they don't pay.

As I followed my participants in their field activities, I noticed that fieldworkers patrolled areas to maintain control and establish power over their territory and the supply of materials. For example, they would spend entire afternoons roaming around New Town looking for a new plot of land to control. The Ghashi syndicate had established a monopoly over the areas around Eco Park, and fieldworkers made sure this monopoly went unchallenged. As Aftab put it, "If we find a vacant plot and we manage it before it is even sold, then we get a bit more money from the leaders. We see a plot is available, and we establish control over it". Aftab's comment was not uncommon, as fieldworkers often acted as the explorers of new plots, and acting in advance, before leaders controlled a plot, was seen as a valuable act.

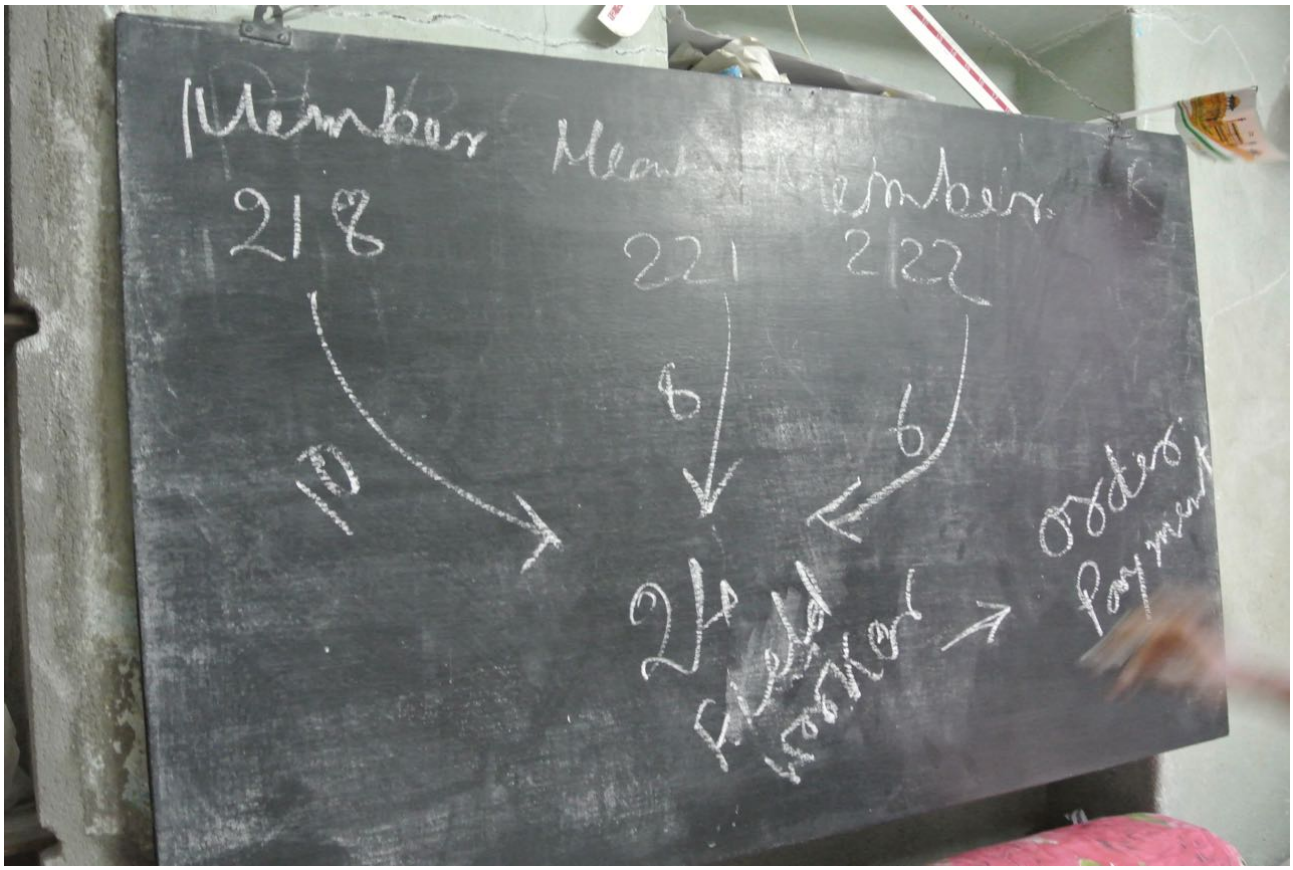

Figure 5. Mahafuj's diagram of the syndicate structure. Photo by the author.

Like many other syndicate members in Ghashi, Mahafuj and Aftab from syndicate group number 218 emphasized that state protection allowed them to take on the role of fieldworkers for

the syndicates. Fieldworkers often stressed that it was important for orders and money to be delivered to the syndicate leaders on time. The efficient delivery of orders and money, as my participants always emphasized, would ensure that fieldworkers could receive their payments every three months and have a sustainable livelihood in Ghashi.

Despite rumours in the news of connections between political figures and syndicate mastans, when it came to the daily syndicate activities it was only mastans who undertook a public role and engaged in the open in extortion practices. In public debates, there were very little details of the actual ways in which syndicates' extortion rackets worked and how these were connected with politicians. Secrecy was indeed another key aspect of fieldworkers' activities. Any trace of connection between fieldworkers and syndicate leaders or political bosses needed to be covered up.

Narzul explained how secrecy was maintained in their interactions with real estate companies:

> We never say the name of the person who's sending us to the company people or to their contractors. We don't say 'Sir ___ is sending us'. We just say '*dite hobe*', and people know we are from the syndicates. Police will not bother us, Hidco will not bother us, so this is enough to do our work.

