

GENERATION NGO
Youth and Development in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is about the role of NGOs in the lives of subaltern youth in urban India. It is an ethnography on the everyday lives of young people between the ages of 18-32 from impoverished 'red-light areas' in Kolkata who grew up participating in NGO youth programmes. This thesis investigates how NGOs partake in a process of subject making, and how young people interact with and improvise NGO subjectification to better their own lives in a world-class aspiring city.

The youth featuring in this dissertation spent their childhood and adolescence either residing in NGO shelter homes or regularly attending NGO drop-in-centres in their neighborhoods. They came of age attending NGO education programmes, job skills trainings, and human rights workshops. Grounded in 13 months of fieldwork, my ethnography tells the stories of young people's lives after their participation in NGO programmes, amidst their everyday worlds of work, consumption, and politics.

My examination of the young people's post-NGO daily lives in Kolkata makes three key contributions. First, it reveals the contradictions of NGO development. It examines the ambivalent effects of NGOs on subaltern young people's gender and class identity, as well as their social and political subjectivity and mobility. Second, it illustrates the plural forms of agency practiced by urban marginalised youth. My thesis demonstrates how young people are not just passive recipients of NGO development opportunities, but active negotiators of development as they interact with NGOs and navigate its attempts to regulate youth. Third, it illustrates how NGOs and post-NGO youth both foster and trouble class divisions in the world-class aspiring city of Kolkata. I illustrate how young people develop cultural dispositions that straddle across subaltern and middle classes and unsettle class boundaries but not inequalities.

This dissertation argues for ethnographic attention to the everyday lives of post-NGO youth as an analytical lens to theorise NGOisation and global city processes in contemporary India and the greater global South.

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For my young friends in Kolkata,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
Introduction.....	9
1.1 Introduction	9
1.2 NGOs.....	12
1.3 Kolkata and the Red-light Area	16
1.4 Young People in Development.....	19
1.5 Everyday life, Post-NGO	21
1.6 Dissertation Outline	23
CHAPTER TWO	27
Literature Review: NGOs, Youth, and the World-Class City	27
2.1 Introduction	27
2.2 NGO Development and Subject-Making	27
2.3 Youth: Transitions and Agency	37
2.4 The World-Class City and Subalternity.....	44
2.5 Conclusion	53
CHAPTER THREE.....	55
Methodology: From Practitioner to Researcher.....	55
3.1 Introduction	55
3.2 Research Design: Why Ethnography?.....	57
3.3 Recruitment and Methods.....	60
3.4 Positionality and Reflexivity	74
3.5 Field notes, Analysis, and Writing.....	79
3.6 Conclusion	81
CHAPTER FOUR	83
Locating NGO Development in Kolkata's Red-light Areas	83
4.1 Introduction	83
4.2 Development Interventions and Assemblages	85
4.3 Kalighat Red-light Area: NGO Subjectification and Habitus Making	94
4.4 Conclusion	103
CHAPTER FIVE.....	105
In Search of Respectable Work.....	105
5.1 Introduction	105
5.2 Sex Work Economies and 'Mainstream' Economies.....	109
5.3 The Poverty of Domestic Work.....	111
5.4 The Allure of NGO Work.....	118
5.5 The Occupation of Marriage.....	127
5.6 "New" Consumer Service Economies	134
5.7 Opportunities in the Sex Work Economy	139
5.8 Conclusion	144

CHAPTER SIX.....	147
Being NGO Girls: Class, Consumption, and Mobility in the City	147
6.1 Introduction	147
6.2 Urban Indian Femininities	151
6.3 Being an NGO Meye/Girl.....	155
6.4 World-Class City Cultures and Spaces	163
6.5 Bounded Mobility.....	173
6.6 Conclusion	176
CHAPTER SEVEN	179
NGOising Politics? Everyday Injustices and Politics of Making Change	179
7.1 Introduction	179
7.2 Political Traditions in Young People's Lives: Social Movements, Parties, and NGOs	183
7.3 The Politics of Protibad	193
7.4 Politics of Resourcefulness	201
7.5 Conclusion	210
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	213
Conclusion	213
8.1 Introduction	213
8.2 NGOs and NGOisation.....	214
8.3 World Class City Making and New Subalternity	222
8.4 Future Directions of Research.....	228
APPENDIX I	231
APPENDIX II	234
REFERENCES	236

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1:** A lane in red-light area in Kalighat (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Figure 2:** Boro Gali (The Big Lane) in Kalighat (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Figure 3:** An arts education session at an NGO drop-in-centre in a city red-light area (2007)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Figure 4:** Youth NGO worker facilitates a workshop for children at a drop-in-centre (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Figure 5:** First day, first show celebration at Navina cinema hall (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Figure 6:** A large poster featuring Trinamool Congress Party leader Mamata Banerjee in Kalighat (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani
- Photo 7:** A “Protect the Girl Child” poster at an NGO campaign event (2012)
Photo: Sahar Romani

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It is 2003. Ten kilometres away from central Kolkata, there is an NGO (non-governmental organisation) operated shelter home for children from red-light areas. Priya lives here. She is 9 years old. A few months ago, there was a police raid in her neighbourhood against sex workers. Priya was taken into government custody and then brought to this NGO shelter home. Neela, 16, also lives here. Two years ago, her mother brought her here so she could access a better education. Neela is learning how to tailor and design clothes as she prepares to take a government school entrance exam. Keya, 18, has been living under NGO care for several years now. She was one of the first girls to move into the shelter home at the mere age of 8. Keya is a top student and knows a great deal about women's rights. I am 23. I just graduated from college and arrived from the United States for my first job with a budding international NGO. As a part of my job, I am going to live at this shelter home for several months. I will be teaching Neela, Priya, and Keya, among many others, English. Living in this NGO shelter home, promises to effect change in each of our lives. This dissertation is about that change.

