Between Cities and Borders: Environmental Migration and Urban Mobility in the GBM Delta

By

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Human mobility due to environmental factors is not a new phenomenon. Over the past few years' migration, mobility and displacement have become the key foundational component of critical urban theory and have become central to understand how urban spaces are produced and contested.[1] Oxford Dictionary defines mobility as "the movement and circulation of people, goods, and information locally or across scales".[2] Scholarly literature on forced migration has expanded this definition by framing mobility within the discourse of voluntary and involuntary movements.[3] Involuntary mobility or forced migration typically arises from environmental disasters, conflicts, or persecutions compelling individuals or communities to relocate. This form of mobility is often characterised by urgency as migrate for safety and survival. The drivers of forced migration are multifaceted, encompassing economic instability, political oppression, and sudden environmental disasters leaving the affected with limited agency and often relocating under dire circumstances without the opportunity to make informed decisions about their movements. On the other hand, voluntary mobility is generally associated with the pursuit of better opportunities, such as employment, education, or improved living conditions. Individuals exercising voluntary mobility have the autonomy to weigh their options and plan their relocation strategically. This form of mobility is influenced by personal aspirations and the desire for enhanced quality of life. However, even in voluntary migration, underlying structural factors such as economic disparity, social networks, and policy frameworks play significant roles in shaping their decision. The dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary mobility reveals a spectrum rather than a binary distinction. Many migration scenarios involve a combination of both voluntary and involuntary elements. For instance, environmental degradation may gradually undermine livelihoods, prompting individuals to move in search of better opportunities before a full-blown crisis necessitates immediate relocation. In such cases,

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mobility is both proactive and reactive blurring the lines between voluntary and forced migration. While mobility has always been a strategy for survival, environmental changes in the Bengal Delta uniquely intersect with rapid urbanisation and border politics. This interplay demands a deeper exploration of how displaced populations reshape the materiality of cities such as Kolkata and Dhaka, challenging the traditional concepts of citizenship and belonging.

The Bengal Delta, encompassing the historical regions of West Bengal in India, and two-thirds of Bangladesh, is characterised by its intricate network of 700 rivers, including the three major rivers: the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. This transboundary geological region covers an area exceeding 1,05,000 square kilometres, with 60 per cent of the delta located in Bangladesh and 40 per cent in West Bengal, India.[4] This region, one of the most densely populated and ecologically sensitive regions in the world, is undergoing severe environmental change—the degradation is multifaceted, involving a combination of natural and anthropogenic factors.[5] Frequent and severe flooding is a significant problem in the Bengal Delta. The region's topography and the confluence of three mighty rivers results in substantial seasonal inundation due to floods causing extensive riverbank erosion, loss of arable lands, displacement of communities, and destruction of infrastructure.[6] Erosion not only affects the physical landscape but also disrupts livelihoods, particularly for farmers and fishing communities who depend on the deltaic aquamarine resources. The intrusion of saline water into freshwater systems is another critical issue. This salinisation is exacerbated by rising sea levels and reduced freshwater flow from upstream due to damming and diversion projects. Increased soil salinity severely impacts agriculture, reduces crop yields negatively impacting food security, drinking water supplies and the overall health of the ecosystem.[7] World Bank has predicted that by 2050 nearly 40 million people would be internally displaced.[8]

South Asian countries except for Afghanistan are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. This region has both produced and received refugees due to a multitude of factors, including conflicts, wars, violence, persecution, social origins, political inclinations, religion, caste, communalism, sub-regionalism, and geophysical events. The potential link between environmental degradation and migration in South Asia has been a subject of academic discourse for many years, reflecting growing concern over the impact of environmental changes on human mobility in the region along with its inability to form a unanimous understanding to address the affected population.[9] In the absence of a formal structure or specific refugee laws, South Asian countries, till date, have relied on *ad hoc* and volatile administrative measures to address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and the measures often result in arbitrary, discriminatory, and preferential treatment.[10] Historically referred to as the Bengal Presidency, the region is home to communities that share similar ethnicities, languages, and lifestyles. The Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta, one of the world's most densely populated Low Elevation Coastal Zones (LECZs) encompasses two major metropolitan areas: Kolkata in West Bengal, India, and Dhaka in Bangladesh, located on its fringes. As the economic centre for both regions, the delta sustains an average