As Nazrul's comment shows, protection from police and Hidco sustains both extortion and secrecy towards syndicate leaders and politicians. The fact that fieldworkers are allowed to undertake illicit activities openly is enough to identify them as syndicate members; no names are needed.

My participants stressed that their role as fieldworkers meant that they had to do much "convincing" of clients and people in the field. They call this key aspect of their work *tolabaji*. The word tolabaji can be translated as "extortion", and it carries the meaning of forcefully extracting something. Everyone in the syndicate group emphasized that tolabaji, because it required some "convincing", could only happen if they were protected by the state and had rokkha.

Syndicate workers spoke spoke of tolabaji when they described their activities in the syndicate group. In particular, they referred to tolabaji as the illicit practice of extracting money from companies in exchange for protection from their own violent acts. Syndicate workers explained that, as fieldworkers, it was up to them to go and "collect the orders and the payments" from real estate companies and their contractors. As Mahafuj explained to me:

> We work as fieldworkers, and what do we do? We take orders *mathe*, in the field. We go to the person in charge of the construction site and we say, 'You have to give the order to us'. '*Dite hobe*'. You have to give us the order of 10 trucks', because materials are provided according to the number of trucks. Once we have collected the order, we go to the syndicate

members and we tell them that we have done our work and now the Ghashi syndicate can provide the materials.

The fieldworkers made orders possible for the syndicates. In order to do so, these fieldworkers bore the major risks by being the ones doing the extortion practices on the ground, unlike the syndicate leaders. The business of supplying materials relied on fieldworkers' activities in the field and on their *dite hobe*, upon which the orders would be granted. It is worth noting that the sentence *dite hobe* was also used in another kind of extortion: that of powerful politicians like MLA and Hidco managers asking for regular payments from syndicate members.

Representing the Syndicates with a Show of Muscle

Aftab explained fieldworkers' practices with regard to the collection of payments:

> There is the payment issue as well. Whatever the price of something, we ask double, we ask double the market price. So, if we buy cement for 16 rupees, we would sell it for 32. We do tolabaji, we force people to buy from us. . . . Suppose we delivered the cement to the company, but then the real estate people refuse to pay what we agreed on. If you don't pay what we asked for, we will force you to. For this, some convincing needs to be done, some *gaer jor* is necessary. So, then people pay.

My Muslim informants in Ghashi deployed *gaer jor*, or a show of muscle, in order to protect their clients in the real estate business. Tolabaji required that convincing was done through gaer jor. Gaer jor is performed by signs of power and physical superiority. I heard many times similar accounts of how tolabaji required gaer jor, secrecy, and protection. Everyone conveyed that, in order to do tolabaji, the quality of gaer jor, or a show of muscle, was needed.

This show of muscle was often the object of conversations among my participants. It was the implementation of gaer jor that my Muslim participants narrated whenever they told me of how they got involved in the syndicates in the first place and how they still performed gaer jor activities whenever there was a fight (*jhogra*) going on in the business. Aftab told me:

> To become a syndicate member, I first showed to Hidco that I am able to use a show of muscle (*Hidcoke ektu gaer jor dekhiechi*). Then, I got some work done through physical threats (*tarpore gaer jore kaj dilo*). I had to make a lot of effort in order to enter this business. If I didn't show my power, I wouldn't have had this opportunity (*na dile hoto na*).

Aftab explained that, together with a group of fellow syndicate members from the village, he had to threaten a developer who wasn't willing to accept an order of sand and bricks from the syndicate group for the expansion of the main highway in New Town. Like Aftab, many other syndicate workers stressed the importance of gaer jor to be able to work in the syndicates.

For my participants, gaer jor was made manifest not only through muscles and fists and a strong body. Gaer jor was also made visible through signs of power as well. One key sign of power for syndicate members was their motorbikes (see Figure 6). For example, one day I met Aftab outside his house working on his motorbike. I knew he had been busy working on fixing the battery and the gearbox that had broken down, leaving him stuck one day at the side of the road. He welcomed me with a smile, saying he was happy as he had fixed the problem and could go back to riding his bike again. He was proud of having fixed the problem in just a few days on his own. Aftab said that without his bike, his syndicate work was limited by what he could do just by walking around. "It's not the same" he asserted. "I need the bike for syndicate work. People don't see you the same way without it, I need the noise to come before I arrive so that clients get scared". For syndicate members like Aftab, their gaer jor was sustained by their motorbikes. Every young syndicate boy possessed one, and it was their main means of transportation to the main syndicate office and to construction sites. They often talked about the sound of their engines and how it instilled fear in people in and around construction sites. Stimulating feelings of fear was another manifestation of their gaer jor and an essential part of their work. When I asked Aftab where he found the money for the motorbike, he replied that it was given to him by the panchayat leaders. Aftab's motorbike costed around 40,000 rupees (400 GBP), which was a huge sum for a syndicate boy like him. Aftab explained he was going to pay it back in instalments over time. Motorbikes, which were the means of transportation for syndicate workers and a well-known sign of syndicate power, were sponsored by local political leaders. This shows that tolabaji, and its related show of muscle, required most of all protection from a series of willing parties who enabled it and financed it.

Moreover, motorbikes allowed syndicate members to go around in the field as part of a group. Being in groups of 10 or 20 people when collecting orders and payments was crucial as it was something that couldn't be done by one person alone. Nazrul explained: "We go together, me and the other fieldworkers, whenever there is an issue to be solved or when we collect orders and payments. Whoever comes with me as a fieldworker, I would call him my brother." Gaer jor was more easily manifested in a group rather than by one individual alone, and this stimulated a sense of collective and mutual ties of solidarity between syndicate workers.