1.1 Introduction

Between the years of finishing college and starting graduate school, I was eager to do something with the “gap years” of my life. In Ananya Roy's words, I was a ‘millennial’ – a generation of world citizens eager to solve poverty, oppression, and inequality (2011b: 19). I was also diaspora's child, longing to return to my parents' homeland. When a former professor of mine told me about a position in a newly forming anti-trafficking organisation with field sites in South Asia, I was interviewed for the job, got it, and found myself with a one-way ticket to India. My job description included travelling to Kolkata, building relationships with local NGOs, and learning about anti-trafficking programmes on the ground. For several months in 2003, I lived at an NGO shelter home, spending my days teaching spoken English to group of young women from red-light areas. After class, in the afternoons, I hung out with these young teens in between their routines of sari-making trainings and informal education classes until evenings of leisure

and conversation. After my job at the shelter home, I applied for funding to start up a creative writing programme for marginalised youth in the city, including young people living in red-light areas, railway platforms, and slums. Between 2004 and 2006, I worked as an educator in Kolkata with underprivileged young people not much younger than me; young people like girls in the shelter home, who eventually became friends. Near the end of 2006, my funding dwindled and I reluctantly packed my bags and returned home to the United States. My life after my participation with NGOs looked promising. There were prospects of graduate school, invitations to activist panels, and praises among diasporic uncles and aunties. But what about my friends on the other side of development, the beneficiaries or ‘subjects of development?’ What about Priya, Neela, and Keya? What became of them post-NGO?

Development policy across the world is increasingly concerned with young people, especially ‘at-risk’ and ‘underprivileged’ young people. In the 1990s, children emerged on the global agenda for development. By the mid-2000s, youth also appeared as a category for development intervention. The concern with young people – both children and youth – is also linked to mounting anxiety over rapid and disproportionate population rise of young people in the world. This ‘youth bulge,’ sometimes feared as a demographic disaster, is also perceived as a ‘window of opportunity’ for social and economic growth (World Development Report 2007, Kamat 2007). Increasingly, NGOs are proliferating with programmes for children and young people attempting to harness the potential of marginalised young people, particularly in the global South. This is especially true in India, a country argued to be the capital of NGOs (Kudva 2005: 235) as well as home to a rapidly growing youth population. Over the last decades, NGOs in India are booming with programmes for children and youth, with special attention to the ‘underprivileged’ and ‘at-risk’ children, usually categorised as railway children, homeless youth, street kids, and red-light area children. NGOs operating on the ground promise to protect and develop at-risk childhoods and youth for the hope of producing better youth futures. What are the effects of NGOs on young people’s lives? For some subaltern youth, NGOs are homes and

families; they serve as shelters, schools, kitchens, and community. Yet, what happens to young people once they transition out of NGOs? How do their lives and futures change, and what does this tell us about NGO development, youth agency, and metropolitan India?

This dissertation is concerned with the lives of subaltern young people who came of age with NGOs. It examines the everyday lives of young people between the ages of 18-32 from the red-light areas of Kolkata, India who grew up as targets and subjects of NGO development. Some of these young people came of age in NGO shelter homes. Others spent their childhood and adolescence in their neighbourhood regularly attending NGO drop-in-centres for vocational training, school support, and political education. In this dissertation, I look at these young people's lives, after their participation in NGOs, to tell an ethnographically grounded story about NGO development, youth agency, and city life in Kolkata through the everyday experiences of youth.

This study is about NGOs. It draws upon particular NGOs, not to evaluate them, but to illustrate through case studies, the possible ways NGOs serve as 'simultaneous promise, threat, and resource' in the lives of urban youth (Simone 2010: 3). This dissertation is also about city life in Kolkata. It is about how the city generates desires but also regulates class and gender across space. Above all though, this dissertation is about subaltern young people. It is about their interaction with, and sometimes their transgression of, NGOs and the city. It is about their aspirations for respect, pleasure, security, and mobility, as well as their resistance and resourcefulness in the face of opportunities and constraints in the city.

I have three key aims in this dissertation. First, I seek to analyse NGO development through the under-represented perspective of development's 'subjects', which in my case, are young people. Taking cue from development scholars, such as James Ferguson (1994) and Aradhana Sharma (2008) my purpose is to examine both the intended, unintended, and contradictory effects of NGOs on the subjectivities, practices, and mobilities of young people in the city. My second goal is to foreground young people's agency in light of NGO processes of

development as well as broader social relations of class, gender, and locality. Young people are not passive recipients of NGO programmes, services, and discourses, but as I will go on to demonstrate, they are active mobilisers of NGO resources as well as other cultures, institutions, and processes. My final aim is to examine how NGOs and subaltern youth formation both inflect and are inflected by city life in metropolitan India, especially as cities such as Kolkata, aspire towards world-class standards. In this opening chapter, I introduce and elaborate upon cornerstone empirical concepts central to this research, including NGOs, red-light areas, youth, as well as, the everyday. I conclude with an outline of the forthcoming chapters in this dissertation.

1.2 NGOs

The term “NGO” was first used by the United Nations in 1945. The UN broadly defined NGOs as private bodies independent from government control, ‘not seeking public office, not operating for profit, and not a criminal organisation’ (Lang 2012: 10). This UN definition has allowed for a range of entities from churches to charities, social service agencies to social justice organisations to identify as NGOs. Broadly, NGOs can be defined as civil society organisations working on a range of social, political, and environmental issues that typically share common ground through their non-profit status, commitment to an ambiguous notion of public welfare, and support of and by plural political projects across local, regional, national, and global scales (Kamat, 2003a).