population density of over 1280 people per square kilometre.[11] The Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta primarily situated in the tropical wet climatic zone encompassing three distinct terrestrial ecoregions is divided by the Radcliffe Line as the international border between India and Bangladesh since 1947. Sundarbans with the world's largest mangrove forest is home to a unique array of flora and fauna in its 54 islands that makes the region spans across this border.[12] With shared ethnicity, language and lifestyle, mobility within the delta region has always been a common phenomenon until 1947. After Partition people from East Pakistan crossed the newly formed border and entered the sovereign territory of India. Although population movement was an ongoing process the numbers surged in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The initial waves of post-1947 migration was primarily due to political upheaval caused by Partition. Similarly, the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 triggered another substantial migration wave as political turmoil and violence forced many to seek refuge in India. Recent studies, however, emphasise the role of environmental degradation in shaping migration patterns. The region's susceptibility to flooding, erosion, and salinity intrusion has increasingly forced people to move in search of safer living conditions and viable livelihoods.[13] Moreover, circular migration, characterised by temporary and repetitive movement, has become a critical survival strategy for many, affected by changing climatic condition and environmental disasters.[14] This article explores how environmental degradation, and disasters act as a catalyst to the neo-liberal shifts in urbanisation of the Global South in the 21st Century that challenges traditional concepts of mobility, belonging, and citizenship within and across borders, reshaping urban and rural identities and economies in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) Delta. The Bengal Delta's environmental challenges—flooding, salinity intrusion, erosion and frequent cyclones—serve as a backdrop for examining urbanisation in the Global South and its intricate relationship with borders. As displaced populations move toward metropolitan centres like Kolkata and Dhaka, the dynamics of borders and urban spaces become critical in understanding how environmental migration shapes cities and citizenship.

Urbanisation and the Dynamics of Borders in Contemporary Cities

Urbanisation in the past two decades is characterised by mobility, periphery and in-between spaces. With passing time cities are growing rapidly and incorporating and excluding citizens at the same time. Sociologists and political scientists conceptualise borders and borderlands as politically and socially constructed boundaries, continually contested and negotiated by diverse actors and agents.[15] These boundaries are not static but dynamic, reflecting ongoing political, social, and economic interactions. Historians, on the other hand, interpret borders as products of cumulative historical events, particularly shaped by colonial and postcolonial developments.[16] They view these boundaries as legacies of historical progressions that continue to influence contemporary political and social landscapes. Anthropologists however, define

borders as demarcations that separate distinct social forms, people, and regions. They describe borderlands as regions and sets of practices defined and influenced by these borders, characterised by "conflict, contradiction, and a mix of material and ideational elements".[17] Mobile demography, thus, situated in the periphery are never confined within its borders, in fact, they never stop moving or being moved, being included or excluded based on their positionality within the urban structure.

Kolkata and Dhaka, the two largest metropolitan cities situated at the edges of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta, separated by an international border, have become key destinations for environmentally displaced populations in the region.[18] These cities, historically significant and economically vital, attract those seeking a more secure future amidst growing environmental uncertainties. However, the promise of stability and opportunity in these urban centres is increasingly under scrutiny, given the ongoing challenges of rapid urbanisation, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities.[19] The continuous influx of displaced individuals seeking refuge in the metropolitan areas of Kolkata and Dhaka constantly navigate their marginal status within the existing urban structures. This ongoing migration challenges the cities capacity to integrate these populations, often exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and testing the limits of urban infrastructure and services.[20]