Figure 6. A syndicate office in Ghashi with a syndicate boy's motorbike parked in front. Photo by the author.

Gaer Jor and Criminalization

Practices of tolabaji thrived thanks to the spectacularisation of syndicate workers' dangerous criminal persona. Gaer jor, inherent in extortion acts of tolabaji, had an element of visibility and performativity and showing off. Syndicate workers reproduced their criminal persona through embodied performances of gaer jor, which included showing off their physical superiority and muscles but also involved signs of power such as motorbikes and sticks and a certain style of clothing and posture. Such performances of gaer jor reinforced and echoed widespread expectations and stigmatizing stereotypes of syndicate mastans. Drawing from Judith Butler's (1990) work on performativity, we can see that syndicate mastans "do" their bodies within a specific context of symbolic meanings, performing in a "corporeal style" (Butler 1990; see also Harms 2011) which reinforces their marginal and criminalized position. This criminalized identity is gendered strongly masculine, and it is connected with certain expectations of the Muslim criminal mastan and the way he acts. In the examples below, syndicate workers used gaer jor while being protected by police. They manipulated the criminal imagery of mastans to find strategies to make things safer for them and to obtain an order, but by doing so they also reiterated their criminalization.

Every morning, Aftab would rise around 7 a.m. and dress in his traditional village clothes. Around 8 a.m., he would meet Narzul and Mahafuj at the tea stall on the village road, and they

would sit together over tea and samosas. They would then head together to the syndicate office for group number 218. There, they would attend to the cargos of sand and bricks arriving from Burdwan, unloading them and storing them on the premises of the office. After some more work for the syndicate group, they would get ready to go to the main Ghashi syndicate office, located just outside the village. The Ghashi syndicate office was strategically hidden underneath a flyover that was being constructed, and its location had been chosen because it faced plots of land controlled by the Ghashi syndicates. Aftab and his companions would go to the main office every morning at 11 a.m. Before going to the office, they would change from their daily village clothes into their fieldworker clothes. These were modern clothes that mirrored the mastan imagery portrayed in the media and in Bengali gangster movies. Aftab actually had posted several posters of actors playing gangster roles on his bedroom walls. Like most of his companions, Aftab was wearing a black bandana with white dots, big sunglasses covering his face, a bright red polo t-shirt, and tight blue jeans. Aftab and the other fieldworkers in the group would then ride their motorbikes to the Ghashi office. Before he left the village, Aftab announced to me: "Today we are going to show some gaer jor to the company people at the Paloonjee construction site".

Aftab explained that the Paloonjee real estate company had refused to give the Ghashi syndicates an order for bricks and sand and instead had hired different contractors from outside New Town. Aftab's use of the expression "showing gaer jor" underscored the element of performance, functioning as a warning to clients as well as a confirmation to the syndicate workers' bosses that they could do their job. The fieldworkers returned home to Ghashi village in the evening. As I sat outside Mahafuj's house, I noticed the exhaustion in Aftab's face. He told me that the fieldworkers' gaer jor had made the company owner change their minds. I learnt that the fieldworkers of group number 218 together with those of two other syndicate groups, numbers 221 and 222 – a total of 24 people – had gone to the construction site with their motorbikes and interrupted the construction work with a show of muscle. "We showed gaer jor, we occupied the site with our motorbikes. We made some threats to ruin the Caterpillars and burn the sacks of sand if they didn't take the rest of the materials from us". Occupations of construction sites and forceful interruptions of work in progress were not uncommon techniques deployed by syndicate fieldworkers to show gaer jor. The threats of vandalizing the machinery and at times of burning down part of a construction site were also strategies of gaer jor. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard my participants many times narrating about these practices of "convincing methods with gaer jor". These narratives were not recounted without shame and negative moral evaluations towards the fieldworkers' own actions. Yet, my participants told me that these "ways of convincing" were for them strategies for ensuring that orders and payments would reach the leaders without too much

delay. Despite widespread accounts by media pundits of murder and violence by syndicates, during my time in Ghashi I never heard of a killing or kidnapping done by fieldworkers. I also never heard of the use of weapons by any of my participants. Threats and site occupations were more common for them, as long as their protection from the state held.

When I asked Aftab how he felt about the risks involved in the construction site occupation, he replied: "The police were just a block away. The company contractor in charge of the site called the police. They [the police] said that they would come after an hour. But nobody came." As Aftab's account shows, protection from the MLA, who controlled the police posts in New Town, ensured the syndicates would be protected from police officers as well. Tolabaji and gaer jor required rokkha from powerful politicians to be implemented.

Beside threats and occupations, fieldworkers' work involved another key element of performance. Once back in Ghashi, Aftab went home and changed out of his bandana, sunglasses, tight jeans, and bright red t-shirt and back into his village clothes. The latter didn't look like "fieldworker clothes" at all. He wore his *lungi*, a traditional cotton garment tied with a simple twisted knot around his waist that hung down to his ankles. Most men in Ghashi village wore the *lungi* both within and outside the house. Aftab's *lungi* was made of simple cotton, with a pattern of white and light blue stripes that was washed out by long use and the sun. Aftab sometimes wrapped up the lungi so that it fell short, to his knees, so that he could attend to his syndicate work in the village more easily. It was a typical *lungi* of a lower-class man, and it contrasted with the modern clothing of fieldworkers usually associated with status and power. Instead of the tight red polo t-shirt, Aftab wore a loose white t-shirt. I asked Aftab whether he could do his fieldwork in these clothes. "It won't work out", he objected immediately. "Do you go to teach to your students in your home dress? . . . No, it is not even safe if we don't dress properly. Police won't know it is us". Aftab explained that even Faquir, their panchayat leader, would encourage them to dress in fieldworkers' clothes in order to be more recognizable by the police. During the time when Aftab's motorbike was broken, Aftab had to stay in the village while the other fieldworkers did their work in the field. I enquired about the possibility of him using his bicycle to go to work. He replied firmly: "People like to see us on motorbikes. Only women sit at the back of motorcycles".