Since the 1990s, regions across the world have witnessed what Sonia Alvarez (1999, 2009) famously called the ‘NGO Boom’: the proliferation of NGOs as well as the sanctioning of NGO forms and practices as essential to civil society. Across the global South and global North, NGOs (or non-profit organisations as they are called in North America) are normalised as institutions driving development and change (Bernal and Grewal 2014). The normalisation of NGOs in the civil society landscape is relatively new. In historicising NGOs, Diane Mitlin et al

(2007) identify four general phases in the global development of NGOs. The first phase entails a long history leading up to the mid-1960s, consisting of philanthropic and advocacy agencies and organisations responding to the needs of marginalised and under-resourced communities. The second phase, emerging in the 1960s-1970s, marks the peak of ‘alternative development’, that is, civil society initiatives for change that advocated alternatives to both capitalism and state-led development. In most cases, these alternative formations and networks for development were embedded in larger political struggles and people’s movements against state failure and capitalist inequality. The third phase starting in the 1980s – termed as the ‘NGO decade’ (Mitlin et al. 2007) – coincided with structural adjustment programmes across the global South, weakened states, and redirection of resources to civil society leading to a professionalisation and arguable depoliticisation of development and social change work. The subsequent and current phase can be described as a deepening of the democratisation of NGOs through discourses of community participation and empowerment. Under this phase, structural alternative agendas are increasingly muted and technical and individualised agendas for change are widespread. Furthermore, poor individuals, communities, and nations are posited as both the problem and the solution to under-development (Kamat 2003b).

A comparable timeline emerges in the context of India. After independence in 1947, Nehru’s five-year plans prioritised building the young post-colonial nation into a strong state with a robust economy through industrialisation that would ostensibly create conditions for peace and equality (Kamat 2002). While the period of post-independence (1948-50) utilised the muse of nationalism to summon people’s faith in state-led development, confidence in statist development did not last long. Over the years, statist, top-down development planning revealed little change and progress for most of the country, leading to calls for alternative development, which came to flourish in the 1960s. Alternative development – development emerging in critique, resistance, or supplementation to state-led development – has a rich history in India even prior to independence. Modern, local voluntary organisations appeared in the colonial

period from the mid-late 1820s, mostly led by Hindu bourgeoisie in Kolkata, then known as Calcutta, that called upon the state for social and religious reform on issues of child marriage, polygamy, and women's education (Sen 1999: 331). In addition, developmentalist-voluntary movements also gained momentum at the turn of the century through Gandhi's advocacy for voluntarism for the freedom struggle and rural development. Gandhi believed voluntary organisation was the sole path to development and social change. According to some, Gandhi's ashrams can be seen as predecessors of contemporary NGOs (Sen 1999).

In the 1960s-70s, astonishing poverty, rising illiteracy rates, and widening inequality between the rich and the poor, catalysed diverse independent movements and people's organisations working for structural social change. The anti-state Naxalite movement, for instance, organised for agrarian land reform, and the Gandhian Socialist Sarvodaya movement called for capital redistribution. Furthermore, unemployed and frustrated middle-class and lower middle-class people mobilised with the poor for social and economic transformation. Former officials, disillusioned by 'modernisation' projects, all started creating their own 'social action groups,' some outside the state and some in collaboration with the state to make progressive change (Sen 1999: 337). However, the 1960s-70s also mark a time of repressive state regime in India under then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's leadership, when surveillance on civil society heightened to extreme degrees. For instance, in 1976, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) was enacted, ordering all foreign funding to be cleared by the Home Ministry, ultimately granting state control over community driven development (Kamat 2002). Further during the Indira Gandhi-led Emergency of 1976-77, many social and political activists went underground leading to the dissipation of social action groups. After Indira Gandhi's authoritarian rule, the first non-Congress party, the Janata Party, rose to power leading to the rise of non-political party associations (Sharma 1992, Kothari 1994) that were either 'alternative-development oriented' or 'struggle oriented.'

In the 1980s-1990s, voluntary organisations and non-political party associations flourished across India. While social action groups continued to exist, new forms of organisations also came into formation by professionals, retired revolutionaries, and bureaucrats (Sen 1999). Further, with the opening economic markets from the late 1980s, the retreat of the state in social services, and the flow of foreign aid, civil society organisations, by then recognised as NGOs, also witnessed an unprecedented professionalisation, creating not just a third sector but also a career sector.

Since the late 1990s leading and into the current moment, NGOs in India represent a variety of entities, formations, interests, and political agendas. Several new terms and acronyms have emerged to further differentiate between NGOs based on scale and affiliation, such as CBOs (community based organisation), GONGOs (government organised NGOs), BINGOs (business and industry NGOs), PINGO (public interest NGOs), and INGOs (international NGOs). Furthermore, scholars have often classified NGOs to differentiate between their political motivations and practices. Swapan Garrain (1994) catalogues the NGO sector into three spheres: corporate NGOs, that are heavily sponsored by the government and promote capitalism development; development-oriented NGOs that rely on government and further the state's interests; and third, social justice NGOs, which are often in conflict with the state and the elite and organise for the rights of the subaltern (Garrain 1994: 344, Kamat, 2002: 13). Janet Townsend et al. (2004) distinguish between compliant NGOs and alternative NGOs, the former shaped by dominant development agendas the latter questioning prevailing agendas. Sangeeta Kamat (2002) on the other hand categorises NGOs as 1) welfare service charitable organisations often set up by religious and secular civic bodies offering tangible services such as housing and child care, and 2) community development organisations, which implement social and economic and sometimes even political development programs. While these respective classifications are useful categories to unravel the universe of NGOs, as Kamat notes, categories and modified acronyms can be misleading. On the ground, NGOs are often dynamic, changing their form,

affiliations, and associations with states and international civil society as they respond to constraints, possibilities, and communities. The NGOs discussed in this dissertation, which I will describe in greater detail in Chapter Three, range from small community-based organisations with national funders to medium sized NGOs with government and international funders. All featured organisations are based and operating in the city of Kolkata.