The Sundarbans, a vast deltaic forest region in the southernmost part of West Bengal in India, and Bangladesh is formed by the deposition of silt from the Hooghly, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers along with their numerous distributaries. This forested area covers approximately 10,000 sq.km. of which only about 4,260 sq.km. lie within Indian territory.[21] The Sundarbans have long served as a crucial natural barrier, protecting West Bengal and its capital, Kolkata, from cyclonic surges originating in the Bay of Bengal. This unique mangrove forest supports the livelihoods of over 3.5 million people who depend on its resources for sustenance and economic activities.[22] Kolkata, situated on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River in the lower Ganges Delta, faces significant challenges of overpopulations. Gradual sea-level rise, soil erosion, and salinisation have severely impacted agricultural livelihoods in the deltaic islands. These issues have been exacerbated by violent cyclonic surges over the past decade, leading to increased migration from these islands.[23] For instance, the submergence of Ghoramara island has compelled its residents to move to higher ground on Sagar Island in the southwest Sundarbans, and further west to Kolkata.[24]

Dhaka, on the other side of border, the capital city of Bangladesh, with an estimated population of 15 million people is another city of the migrants from all over the country.[25] The city has always been a destination of the poverty-stricken rural migrants and gradually that drive has associated itself with environmental factors. The country situated in the low deltaic plain suffers from frequent flooding and intrusion of saline water within fresh water leading to massive scarcity of drinking water in the rural areas, forcing people to move out. Approximately 2,000 people migrate to the city daily in search of livelihood significantly bulging the population pressure and causing the city to become

increasingly overcrowded.[26] The continuous influx of individuals seeking better economic opportunities strains the city's infrastructure and resources, exacerbating existing urban challenges. One of the critical issues facing Dhaka is land subsidence, primarily caused by excessive groundwater extraction and the loss of wetlands.[27] Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation have led to the encroachment and destruction of the natural ecosystems. Environmental degradation in Dhaka, therefore, has profound socio-economic implications. The sinking of the city increases the vulnerability of infrastructure, risk of waterlogging during the rainy season which threatens the livelihood of millions of people living in informal settlements. Depletion of groundwater resources poses a significant challenge to water security, impacting both domestic and industrial water supplies.[28] While the nature of urbanisation in the Global South transforms cities into magnets for displaced populations, the intersection of migration with border politics adds layers of complexity. Policies aimed at securitising borders redefine urban spaces, determining who has access to the city and who remains marginalised.

Urban Citizenship and the Border: Identity and Access in a Securitised Landscape

The Radcliffe Line, established in 1947 to Partition India and Pakistan, initially served as the boundary between India and East Pakistan. Following the independence of East Pakistan and its emergence as Bangladesh in 1971, the Radcliffe Line remained the official international border between India and the newly formed Bangladesh. This border holds a substantial strategic and geopolitical significance, influenced by historical, political, and economic factors.[29] The colonial legacy, nation-state policies, global trade, and local politics shapes the trans-local and cross-border interactions along the India-Bangladesh border. The border region, particularly in West Bengal and the Northeastern states of India, is characterised by complex social and economic exchanges that transcend the physical boundary. The proximity of Kolkata, only 75 kilometres from the India-Bangladesh border, make it a significant urban market for labour and goods connected to the border, acting as a magnet for cross-border migration and informal trade.[30] Kolkata's role as an economic hub attracts both legal and undocumented migrants from Bangladesh seeking better economic opportunities. These migrants, often driven by poverty and lack of opportunities in their home country, are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous agents who take advantage of their precarious legal status. The mobility of goods and people across the border highlights the permeability and fluidity of the Radcliffe Line, despite its official status as an international boundary.[31] The Border Security Force (BSF) stationed at the borderlands are tasked with safeguarding the border and regulating cross-border movement. These officials wield significant power in determining who is allowed to cross the border and under what circumstances. Their actions are influenced by broader political and security considerations reflecting the contentious and often contradictory nature of border management.[32] This dynamic nature of the

border region necessitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between local practices and state policies.