Bandanas, sunglasses, jeans, and bright t-shirts together their motorcycles were the socially recognized symbols of mastans. Syndicate men changed into fieldworkers' clothes when they went to the field, outside the territory of Ghashi village. These clothes reinforced the imagery of "Muslim syndicate criminals", and this performativity helped them receive protection from police officers. Once home, they changed back into their everyday village clothes, indicating that their performance was over.

Another fieldworker, Nazrul, told me that once he delayed his work in the field and he had to rush to the village for a Jamat-e Islami Hind (local Islamic organization) event at the Ghashi middle school. The event was organized by the village members of the organization in honour of the graduation of 16-year-old students from the village by reading passages of the Quran and distributing books. Nazrul told me he didn't want to miss the event, so he decided to go straight to the school from the field. He told me he then felt very embarrassed because he was wearing inappropriate clothes for the occasion. Everyone else wore clean *kurta* (a traditional Indian shirt) with *lungi* or light cotton pants. He was the only one in the modern attire typical of fieldworkers, and this was in stark contrast with the religious event at the school. He realized that when he crossed the border of the village he should have changed out of his clothes, which had a very specific connotation at odds with the village's Islamic event.

There is, in the performativity of the use of a show of muscle (*gaer jor*), a definite distinction between the way my participants act and dress in the village and the way they are supposed to behave outside of it. This distinction emerges in their clothes, their attitudes, their means of transportation, and their language. In the village, everyone walked or cycled around to get groceries or go visit a friend or relative. The use of gaer jor was confined to the work in the field, as well as the use of expressions such as *dite hobe* ("you have to give"). The examples above illustrate how fieldworkers wield the symbols publicly recognized as typical of mastans in order to encourage protection from the police and to give credibility to their social positions as syndicate men. These strategies facilitate the collection of orders and payments so that fieldworkers can sustain their livelihoods. My participants show that there is a performative symbolism around the figure of the fieldworker, based on the criminalization of the Muslim mastan, that sits at odds with their everyday life in the village. In Ghashi, my participants engage in many different activities, but outside the village and in the field, as well as in media reports by pundits and in political debates, they become fully identified as mastans.

Mastans' gaer jor in political meetings

This visibility and criminal persona of syndicate fieldworkers became useful when Hidco officials and MLAs needed to stimulate investments or raise money for political campaigns. In particular, the performance of the criminal Muslim mastan was an effective tool whenever a politician needed support for political elections and their rise in power.

Another example of this became clear as my participants recounted how they attended political meetings and political campaigns, rallies, and events supporting Subir Mukherjee. The protection money paid by syndicate members was key to raising revenues for the party. These

political meetings and events were crucial for the MLA's political power and for ensuring votes. As the General Assembly election approached in spring 2016, syndicate members were repeatedly asked to attend TMC party gatherings for the re-election of Mr Mukherjee.

As an example, one of the biggest events organized by the MLA in New Town in the months before the elections was a blood-donation camp with several medical facilities, such as clinics for measuring the blood pressure and weight of villagers. The event was scheduled to be followed by a long speech by Mr Mukherjee and other local TMC leaders. To set up the event, the party spent about 50,000 rupees (about 500 GBP); it was one of the most expensive events for the party. I was at the office of syndicate group number 218 with Mahafuj, Aftab, and Nazrul when the news came that each syndicate in Ghashi had to provide as many members as they could to attend the camp and the meeting. A huge attendance was considered proof of power for politicians, and thus syndicate members were expected to show up as Mr Mukherjee's supporters. Mahafuj, Aftab, Nazrul, and the other syndicate members in the group had to attend the event as henchmen. My participants gave the news a lukewarm reception. The good side of it, they explained, was that at least the event was being held in a nearby neighbourhood so they wouldn't have to pay for transportation. I learnt that sometimes they had been asked to travel a long distance to another district to attend political meetings, and they had to bear the costs of transport themselves. "If we don't go, we would be deprived of the facilities we need to do our work" Aftab said. "We would not be given any order if we didn't show up." Nazrul added, "It is not like I can say, 'I have my work to do, so I cannot go'. It is not like that. . . . We will have to go, and we will all have to give (*dite-i hobe*) 1000 rupees each". The syndicates were a crucial way for powerful politicians like Mr Mukherjee to raise funds for the party and their political campaign. Part of the rokkher taka paid by syndicate members thus went into the party's coffers.

It was the syndicate leaders' responsibility to ensure that the syndicate workers would participate in the meetings and contribute financially. Syndicate group number 218 had a meeting with its leader Faquir at the office. Faquir was 38 years old and the son of Ali, a well-respected man in the village with connections to the party. As it was typical for panchayat leaders, kinship relations determined who would be elected as panchayat leaders. Ali had also been a panchayat leader before his son took over. Like many local political leaders, Faquir belonged to the landowning class in Ghashi. His family used to own 100 bighas of land, and they used to have several tenants and sharecroppers from the village cultivating the fields. Faquir had quickly climbed the political ladder thanks to his connections with Mr Mukherjee. With regard to his relations with TMC politicians, Faquir told me:

> I have to answer on behalf of my syndicate group. If I have 20 syndicate boys (*chele*), then they expect that at least 16 of us will surely go to the political meeting. Otherwise, later they will say that I will not have the order of materials. They would probably say that if I am unable to bring enough people to the political meeting, then why would I need the tokens for the trucks? They just wouldn't give me the tokens.