1.3 Kolkata and the Red-light Area

Kolkata is the capital of the state of West Bengal, which borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. As the third largest metropolitan city in India, it has an urban metropolitan population of nearly 14 million (Census 2011). Kolkata has an astounding population density of 38,000 per square kilometre, with over 78 per cent of the city's population living in slums (Gooptu 2007). Furthermore, 70 per cent of the Kolkata's population is classed as living below the poverty line (2007). As a city with a long history of social movements, labour unions, and an alliance of leftist parties known as the "Left Front" in government, Kolkata is generally less recognised for NGOs (Roy 2007). The NGO sector in Kolkata did not witness the emergence of powerful NGOs as other metropolitan cities in India, such as Mumbai with the presence of SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres), or SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) in Ahmedabad (Roy 2007). However, there remains one zone of exception where NGOs socially and spatially dominate in the city: red-light areas.

Red-light areas in Kolkata are not just known for sex work economies, they are also known for economies of foreign aid, activism, and NGOs. Red-light districts in Kolkata are home to an exceptional geographic concentration of NGOs – from international groups to small grassroots community organisations. I chose to conduct research with NGOs in Kolkata's red-light areas because of their exceptional geographic concentration within particular neighbourhoods and communities. The social and spatial concentration of NGOs in Kolkata's

red-light areas can serve as a revealing site to examine the incongruent effects of NGOs on the social and spatial lives of subaltern communities in metropolitan cities

‘Red-light areas’ or ‘red-light districts’ are commonly used to describe localities with a sex work economy or where sex work is common. These localities are typically home to multiple economies, residents, and sub-cultures, yet the plurality of the locality is overshadowed by the stigma associated with sex work, as a result, effacing the multiple subjectivities and cultures of these neighbourhoods. In the words of Phil Hubbard (1998), red-light areas are both ‘real and imagined sites,’ where the moral, sexual, and social Other is constructed (61). Red-light areas in urban India are commonly depicted and popularised as spaces of danger, violence, disease, and exploitation. Indian cinema, such as internationally renowned films like *Salaam Bombay!* (1989) to Bollywood films such as *Chameli* (2003) frequently represent red-light areas as spaces of victimhood and moral decline. International journalists regularly cite India’s red-light areas, specifically in Kolkata, as hubs of slavery that demand raid and rescue (Kristof 2011). ‘Socially conscious’ documentaries such as *Born in Brothels* (2005), again set in Kolkata, also contribute in popularising monochrome depictions of red-light areas as spaces of plight, danger, and hopelessness, especially for children (Sircar and Dutta 2011, Shah 2013).

It is difficult to say how many ‘red-light areas’ there are in Kolkata. Early scholars cite 11 localities as ‘red-light areas’ – spaces where several sex workers reside and where sex work economies operate through brothels, individual solicitation, and other permutations of sexual commerce (Joardar 1984). A recent public policy study cited 16 different red-light areas throughout the city. A definitive number though is difficult to determine. While some localities are marked and recognised as historical ‘red-light districts’ such as Sonagachi, the largest red-light area in Kolkata featured in numerous scholarly studies (Jana et al. 2002, Ghosh 2005, Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay 2007, Shah 2013), films, and news stories, other spaces of sexual commerce are ephemeral, dynamic, and partially legible. For instance, several unmarked street corners, highway intersections, and hotel lobbies of the city transform into sites of sexual solicitation for

a few hours of the day or night, then return to their normative status of 'legitimate' transactions. Red-light areas therefore emerge on a spectrum of visibility both in terms of solicitation and stigma, as well as development activity. In this dissertation, the red-light areas I discuss are localities that are recognised as spatially bounded districts of sex work, especially in the registers of NGO development.

Since the 1980s, with the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS and the rise of sex trafficking, Kolkata's red-light areas began to feature prominently in the developmental flows of international and national development funding (Kotiswaran 2011a). The city's geographic location as an eastern port in a state with porous land borders shared with Nepal and Bangladesh made Kolkata a primary site of rescue, rehabilitation, and prevention in international flows of anti-trafficking funding. This intervention for anti-trafficking efforts significantly fuelled the presence of NGOs in the city's red-light areas. Scholarly literature on NGOs in Kolkata frequently focus on anti-trafficking (Sleightholme and Sinha 1996), but also on the mobilisation of sex worker rights (Shah 2006, Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay 2007), and the prevention of the HIV/AIDS (Cornish and Ghosh 2007), which I will elaborate upon in greater detail in Chapter Four.

My dissertation features five different red-light areas in localities of Khidderpore, Sonagachi, Tollygunge, Bow Bazaar and Kalighat. The red-light districts in these localities are generally embedded and surrounded by slums and under-resourced living conditions. Over half of the youth participants in my study have origins within one red-light area in the locality Kalighat, which as a result, features as my primary field site. Located in South Kolkata, the red-light area in Kalighat is considered to be second largest in Kolkata. The centre of Kalighat red-light area is called *Boro Gali* (the big lane), a 100-meter residential and commercial alley strewn with eight marked and unmarked NGO drop-in-centres and two government funded, but NGO managed, Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) Centres. Like Kalighat, other red-light areas in the localities of Bow Bazaar, Tollygunge, Sonagachi, and Khidderpore are also vibrant

homes to NGOs. Several of the NGOs target their services to women, specifically sex workers, who work or reside in the area. Along with women and sex workers, another equally important target community for these organisations includes children and youth.