The European Union (EU) promotes a human security that aims to balance the interests of its citizens with solidarity towards migrants. This approach emphasises a humane and inclusive treatment of migrants, although the reality often falls short of these ideals.[33] In stark contrast, the Indian's approach to migration from Bangladesh is heavily securitised.[34] The right-wing political structure frames Bangladeshi migrants as a severe threat to national security, fostering a narrative of infiltration by dangerous immigrants. This securitisation is reinforced by mass media, which amplifies the perception of threat. Bangladesh, however, denies allegations of large-scale illegal migration, asserting that its economic development reduces the impetus for emigration.[35] Given the historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Indian state of West Bengal, impoverished Bangladeshis often cross the border seeking better livelihoods. Under these circumstances, it could be argued that, in the absence of universally binding legal framework for managing migration and displacement due to environmental factors—and given the fluctuating political perceptions surrounding border regions—effectively addressing and distinguishing among economic migrants, individuals crossing borders without formal and legal authorisation, and those displaced by environmental forces is profoundly challenging.

In contemporary South Asia, the popular political ideology of the urban structure commodifies the concept of border security transforming it into a marketable product that capitalises the collective fear and hatred of an imagined threat. This commodification process not only exploits societal anxieties but also influences the selection of migrants who are permitted to exercise their "right to the city." This selective inclusion and the criminalisation of the "others" are facilitated through legal mechanisms like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was mandated by the 2003 amendment of the 1955 Citizenship Act and has been implemented in Assam.[36] The politicisation of migration and the construction of an imagined "other" in contemporary South Asian political discourse have redefined the porous India-Bangladesh border. Once a space of fluid mobility has now transformed into a contested periphery of present urban and political imagination reflecting deep-seated anxieties and shifting notions of identity and belonging. This border, historically a zone of cultural and economic exchange, has become a contested space where the rights of individuals are continually negotiated and redefined.[37] This securitisation and commodification of migration have profound implications for urban spaces and the rights of migrants. Urban areas, particularly in northeastern India, have seen an increase in surveillance and policing, which creates an atmosphere of fear and exclusion for undocumented migrants and those perceived as outsiders.[38] Furthermore, the transformation of the border into a fortified periphery reflects broader trends in urban planning and governance, where security concerns overshadow inclusive development and social justice. People living in these peripheral zones must continuously negotiate their right to belong, often without the legal and social protections afforded to recognised citizens.[39]

Migration and Belonging in Contemporary Urbanisation

By the end of the 21st Century, global urbanisation is expected to encompass most of the world, driven primarily by a dramatic increase in population from approximately 1 billion in 1950 to an estimated 6 billion by 2050. During this period, the proportion of the global population residing in urban areas is projected to rise from 30 per cent to 66 per cent.[40] This rapid urbanisation has led to the rise of megacities, defined as metropolitan areas with populations exceeding 10 million. In the 1950s, there were only two megacities: New York and Tokyo. By 2014, the number of megacities had surged to 28, each with populations surpassing 20 million. Projections indicate that by 2030, the number of megacities will increase to 41, with the top seven located in Asia, highlighting the region's rapid urban growth.[41] The first significant wave of urban migration in the modern era began in the 18th Century coinciding with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. During this period a substantial number of rural inhabitants migrated to urban centres in search of employment opportunities created by burgeoning industrial economies. This rural-to-urban migration was driven by the promise of better livelihoods and the mechanisation of agriculture, which reduced the need for rural labour.[42] The second wave of urban migration occurred during the first half of the 20th Century. This period was marked by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, particularly in Europe and North America. The aftermath of World War II further accelerated urban growth as economies rebuilt and expanded. Urban areas offered better living standards, healthcare, and educational opportunities, drawing even more people from rural regions.[43] A century later, we are experiencing what can be considered the third and most significant wave of urban migration. The global urban population has surged with more people living in urban areas than ever before. This contemporary wave of urbanisation is driven by several factors especially economic opportunities as urban areas continue to offer more diverse and higher paying job opportunities compared to rural areas. The growth of service industries, technology, and knowledge-based economies in cities attract rural populations.[44] Access to better healthcare, education, and infrastructure in urban areas improving the quality of life makes cities more attractive places to live.[45] Advances in transportation and communication technologies have made it easier for people to move to and within urban areas facilitating the flow of migrants globally.[46] Environmental degradation in rural areas have acted as a push factor for the populations towards cities where they perceive greater safety and stability.[47] The current wave of urban migration has significant effect on urban planning, infrastructure, and sustainability as urban areas need to manage the challenges of overpopulation leading to housing shortages, traffic congestion, pollution, and increased demand for resources and services. The rapid growth of megacities highlights this need for sustainable urban development strategies.[48]