While the public visibility of syndicate workers was common in relation to tolabaji, the identity and involvement of syndicate leaders such as Faquir, of Hidco officials, or of powerful politicians such as MLAs needed to remain secret. Indeed, while my interlocutors were always quite open about their tolabaji and their own activities, they were unwilling to talk about the syndicate leader Faquir and their relationship with him. Only after several months was I able to identify who Faquir was, after seeing him at the syndicate office and later at the panchayat office. Syndicate workers never mentioned his name to me. In fact, they didn't even like to pronounce the word "leader", afraid of being overheard or of being guilty of violating the secrecy they had to maintain. Instead of using the word "leader", syndicate workers, in everyday conversation amongst themselves and with me, preferred to use the more neutral term "the member". When my interlocutors explained their interactions with real estate companies, they stressed that they would never reveal the names of the persons running and managing the syndicates at the upper levels.

One day, Mahafuj and I were sitting at the syndicate office and he was complaining about how things were run in the group. In particular, he was frustrated by members (leaders) not taking any responsibility for tolabaji and then keeping the money collected by fieldworkers for themselves. When I looked confused, he decided it was time for me to have a clearer idea of how the group worked in relation to the member and how responsibility for tolabaji was managed within the group. He wrote several explanations on the blackboard (see Figure 7). He then stressed the fact that troubles arose for fieldworkers because the member, as he put it, "was always showing he was neat and clean and that he is not involved in any trouble". He continued, "He tries to always show he is a *bhadralok*, a perfect gentleman, and that he has no responsibility for how the money is collected and orders are obtained. And this brings us trouble". Mahafuj concluded: "The common people (*shadharon manush*) have to pay, the *bhadhralok* remain *bhadralok*".

Figure 7. Mahafuj's written representation of the structure of each syndicate group. The member (leader) is at the top, and several syndicate workers, represented by the lines going downward, report to him in their activities. The sum of 10.000 rupees is managed by the member, whose identity is kept secret. Photo by the author.

Conclusion

The perspective of the syndicate workers is useful to understand the element of "violence" of land mafias, how it works and the conditions that enable it. The syndicate workers are the ones who enact violence on the ground on behalf of higher-level members of the syndicate organization. Syndicate workers also bear the greatest risks from these violent activities. Yet, the concept of violence does not fully embrace what my informants call tolabaji, or extortion. For syndicate mastans, tolabaji requires a show of muscle (gaer jor) and criminal visibility, achieved through a series of strategies and daily practices and risky activities. Yet, their accounts of tolabaji should not be taken at face value. Tolabaji does not simply involve violent acts such as forcefully extracting money, physically damaging property, and beating up people. Tolabaji is more performative than actual violent acts of killing and causing harm. It is based more on threats and signs of power and physical superiority. Tolabaji requires, most of all, protection from a series of willing parties who enable it, finance it, and spectacularize it in public debates and the media.

My ethnography points to the relation between two different forms of protection, rokkha by Hidco state officials and local political leaders and tolabaji by syndicates. Rokkha is a claim to payment by Hidco officials in exchange for access to the informal economy of construction work and for safety from police officers. Tolabaji is the practice by syndicate workers of demanding inflated payments for materials and work in construction, and it is required of real estate companies in exchange for their protection from vandalism and violence. Here, I have argued that the performative and visible elements of tolabaji reproduce the inequalities between the common people and the *bhadralok*, the gentlemen. As my participants show, the spectacularization of tolabaji obscures the inner workings and forms of criminalization involved in their activities as syndicate fieldworkers.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Criminalization without the Aura

Mahafuj and I were sitting in the small office of syndicate group number 218, hidden in the interior of Ghashi village. Mahafuj was reading the daily Bengali newspaper, and he had managed to get a copy of the English-language newspaper too, *The Telegraph*, because the cover pages of both had a photograph of syndicate leader Faquir. He wanted me to translate the English article for him as I had been giving him a few English lessons to reciprocate for his helping me with my research. The *Telegraph* article was titled "The Robin Hood of New Town Rajarhat," and the subtitle mentioned that Faquir had "an army of 100 men on call" (Banerjee 2016). The article presented the syndicate leader as a powerful and dangerous Muslim man. The syndicate leader's wealth was referenced by comments such as "a fat gold chain glistening around his sweaty neck, he boasts that he moves around with 100 men" (Banerjee 2016). The article focused on how the leader, with his army of mastans, terrorized large companies and forced them to agree to his terms. The author addressed what it takes to be a leader and claimed that Faquir was "like a Robin Hood. In job-starved Bengal, he provides income to hundreds of young men who would have nothing else to do otherwise" (Banerjee 2016). This is a typical description of syndicate leaders and their workers known as mastans. Mahafuj was not happy with the portrayal of syndicates in the article. Mahafuj told me:

> You see what they say things are. Leaders are in the front pages of papers, and they get powerful and dominate us. But when we collect the money for them and we do *tolabaji* (extortion), then he [the leader] tries to show that he is neat and clean, that he is not involved in any trouble, that he is a *bhodrolok* (gentleman)!