1.4 Young People in Development

My ethnography centres on young people between the ages of 18-32, who I also refer to as youth (*jubok/jawan*). In spite of my general categorisation of “youth,” like many geographers and youth scholars, I recognise categories of child, youth, and adult are often arbitrary and rooted in hegemonic, western notions of life transitions and codified through legal definitions (Aitken 2001b). Official youth development agendas abide by legal categories of children (0-18), adults (18+), and more flexible categories of youth (14-24). Interestingly though, in everyday NGO parlance and practice, the categories of child (*bachcha*) and youth (*jubok/jawan*) are often used interchangeably, in spite of legal definitions. For instance, it was common for a 20-year-old young person to sometimes refer to themselves or to be referred to by NGO staff members as child (*bachcha*). In the everyday practice of NGO development work, the distinction between children and youth is fluid instead of fixed. At the same time, legal categories of children and youth are regularly mobilised by NGOs at an official level in order to leverage global flows of development funding.

Children have prominently featured on the agendas of NGO development. In the late 1970s, tropes of the “global child” and the “world’s children” emerged in development discourse of UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund), the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and the WHO (World Health Organisation) as well as other prominent international development organisations. (Aitken 2001b: 11). The United Nations, for example, declared 1979 as ‘International Year of the Child’ and collectively these organisations produced and circulated images of the iconic third world child in need of intervention, protection and development (James and Prout 1997, Ansell 2004). Narratives of childhoods at-risk through

tropes of child labour, child trafficking, child begging, and child prostitution emerged in the public imagination mobilising international development. In India, categories of at-risk and underprivileged children have been mobilised by NGOs to obtain funding and offer services to several children under difficult circumstances, including ‘street children,’ railway children,’ ‘child labourers,’ and most popularly in Kolkata, ‘red-light area children’ or ‘children of sex workers.’

Unlike children, youth were less prominent in discourses and agendas of international development until the beginning of the 21st century. Youth are often portrayed through conflicting representations. They are seen either as trouble makers, rioters, potential terrorists, gang members, pent up with anger and frustration, or they are rendered as agents of change and innovative leaders, promising a collective sense of hope for the future (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008). Since the turn of the century, international development is increasingly casting attention to ‘youth’ as a category of concern. In 2001, the World Bank, the UN, ILO, came together to forge a ‘Youth Employment Network’ to address global priorities of employment, entrepreneurship, and equal opportunities for youth (2008: 302). Thereafter, numerous other agendas, initiatives, and plans of action are emerging concerning youth. Most notably, in 2007, the World Bank published its annual development report with a focus on youth for the very first time, *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*. This mounting attention and concern for youth parallels the changing demographics in developing countries and imminent youth population bulge (Kamat 2007). As the World Development Report states, 2007 witnessed the ‘largest youth cohort in history’, 1.3 billion youth (aged 12-24). In India, the 2011 national census reported 35.3 per cent of the population was under the age 15, making up nearly one third of the population. Further, it is estimated in 2020 the age of the average Indian will be 29 years old (Chandrasekhar et al. 2006). The impending youth bulge in India is viewed both as a source of anxiety as well as a source of possibility. On one hand it is feared as a demographic disaster as a surplus population in a context of limited resources. On the other hand, it has the potential to offer the country a ‘demographic dividend’ – a capable population that can result in

social innovation and economic growth (Corbridge et al. 2013). Such a dividend is deemed only possible though through ‘institutional and infrastructural’ conditions that allow youth to contribute to economy and society (2013: 287). Thus, facilitators of development from the state to civil society are increasingly developing opportunities for youth to harness their potential as future assets of change (WDR 2007).

The turn to youth is visible in NGO programming in red-light areas as well. It was only in the middle to late 2000s, that several NGOs in Kolkata’s red-light areas started hosting youth groups, youth leadership trainings, and youth action research programmes, as well as stipend based internships where young people trained as youth workers. These interventions were an expansion of formerly existing programmes and services for children. Young people in my ethnography participated in multiple NGO programmes in different ways, many of which I will introduce in greater detail in Chapter Four. With the proliferation of NGO services and activities in most red-light areas, some young people grew up ‘NGO-hopping’ in their neighbourhood. Young people, for example, attended a workshop with one organisation but took a skills-training course with another group, even if those NGOs articulated and practiced differing ideologies of development. For instance, many young people who participated in anti-trafficking campaigns of one NGO, also accessed resources and trainings from a sex worker’s union that advocates for the legalisation of sex work. In some cases, young people who were active in an anti-trafficking organisation were equally active members of other NGOs. However, in other cases, young people developed an affinity towards one NGO over another, finding it to be more formative than others, even if they attended several NGOs through their childhood and adolescence.

1.5 Everyday life, Post-NGO

I focus on a period of young people’s lives after their participation in NGOs as ‘subjects,’ participants, or beneficiaries, what I call, *post-NGO*. On first blush, my usage of the prefix post can suggest a distinct break between two phases of young people’s lives, the first being within

NGOs and the second being after NGOs. However, as I will go onto illustrate, post does not represent a clean break from NGOs. As a matter of fact, in young people's lives, a clear disjuncture and separation from NGOs is rare. For several young people, life post-NGO includes NGOs but in a new role and capacity. In some cases, NGOs that were once caretakers and scholarship providers are now employers or lifelong mentors. They remain active in young people's lives. In other instances, NGOs are dormant and a remnant from the past, but recognised as a formative force with lasting effects for better or worse.