The economic performance of a city is a critical determinant of its attractiveness. However, the ideal model of a well-functioning city often based

on examples from the Global North does not fully capture the complexities and challenges faced by the cities in the Global South. Cities in the Global North, such as those in Europe and North America, typically benefit from well-developed infrastructure, effective governance, and robust economies where cities are often planned with a focus on sustainability and quality of life, resulting in a relatively balanced urban development.[49] Cities in the Global South, however, face distinct challenges. Rapid urbanisation in these regions often outpaces infrastructure development, leading to issues such as inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and limited access to essential services. Informal settlements or slums are a common feature, in this region, highlighting the disparity in living conditions.[50] Additionally, governance structures in these cities might struggle with corruption and inefficiency, further exacerbating urban challenges.[51] Scholarships on southern urbanism that tend to challenge theories developed from the experiences of the Global North, view the process of urbanisation as "multiple scales of peripheralization"[52] where the urban is built with heterogeneous and interconnected networks of multiple zones of centre and the edge. The materialist approach towards understanding the ontology of southern cities includes an interconnection with the political economy.[53] Therefore, perceiving two delta cities of the Global South, Kolkata and Dhaka, at the global urban turn, becomes paramount, specifically because of their unique geographical location.

Building on Harvey's interpretation of Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city" that addresses urban inequality through inclusive and democratic urban governance, this paper argues that the 21st Century southern cities and the phenomenon of rapid urbanisation needs to be analysed considering the massive influx of environmentally displaced populations.[54] While Lefebvre's principle of universal accessibility and equity in urban spaces is a foundational ideal, it faces significant challenges in practice due to the differential inclusion and treatment of individuals based on their marginalised status based on factors such as socio-economic background, race, gender, ethnicity, and migration status, which influence how different groups are accepted and integrated into urban environments. The 21st Century metropolis of the Global South is characterised by a transformation of urban structures that disrupt traditional neighbourhoods and community dynamics. This transformation often manifests in the form of gated communities that prioritise private leisure facilities under the pretext of enhanced security. Surrounding these enclaves are slums and informal settlements whose inhabitants are employed in service roles that sustain the gated communities. This phenomenon is a byproduct of the neoliberal economy, which, as David Harvey articulates, channels surplus capital into urban restructuring as part of the global political economy.[55] Various gated communities, be it residential or special economic zones, leisure parks, etc., symbolise a significant shift in urban planning and social dynamics. These enclaves create a stark divide between the affluent residents within the gates and the marginalised populations in the surrounding informal settlements. The privatisation of public spaces and services within these gated communities exacerbates social inequalities and limits the right to the city for those outside the gates.[56] The concept of security justifies the existence of gated communities

designed to protect wealth and privilege rather than address broader social safety concerns. As a result, the urban landscape becomes fragmented, with wealthier residents enjoying exclusive amenities while poorer populations remain confined to underdeveloped areas with limited access to essential services.[57]

Within a neoliberal economic framework, urban spaces are strategically restructured as surplus capital is allocated to redevelopment projects that align with broader global political and economic objectives. Such projects commonly emphasise the beautification and reorganisation of urban areas to attract investment and improve visual appeal. This often occurs at the cost of displacing existing communities.[58] Under neoliberal policies, urban restructuring primarily focuses on capital accumulation and market-oriented development resulting in the displacement of informal settlements and the marginalisation of their residents. Despite being relocated, these communities continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the urban economy, as the informal workforce underpins numerous service sectors that keep the city's economy operational.[59] Marginalisation plays a critical role in the process of securitisation. From a gendered perspective, women often emerge as marginalised groups facing compounded vulnerabilities throughout the migration process. Examining southern urbanisation from these perspectives reveals how women simultaneously navigate differing challenges while asserting agency within urban spaces.