Mahafuj's comment illuminates the different forms that criminalization can take and its different effects depending on people's structural positions. Mahafuj's experience, like that of many other syndicate workers, challenges the idea of a redistributive system within the syndicates from the leaders to their followers. For Mahafuj, the presence of syndicate leaders in the media only led

to more domination of workers like him. Being depicted as powerful in the media creates respect and reproduces leaders' credibility and power. Leaders sustain their criminalized aura and mythical personas in this way, but they do all they can to erase any trace of their involvement when it comes to criminal activities on the ground. When syndicate workers practice extortion, they have to maintain complete silence about who their leaders are. They need to leave no trace of their work's connection to any of their bosses. This is why the syndicate's structure and its inner workings are so hard to detect. On the ground, in daily activities, the usual game of who hides and who is on display is inverted; leaders are hidden while low-level workers are exposed to arrest and other risks. As Mahafuj put it, "They [the syndicate leaders] take no responsibility; here lies the trouble!"

Mahafuj added that recently BJP political leaders had been coming to Ghashi and were trying to establish a BJP-led syndicate group in the village. "BJP is trying to gain an entry into Ghashi", Mahafuj said. "There were four members of Ghashi who were bribed into joining BJP and are going around saying that if we do all sorts of bad deeds for them as mastans, we will be better off". Mahafuj was describing an increasing trend in all the Muslim villagers of New Town in which BJP leaders were trying to gain votes in exchange for work in the syndicates. Mahafuj and my other informants in Ghashi were very worried that this would bring more problems for them and more bad values in the village.

Understanding what it means to be involved in the bottom ranks of a mafia organization and the ways Muslim workers deploy strategies that simultaneously transgress and reproduce their criminalized conditions has important consequences for anthropological studies of the mafia in South Asia. As I have shown throughout the thesis, recent anthropological scholarship on South Asian criminal economies has productively challenged explanatory models organized around binary oppositions between the legal sphere of the state and the independent sphere of illegality of mafia groups. Offering important insights on the intertwining of criminal businesses and politicians, a host of studies have shown that mafias are socially embedded, not separate from social, economic, and political dynamics (Sanchez 2016; Martin and Michelutti, Michelutti et al.; Harris-White and Michelutti). Milan Vaishnav's (2017) work on elected criminal politicians illuminates how "crime pays" in Indian political systems. Michelutti et al. (2019) have taken Vaishnav's work further by focusing on how personalized forms of power and personal sovereignty are created and sustained by bosses through hard, everyday work. They provide unique insights into the cultures of masculinity, respect, charisma, and force that surround mafia bosses and how these leaders navigate the blurred boundary between legality and illegality to make money. Yet, Michelutti et al. do not address what happens at the lower ranks of the mafia raj, who the people are who work at the bottom of mafia structures, and what their complex motivations and experiences are.

This thesis contributes to this body of literature on South Asian mafia by foregrounding the lives, experiences, and complex motivations of marginalized Muslim villagers who work as syndicate *chele* ("syndicate boys"). The thesis analyzes the inner functioning of the syndicates from the point of view of those who join criminal activities for lack of other possibilities for survival – the men who constitute the majority of the syndicate organization while being excluded from its profits and wealth. The perspectives of syndicate chele provide a unique window onto ordinary people's aspirations, strategies, and anxieties about engaging in criminalized work. The perspective of mastans offers a key methodological vantage point for examining the relationship between state officials, political leaders, and low-level workers who implement criminal activities on the ground. Syndicate chele's experiences illuminate how low-level workers are embedded in two circles of protection: the syndicate chele are protected by state officials and policemen, and at the same time they protect clients in real estate from their own potential acts of violence. Moreover, by delving into what it means to perform a show of muscle (*gaer jor*) for syndicate workers, we can understand how "getting things done" (Michelutti et al. 2019) is often based on criminal personas and visibility on the ground that translates into precarious workers bearing the most risk while leaders are hidden from public risk. The experiences of Muslim syndicate workers illuminate that mafia bosses' capacity for violence and making money often relies on marginalized people's risky activities, extortions, and criminal personas. In New Town, it is often those at the bottom of the hierarchy who suffer criminalization and precarity, while the bosses, more often than not, remain protected from the consequences of their criminal activities. Syndicate groups, therefore, rely on and function through the criminalization of the cheap, precarious labour of Muslim workers.

Recent studies have shown the important role that mastans play in systems of the mafia raj (Ruud 2019; Sissener 2019). I build on Ruud's (2019) nuanced account of Bangladeshi mafia as a "syndicate of mastans". Similar to the Bangladeshi context, in New Town too it is the politicians who control the mastans for profit rather than the other way around. I contribute to these studies by delving into the precarious relationship of protection that exists between leaders and low-level workers. My informants' experiences challenged at least one key aspect of the conventional way in which syndicate mastans are portrayed (Das 2019; Ruud 2019; Sissener 2019), that of making quick money and having a glamorous lifestyle. Although the system of protection was expensive for them and quite extractive, syndicate members received little in return due to the lack of equal redistribution. Moreover, I foregrounded the more intimate, implicit motivations for Muslim men to become mastans. The dynamics of class, kinship, and patronage do not disappear in a context of rapid urbanization and a real estate boom. Rather, these dynamics are deeply entwined with the motivations that bring marginalized people into working in the syndicates. The perspective from the

bottom of the syndicate hierarchy illuminates that dispossessed Muslim villagers do not engage in syndicate work simply because of the prospect of quick money and an attractive criminal lifestyle. Ghashi villagers don't aspire to be involved in politics, which is often seen as corrupting to the soul. They don't want to be criminals either, but they engage in the syndicates for multiple, ambivalent reasons related to ethical projects of kinship, sense of belonging to the place, lack of state recognition, coercive relations with local political leaders, strategies for home-making, and land reclamations.