My use of the term 'post', similar to Nivedeta Menon's (2011) use of 'post' in a discussion of feminism, indicates a sense of 'having gone through' an experience, discourse, and institution in such a way that one's disposition has been altered. Post-NGO therefore indicates a shared passage of alteration through NGOs. For some, the NGO passage was long, spanning their entire childhood, for others it was a short flicker in their adolescence. Similarly, for some young people, the effects of NGOs seem tantamount and for others substantial, but not determinative. In some cases, the effects of NGOs are immediately visible, apparent in language, dress, and comportment. For others, the effects are harder to detect and become visible under particular conditions and circumstances. Essentially, being post-NGO refers to a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) – a shared orientation and affect with varied meanings and manifestations among different youth.

In order to analyse the shared and varied effects of NGOs on young people, I explore in depth young people's urban everyday lives in the city of Kolkata. My focus on the everyday emerges from the ethnographic sensibility steering this research. Like many other feminist ethnographers, I seek to unpack wider scale political-economic processes such as NGO development, urban change, and city life through the localised experiences of young people at an everyday scale (Katz 2004, Rankin 2004, Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006, Sharma 2006). The everyday in this study signifies the ensemble of daily preoccupations, habits, embodiment, sociality, and material practices. It concerns moments at home or between family members, as

well as public encounters, such as on the street, cinema, or bus. The scale of everyday life puts into view not just young people, but their interactions with their community and their broader social and environmental engagement with the city, while foregrounding the young people's social meaning of experience.

I focus in particular on three key spheres of the everyday: work and employment, embodiment, consumption, and leisure, and political actions of addressing social disadvantage and improving everyday life. I select these three spheres, as they were arenas young people were mostly preoccupied with amidst interviews and conversations over the course of fieldwork. However, one significant sphere in young people's lives that I choose not to include concerns their experiences of love, sex, and romantic relationships. As I will elaborate in my methodology, Chapter Three, I abstained from writing about young people's romantic and sexual lives for ethical reasons, but also to maintain a concentration on public spheres of work, consumption, and politics. In spite of this omission, references to young people's sexuality and relationships are lightly interspersed through stories about work, consumption, and politics. In this next section of this chapter, I outline the subsequent chapters in this thesis as a guide for readers.

1.6 Dissertation Outline

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. In Chapter Two, I outline scholarly debates and the theoretical framework informing the inquiry behind this dissertation. Three interdisciplinary bodies of literature shape this dissertation: scholarship on NGO development, youth transitions and youth agency, and subalternity and the world-class city. Within each body of literature, I delineate key debates intersecting and orienting my empirical chapters and present three arguments central to this dissertation. In Chapter Three, I elaborate on the methodology and praxis shaping this dissertation. In this discussion, I introduce my research participants, elaborate upon my own subject position as a researcher, as well as, outline the dilemmas, lessons, and limits of my ethnographic research process.

Chapter Four is the first empirical chapter that provides context to NGOs in Kolkata's red-light areas and outlines multiple NGO development agendas circulating in Kolkata's red-light areas. In order to contextualise disciplinary regulation in red-light areas, I begin with a brief historical glimpse of state interventions into sex work, or what was then called prostitution, under British colonial rule. Then, I turn to the contemporary moment and outline prevalent development agendas circulating in Kolkata's red-light area, particularly operationalised by NGOs. The key agendas shaping NGO development I highlight include, HIV/AIDS, anti-trafficking, sex workers rights, and child rights. I argue these discourses collectively create a multi-vocal environment in which young people come of age and develop an NGO habitus, a concept I will introduce in Chapter Two. In the second section of this chapter, I present the case of one red-light area, Kalighat red-light area, my primary fieldwork site, to demonstrate the common ways young people are recruited into NGOs and experience NGO subject-making.

After I set up the assemblage of development in Kolkata's red-light areas, Chapter Five commences the ethnography. In this chapter, I begin tracking young people's lives post-NGO by examining young people's journeys towards economic independence and social acceptance post-NGO through their search for respectable work. Youth studies literature suggests the various ways marginalised youth attempt to earn social legitimacy. Some scholars demonstrate how young people embrace cultures of resistance in search of respect (Willis 1981 [1977]). Others illustrate how youth affirm and aspire towards dominant values and cultures (Jeffrey et al. 2004). For post-NGO youth in Kolkata, I argue that 'respectable' work underpins the symbolic transition from marginality to mainstream, subalternity to respectability. I present five different case studies highlighting common pathways of work taken by subaltern youth. Through these narratives, I examine how young people negotiate and rework notions of respectability as imparted by NGOs as they seek jobs and employment for their own social mobility. Further, I demonstrate how NGOs mostly reconfigure old sites of inequality into new formations of

inequality as they selectively advocate against exploitation in sex work economies, while tolerating exploitation in other economies.

Another medium of everyday life in which young people navigate and rework gender and class based inequalities is embodiment, consumption, and leisure– the topic of Chapter Six. In this chapter, I exclusively focus on young women because of the exceptional emphasis by NGOs on subjective development for the ‘girl child’ in red-light areas. I demonstrate how post-NGO young women creatively and strategically draw upon cultures of NGOs as well as cultures of world-class city to perform cross-class cultural practices and femininities. In doing so, post-NGO women navigate and appropriate subaltern and middle class lifestyles for their own social mobility. Drawing from the concepts of performativity (Butler 1990), performance (Goffman 1959), and habitus (Bourdieu 1977), I examine young women’s fluidity as well as the limits and fixities of their classed performances across city spaces. I demonstrate how NGOs offer cultural resources that young people draw upon to negotiate norms of inequality that are useful temporally but not structurally.