Invisible Labour, Visible Divides: Gendered Perspectives on Urban Migration and Citizenship

With the advent of globalisation and rise in international trade and capital flows has significantly increased the pace of human mobility within and across borders. As cities expand to accommodate displaced populations, they not only reshape rural-urban migration patterns but also reveal distinct gendered dynamics in how and why individuals migrate. It is estimated that at least 210 million people are migrating globally, with approximately 105 million of them being women.[60] While urbanisation opens pathways for economic participation, the urban experience is profoundly shaped by gender, with female migrants navigating additional layers of vulnerability and opportunity in city spaces. Women's migration pattern is driven by a variety of factors, including economic opportunities, the feminisation of poverty, persistent gender inequality challenging the traditional notion that migration is predominantly a male endeavour. However, there are several factors influencing female migration, among those economic opportunities deserve special mention, where women migrate in search of better employment opportunities.[61] There is a common misconception thar men are primary migrants while women stay at home or migrate only for marriage. However, the reality is more complex. Women actively engage in labour migration, often becoming primary breadwinners for their families. This migration is frequently overlooked due to traditional andro-centric biases in migration studies.[62] The adaptation paradigm for

environmental migration has traditionally focused on male perspectives, often neglecting the experiences and strategies adopted by women. Women's migration for environmental reasons is shaped by their roles in households and communities, where they often manage resources and adapt to environmental changes differently from men. For example, traditionally, migration studies focusing on the Sundarbans delta have emphasised that men constitute the majority of migrants moving to Kolkata, driven by the search for better economic opportunities.[63] However, recent studies reveal a significant shift in the number of women migrating from the villages of Sundarbans to Kolkata. This emerging trend highlights the changing dynamics of migration and the growing role of women as active economic participants in urban settings.[64] Migration of women to urban areas represents more than just a demographic shift; it marks a significant transformation in social and gender norms.

The export-oriented economic model of the Global South, largely controlled by interests of the Global North, has reshaped the traditional structures of workplace. The shift towards export-oriented economies has given rise to a new urban imagination where traditional image of labourers has changed, along with new labour laws which are often relaxed to attract foreign investment. The export manufacturing garment industry in Bangladesh, the backbone of the country's economy, has become a significant workplace for a massive influx of women migrating from rural areas to seek employment in Dhaka's factories.[65] The labour force in these factories predominantly comprises women from rural Bangladesh, who live in informal settlements or slums on the city's periphery. The sight of large groups of women of various ages walking together has become quite common, earning them the moniker "garment women".[66] This public visibility challenges the traditional patriarchal structure of the country which strictly adheres to gendered roles of women outside the public view. However, this neoliberal urban restructuring has introduced new forms of exploitation and inequality. Women, now integral to the economy, are often forced to abandon their education early to join factories or receive only enough education to qualify for factory work. Female labourers are paid less than their male counterparts and face discrimination in promotions. Despite these challenges, women are banding together, forming labour unions to give their public visibility a legal form.[67] Therefore, it could be argued that the 21st Century urban imagination of the South has become more tolerant, shedding some archaic images and practices as long as it doesn't directly challenge the status quo. The neoliberal ideology underpinning this economic structure prioritises profit over human well-being. It often disregards the exploitative conditions these women endure such as low wages, poor working environments, and lack of job security. Despite the exploitation, these women are essential to the profitability of the garment industry and, by extension, the global economy.

The 21st Century urban landscape increasingly depends on a service-based economy, where citizens are viewed as consumers. This shift driven by global economic restructuring have made urban households' part of the white-collar workforce. Consequently, these households require professional domestic services to manage daily life efficiently creating a booming market for