Mahafuj, Ashim, Aftab, and Nazrul, like many syndicate workers in the Muslim village of Ghashi, are all dispossessed farmers who fought against land dispossession in a social movement, and since then they have become syndicate workers. Their stories illuminate the relation between state-led land dispossession and the emergence of criminal political economies. The syndicate raj of New Town, therefore, is not merely a consequence of mechanisms of capital. Rather, criminal political economies are intertwined with predatory dynamics such as land dispossession and neoliberal land regimes (Michelutti et al. 2019; Harris-White and Michelutti 2019). The experiences of Muslim villagers in Ghashi thus call into question the claim that farmers are "dispossessed for a form of economic growth requiring their land but not their labour" (Levien 2018: 101). In New Town, the process of land dispossession did not occur solely via mechanisms of exclusion and compliance (Levien 2018); the land dispossession also took place through Hidco's enlisting and exploitation of dispossessed people's labour in the cooperative scheme. The dispossessed farmers of Ghashi actively contributed to the process of land dispossession in their work for the cooperative. The cooperatives gradually turned into syndicates as these represented more profitable machines for politicians and syndicate leaders. State authorities are thus not separate from the land mafias, but Hidco's state officials need and enable land mafias to implement neoliberal land regimes. This historical process has had consequences for the relationships between the state and dispossessed communities, for patronage relations, and for local people's aspirations and motivations. It is the exploitative, coercive nature of this labour and the lack of recognition of this that leads to the criminalization of Muslim workers in the syndicates.

Whose Environmental Crime?

The question of whether syndicate work can be considered an environmental crime is an important one for future research. New Town is being built on the East Kolkata wetlands, which are included on the Ramsar list of wetlands of international importance (Kundu et al. 2008). Prior to New Town, lower-class Muslim villagers depended for their livelihood on a system of sewage-fed fish farms known as pisciculture (Dey et al. 2013: 6). Pisciculture functioned as a natural waste-

recycling system (Kundu et al. 2008). The sewage-fed ponds contained floating mycrophytes such as *Eichhornia crassipes* (common water hyacinths), which were key to cleaning the ponds' water. Nowadays, the pollution of canals and waters in New Town represents the next big challenge for Hidco and the West Bengal government. Anthropological research could illuminate the ongoing transformation of the pisciculture ponds into Eco Parks, where water is being rechannelled into massive lakes for fish production and for entertainment and where ponds on the sites of Eco Villages have been filled in for real estate investment. In this regard, it would important to probe the ways projects of urban greening such as New Town may rely on and sustain the illegalization and criminalization of Muslim labour in India. To what extent is the criminalization of Muslim labour intertwined with the illicit extraction of natural resources for the production of the Green City of New Town?

Moreover, it would be key to examine the ecological impact of green urbanism on Muslim ways of engaging with the environment as well as Muslim alternative rights-claiming practices in the Green Cities of India. As Muslim villagers in Ghashi have a long history of engagement with the wetland environment and pisciculture, it would be important to consider the unexpected processes through which they are reclaiming their citizenship rights through water and land reclamations that run counter to those of the state. Evidence from fieldwork has highlighted new strategies that Muslim villagers are enacting to recreate ponds from vacant plots in Ghashi. By exploring further these practices and their meanings, future research may ask: What is the ecological impact of the Green City on the wetland environment, and what is the environmental impact of syndicates? How are Muslims in Ghashi reinventing and reclaiming their relationship with the land and ponds while being engaged in syndicate work?

Ethics of Kinship, Criminalization, and Protection in the Syndicates

In New Town, the Muslim community of Ghashi faces increasing criminalization and stigma as the public discourse on criminality allows the state to create scapegoats. Chapter 2 asked how syndicate workers narrate the process that led to their engagement in the syndicates. Muslim syndicate workers evaluated their current precarious condition as the result of their unethical actions in the cooperative scheme. Dispossessed farmers actively contributed to the process of land dispossession by working in the cooperative scheme in the early 2000s. This process stimulated negative self-evaluation and an ethics of *durodorshita*. This term can be translated as "foresight", and in its vernacular use among Ghashi villagers it refers to moral attitudes towards time oriented towards the reproduction of the family. Currently, syndicate workers in Ghashi are enacting strategies aimed at the revival of the ethical value of foresight. *Durodorshita* imbues the actions of a

person who always keeps Allah in mind and who is not blinded by short-sightedness regarding money and momentary benefit. My informants are caught in a moral dilemma between their own negative evaluation of their syndicate work and the possibility that this work may allow them to engage once again in foresight-oriented actions. Muslim men aim to revive the value of foresight as they sustain their families, reclaim their family gardens, tend the graves of their ancestors, and take care of the vacant land around their village. For Ghashi syndicate workers, kinship ties and family values are not simply "opportunistically exploited or undermined" (Levien 2015: 78) so they can make quick money for themselves. Rather, syndicate workers aim to find ethical strategies to reproduce their families and themselves as members of their families.