Through Chapter Six, I show how cultural politics and stylistic performances can support young people to circumvent some inequalities, but not always. In Chapter Seven, the last chapter of my ethnographic suite, I examine young people’s direct political practices to address inequality and improve everyday life, including their practices of protest and resourcefulness. In the first section, I discuss the politics of *protibad* (protest). I pay attention to the spaces and conditions that instigate and support *protibad*, as well as the conditions and spaces that prevent *protibad* and inspire a different mode of politics for improving their situation – a politics of resourcefulness. I argue young people engage in *protibad* as a mode of politics when they inhabit positions of power, often times, NGO-backed power. However, in conditions when young people consider themselves powerless, they turn to a politics of resourcefulness. In the second section, I analyse the various ways young people practice a politics of resourcefulness and its connections to wider trends in urban politics and processes of NGOisation.

I conclude my dissertation in Chapter Eight by reiterating the key contributions of my research to debates on NGO development, youth agency, and the world-class city and class formation in Kolkata. In that final chapter I also take the opportunity to outline further frontiers of research this dissertation inspires.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review: NGOs, Youth, and the World-Class City

2.1 Introduction

My dissertation is set within three interdisciplinary bodies of literature: scholarship on NGO development, critical youth studies, and subalternity and the world-class city. Within each body of literature, I review key debates intersecting and orienting my empirical chapters. I also outline three arguments central to this dissertation.

In the first section, after reviewing scholarship on NGO development, I argue that NGOs are subject-making institutions and that an ethnographic examination of development subjectivities thickens analyses of NGOs. In the second section, I review debates on youth transitions and agency. I contend that NGOs are a formative force in young people's lives affecting their life trajectories and futures. However, young people growing up in red-light areas and coming of age with NGO programmes are not passive recipients of NGO development, but rather active mobilisers of NGO resources and other resources available to them from subaltern and middle class city cultures. In the last section, I review scholarship on subalternity and 'world-class' aspiring metropolitan India. I examine the subaltern intersections of class, gender, and locality in relation to young people growing up with NGOs in red-light areas. Concerned with the boundaries of gendered class formations in world-class aspiring Kolkata, I argue that once young people have concluded their time with NGOs, they produce and perform subjectivities that fall between subaltern and middle class identities. As I demonstrate, an ethnographic analysis of their liminal subjectivities summons new ways of theorising middle class and subaltern relations in urban scholarship.

2.2 NGO Development and Subject-Making

As I outlined in Chapter One, NGOs are a significant social and political phenomenon across the world. Since the 1990s there has been significant debate on the agendas and effects of

NGOs in terms of social movements, feminism, and social change in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Caribbean and the West. Some call NGO driven development an ‘associational revolution’ or ‘quiet revolution’ (Fisher 1997), while others see it as an ‘anti-politics machine’ (Ferguson 1994). NGOs appear as a paradox, embraced both by international development institutions like the World Bank as well as grassroots activists strategising for bottom-up change. I contextualise my study in light of three contending strands of scholarship on NGOs. The first and earlier strand of scholarship views NGOs as effective democratising forces of development that can redress top-down approaches of large-scale development and offer more sustainable and alternative solutions to poverty and inequality (Korten 1987, Edwards and Hulme 1996). NGOs are recognized for their potential to politicise and mobilise communities through various technologies such as human rights or empowerment programmes. Several scholars working in India describe alliances between grassroots movements and NGOs as evidence of a dynamic civil society, collaboration across local and global scales, and possibilities of spawning subaltern activism (Appadurai 2002, McFarlane 2004, Misra 2006). From this perspective, NGOs are argued to mobilise resources for meaningful transformation, and sometimes, ‘deep democracy’ (Appadurai 2002).

The second strand of scholarship is critical of the possibility of pro-poor and transformative change by NGOs in the global neoliberal political economy. This line of scholarship, inspired by critical development studies (Ferguson 1994, Escobar 2012 [1995]) is concerned with the ‘NGOisation’ of the grassroots and social movements (Petras 1997, Alvarez 1999, Kamat 2003a). The term NGOisation refers to the both the proliferation of NGOs as well the domination and institutionalisation of NGO forms and practices within processes of social change, perpetuating a ‘hegemony of development’ (Kamat 2002). NGOisation is used to describe the mounting prioritisation of technical solutions and individualised models of empowerment over political and structural change thus undermining larger questions of power. Further, in light of NGOisation, NGOs are seen to be accountable to global streams of funding

rather than the local communities they serve. Variations of NGOisation have been described by scholars across geographic contexts including Latin America (Alvarez 2009, Petras and Veltmeyer 2001), South Africa (Sinwell 2010) post-socialist Europe (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), Europe (Lang 1997) and South Asia. In North America, particularly in the United States, NGOisation is described as the ‘non-profit industrial complex’: the nexus of social service and social justice organization with donors, leading to the management and curtailment of political movements (INCITE 2007). In India, several have pointed to the NGOisation of social movements and people’s struggles. (Kamat 2002, Kapoor 2005, Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). For these scholars, NGOisation threatens possibilities of radical social change.