domestic labour. Domestic work often deemed "low-skilled" is essential for the smooth functioning of the urban economy. However, it is frequently undervalued and lacks formal recognition. The informal nature of this sector means that domestic workers are excluded from labour laws and protections resulting in job insecurity, low wages, and exploitation. Despite these conditions, domestic labour is integral to urban society enabling white-collar professionals to perform their roles effectively. A notable demographic contribution to this sector in Kolkata includes women migrating from the villages of the Sundarbans delta, the borderlands and beyond. These women take up domestic work in the city, which, despite its informal structure, offers them economic opportunities. Despite the vital contributions of female migrants to urban economies, their needs are often overlooked in urban governance, perpetuating cycles of gendered inequality. The absence of legal protections and formal recognition leads to systemic issues such as wage discrimination and poor working conditions. However, the narrative of these female migrants shifts away from its victimisation perspectives.[68] These women demonstrate significant agency in their roles. They negotiate wages, working conditions and job responsibilities often leveraging their skills and experiences to improve their circumstances. This shift from viewing them solely as victims to recognising their negotiating prowess highlights their resilience and adaptability. Their ability to navigate the informal economy and carve out a space for themselves within the urban landscape is a testament to their strength and determination which ultimately earns them a *right to the city*. The experiences of female migrants underline the broader themes of resilience and exclusion in urban spaces. By understanding their struggles and contributions, we gain a nuanced view of how southern urbanization intersects with gender, migration, and environmental challenges—setting the stage for reimagining inclusive cities.

Conclusion

The politicisation of migration and the neoliberal restructuring of urban spaces reveal a complex, multi-layered dynamic in the India-Bangladesh border regions, particularly within the metropolitan hubs of Kolkata and Dhaka. The historical India-Bangladesh border, once a fluid zone of cultural and economic interchange, now embodies a contentious space where migration policies, security concerns, and economic imperatives intersect. The shift from mobility to restriction within the urban imagination reflects broader anxieties about national identity and sovereignty, reshaping the border into a marginalised periphery. In the context of neoliberal urban restructuring, cities of the Global South are strategically moulded to attract global capital through redevelopment and beautification projects. These transformations often displace the marginalised communities, intensifying socio-economic divides. Despite their marginalisation, displaced communities and migrants continue to support the urban economy, especially in sectors dependent on informal labour, thus highlighting the contradiction between the push for capital driven urban growth

and the reliance on a workforce that is often excluded from formal recognition and protections.

Within this paradigm, migration of women from environmentally vulnerable regions, such as the Sundarbans delta, underscores a critical but frequently overlooked dimension of migration studies. These women, driven by a combination of environmental and economic pressures, defy the traditional assumption of migration as a male-dominated phenomenon. As active participants in labour migration, they challenge andro-centric biases by becoming primary economic providers and adapting uniquely to environmental challenges. Far from being passive victims, these women exhibit remarkable resilience and agency, negotiating work conditions and creating livelihoods within the informal economy. Their capacity to assert agency and carve out space for themselves within the city represents not just a survival strategy but a sense of belonging and right to the city that is often denied to them within formalized frameworks. The export-oriented economic model in the Global South, driven largely by interests from the Global North, has reshaped traditional workplace structures and labour dynamics, especially in Bangladesh's garment industry. The transformation from rural life to urban factory work in Dhaka has created a new urban identity for female labourers, symbolised by the "garment women" who navigate the city in groups, publicly challenging longstanding patriarchal norms that traditionally relegated women to private spaces. Their visibility on the urban landscape not only signals a shift in gender roles but also highlights their critical role in sustaining the country's economy.

However, while this model has opened avenues for women's economic participation, it has also entrenched new forms of inequality and exploitation. Amendments in labour laws to attract foreign investment often fail to protect the rights of these women, who face unequal wages, limited advancement opportunities, and the need to enter the workforce at a young age with minimal education. These conditions underscore the complex duality of neoliberal policies in the Global South: while it empowers women to some extent by bringing them into the labour force, it simultaneously enforces structural inequities that limit their socio-economic mobility. In response, many of these women are organizing themselves into labour unions, transforming their public visibility into a collective voice for rights and recognition. By viewing southern urbanisation through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that gender plays a pivotal role in shaping the urban experience, particularly for environmentally displaced migrants. In recognising the agency and contributions of these marginalised populations, particularly female migrants, we gain a more nuanced understanding of urban spaces as sites of both opportunity and exclusion. Their stories illuminate the need for more inclusive urban policies that not only accommodate the complexities of environmental and economic migration but also affirm the rights of all residents to shape and inhabit the city. In doing so, we move closer to envisioning cities not as exclusive enclaves but as truly dynamic spaces where diverse voices and experiences collectively contribute to urban resilience and growth.

Notes

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