The ethical struggles and negative self-evaluations that Muslims had of themselves were also sustained by constant comparisons to their Hindu neighbours in the East Bengali refugee colony of Jolergram (chapter 3). Muslims always referred to the Hindu refugees' benefits in New Town to stress their own marginalization and precarious condition. Chapters 2 and 3 thus considered the different perspectives of the two communities of Bengali Muslims and Hindu refugees and their relational identities. On one side, Muslims see Hindus as *bairegotro,* literally "those people whose lineage comes from outside". According to Muslims in Ghashi, Hindus are outsiders who are benefiting from the Muslim lands that were forcefully taken away during the Partition of Bengal. On the other side, Hindus see Muslims as dangerous criminals involved in polluted syndicate work. Despite doing very similar work in the supplying of construction materials, Hindu refugees have reproduced a narrative of Muslim criminality in the syndicates. Chapter 3 thus shed light on how the same process of dispossession and development led to different outcomes that illustrate these communities' different structural positions. Both Mahafuj and the Hindu refugee Ratan, like many Muslim men and Hindu refugees, had their land expropriated by Hidco. They both subsequently worked as construction workers in the land losers' cooperative program run by Hidco, and they both engaged in similar livelihoods in the construction sector of the emerging township. Yet, the living conditions of these two men were radically different. For Ratan, being a promoter in real estate meant a significant improvement in his economic and living conditions as well as in his status as a respectable man. As with most of the Hindu refugees I met in Jolergram, Ratan never used the term "syndicate leader" to define his occupation. He had a fancier title for himself; using the English word, he defined himself as a "promoter". In contrast, doing syndicate work seemed to have put Mahafuj in an uncertain position, leading to social stigma and getting by through risky activities related to his work. How did Ratan and Mahafuj's circumstances come to be so starkly different? Over the course of my fieldwork, I frequently encountered men like Mahafuj and Ratan. I realized that their stories represented

structural positions occupied by many dispossessed Hindu and Muslim villagers in New Town. Different structural positions reflect new forms of hierarchies and inequalities inherent in neoliberal land regimes and urban development projects. Land dispossession in New Town shaped dispossessed people's access to land and employment in an unequal fashion. Crucially, the process of land dispossession led to the empowerment of East Bengali Hindu refugees such as Ratan and to the criminalization of dispossessed Muslim villagers such as Mahafuj.The criminalization of Muslim syndicate workers is reproduced through the Hinduization of the newly urbanized area of New Town.

Following the flow of "protection money" (chapter 4) is key to understanding how the syndicate hierarchy is maintained and inequalities between the higher levels and the lower ranks are reproduced. State protection (*rokkha*) for my informants is not simply a calculated and opportunistic partnership with Hidco state officials and police. Rather, for Muslim syndicate workers relationships of protection are coercive and volatile, precarious and unstable. I use the term volatile protection to refer to the precarity of the protection. For syndicate workers, precarity extends from their livelihood vulnerability and their conditions of employment into their relationships of protection with the syndicate leaders.

Syndicate members often complained that *rokkher taka* had a double edge. On the one hand, it allowed them to get access to work in the behind-the-scenes supplying of sand, stone chips, and bricks, but on the other hand it drained most of their income and prevented them from planning ahead for their families as they had little to go by. Instead of using protection money to buy their independence, syndicate members were caught in a relation of dependence on the political bosses and their right-hand men in the panchayat. Syndicate workers perceived this relation of dependence not as voluntary but rather as coercive. Indeed, syndicate members emphasized that the payment of rokkher taka was not an option for them: "*Dite hobe* (we have to give)". For my informants, missing a payment of protection money could lead to targeted arrests, threats, and physical violence from leaders.

Moreover, protection was experienced as precarious; it could be given one day and withdrawn the day after, depending on political games. The coming and going of protection is oppressive specifically because it undermines subsistence and income all of a sudden. It also precludes the ability to plan for better subsistence strategies. My participants were mostly concerned about how this coming and going of protection greatly affected their ability to make ends meet.

Finally, chapter 5 asked what syndicate workers do with the protection they receive from the state. Tolabaji refers to the practices of extortion that syndicate workers enact towards their clients,

provided they have the protection of Hidco and the police. Syndicate workers like Mahafuj and Aftab enact a performance of criminality with real estate company owners and their subcontractors in order to obtain orders for building supplies and to receive payments. Muslim workers are tasked with collecting the amount of money set by the syndicate leaders on orders that involve cheating on measurements – in the quantity and quality of sand, stone chips, and bricks. To implement this task, syndicate members must embody a criminal persona. Yet, tolabaji implies a hide and display game. The visibility of practices of tolabaji by syndicate members mirrors the invisibility of the involvement of the syndicate leaders, Hidco officials and panchayat leaders, in the acts of extortion. It is this game of hiding and displaying that reproduces inequalities within the syndicate structure. While syndicate workers are criminalized and excluded from profit, the *bhadralok* (gentlemen) leaders accumulate wealth and power at the expense of the poor.

The story of ordinary people's engagement with syndicate work continues. Unstable and dynamic as it is, the supply of construction materials in New Town is still made possible by cheap and criminalized Muslim labour. In this thesis, we learned that at the bottom ranks of the syndicates there are ordinary Muslim villagers who do not fit the fixed images of the self-maximizing "asset entrepreneur" (Levien 2018), a powerful man aspiring to a career in politics, or a successful money-making mastan. As illustrated by my ethnography, Muslim villagers in Ghashi are neither simply dispossessed farmers nor syndicate mastans, neither wholly excluded from nor included in the profitable real estate business and state networks. Rather, they – uneasily – fall into all of these categories.

Despite the failure of the farmers' resistance in the Jomi Bachao Committee movement and the subsequent loss of their land, Muslim villagers in Ghashi are still actively finding strategies to sustain their families, reclaim their land, and be recognized as belonging to the area. I suggest that we should attend ethnographically to a wide range of popular imaginations of the political and of forms of political engagement beyond traditional forms of resistance. The political undermining of collective action in New Town does not necessarily mean that people have stopped engaging with forms of solidarity and resistance, despite their precarious lives and work as Muslim syndicate chele.

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