A third and more nascent strand of scholarship contests dualistic approaches in contemporary NGO development debates and instead approaches NGOisation not as the end of critique, but as the beginning of analysis (Alvarez 2009, Lang 2013, Choudry and Kapoor 2013, Bernal and Grewal 2014). Instead of viewing NGOs as either co-opting grassroots activism or cultivating grassroots activism, this emerging strand of scholarship argues against a one-sided version of development and pays attention to effects of contradictions and contentions through NGOs (Townsend et al. 2004). It examines how NGOisation alters processes of social change and contributes to new constructions of inequality but also political projects of change (Bernal and Grewal 2014). This position claims that all NGOs to some degree are sites and modes of governmentality (Bernal and Grewal 2014). In India, an emerging body of scholarship examines the ‘awkward confluences’ (Sharma 2008: ixviii) and ‘points of friction’ (Dave 2012: 11) between social reproduction and social change in NGO development within neoliberal contexts in rural and urban settings (Baviskar 2004). Aradhana Sharma (2008) in her ethnography of Mahila Samakhya, a government-organised GONGO in Uttar Pradesh, troubles the singularity of development effects often highlighted in critical development studies by analysing development as a social drama (Ferguson 1994: 97, Escobar 2012 [1995]). The perspective of social dramas, according to Sharma, allows development to be seen through the

interface of multiple actors including actor-led institutions, funders, communities, and subjects of development. It perceives development as ‘mutable and less certain in their outcomes’ which in turn stresses the ‘instability and heterogeneity’ of development (2008: 97).

In my dissertation, my research is informed by this third generation of scholarship. In particular, I draw upon Sharma’s conceptual approach examining NGOs and NGOisation as a social drama. I approach NGOs as an interactive process occurring in particular temporalities between multiple actors – funders, middle-class NGO workers, and a heterogeneous community of marginalised youth subjects. There is no singular, monolithic effect of NGO development because it is experienced, received, translated, and appropriated by multiple differently positioned actors moving through time and space. Through my analysis in the succeeding chapters, especially Chapter Four, I emphasise the heterogeneity of NGOisation in red-light areas. I pay attention to the various ways NGOs are experienced as a resource and a hindrance by young people. I focus on the ambivalence and contradictions within young people’s interactions with NGO development as it fosters both inequalities and progressive change in young people’s everyday lives.

Self-Making and NGO Subject Making

In the current literature on NGOs, relatively little is known about the subaltern subjects of NGOisation and their experiences of social reproduction and change. A number of studies examine the identities and subjectivities of activists in NGOs (Nagar and Sangtin Writers 2006, Sharma 2008, Jenkins and Smith, 2011, Dave 2012), but rarely do studies principally frame their analysis through the lived experiences of subjects of development. In spite of Norman Long’s invitation for ‘actor-oriented analysis’ (2004: 4, Sharma 2008: 98), studies on development are dominated by institutional and political economic analyses. Rebecca Klenk’s (2004, 2010) study of women in the Kumaon region of Northern India as ‘beneficiaries’ of development is among the few exceptions. Klenk contends that literature on development mostly focuses on ‘official’

sites such as projects, officers, documents, and agencies, paying less attention to the ways development ideas are received and translated by beneficiaries of development. In her study, Klenk examines the subject positions of women participating in a Gandhian environmental education program located in the Kumaon region to illustrate the polysemic subjectivities and struggles of women produced through the development programme. Through an ethnographic emphasis on women's ambivalence and enthusiasm towards the development programme, Klenk shows how the complicated subject positions of the beneficiaries of development challenge the narrow framework of development regimes on the ground as well as in scholarship.

In my research, I foreground urban youth – a prime subject of NGO development programmes in Kolkata's red-light areas. I focus on the trajectory of young people's lives after they participated in NGOs as 'subjects.' I examine everyday lives of post-NGO youth to investigate the lasting effects of development as they relate to their subjectivities, mobility, and political orientation. My approach is inspired by anthropological studies of the state that foreground everyday interactions, relationships, and encounters to analyse the state (Gupta 1995, Gupta and Sharma 2006). These studies 'enculturate' (Sharma 2008) their analysis by focussing on mundane cultural practices and representations of the state. According to Sharma (2008), an enculturating analysis 'disaggregates the itness' (Abrams 1988, Sharma 2008) of state policies and interventions through studying the state's manifestation in the everyday day, at block offices or in college admission queues. Similarly, my analytical approach to NGOisation through the everyday lives of the subjects of development after their participation in NGOs 'disaggregates the itness' (Sharma 2008) of NGOs and offers three critical ways of understanding NGO development. First, it dismantles NGO institutions, programmes, and discourses as monolithic and unidirectional. My approach views NGOs instead as 'social dramas' (Sharma 2008) by interpreting NGOs through the varied experiences of individual young people, illuminating their contingent and heterogeneous forms, meanings, and effects in young people's lives. Second, my approach ethnographically thickens understandings of the social reproduction and social change

driven by NGOs through emphasis on the lived experiences of subjects of development instead of NGO statistics, discourses, and programmes. Ethnographic consideration to the everyday lives of youth after their participation offers a rich and nuanced interpretation of the modalities and effects of NGO development as processes that both contest and reproduce inequalities. It also offers a bottom-up perspective to institutional and political economic perspectives that tend to dominate NGO literature. Third, and above all, the analysis I present allows for an examination of NGO programming as a process of subject-making.

I argue that NGOs foster a process of ‘subjectification’ in the Foucauldian sense. Michel Foucault’s (1991) theory of subjectification conceptualises the political relations between social institutions and human beings. Foucault understands subjectification as the process in which a person transforms herself into a subject of a social institution through consent and participation. Subjectification is an active process, where the individual participates in a process both of ‘self-making’ and ‘being made’ (Ong 1996), also known as a form of governmentality. (Foucault 1991). Governmentality refers the attempt to shape human behavior, action, and disposition by ‘calculated means’ (Li 2007: 5) and power relations that produce consent and participation among their subjects (Ong 1996).

Governmentality and modern subject-making processes emerge in diverse institutions. Tania Li (2007), in her influential book on development in Indonesia, analyses how governments and non-governmental institutions foster a ‘will to improve’ among its subjects. Soo Ah Kwon (2013) describes how non-profit based youth organising in the United States can be a technology of affirmative governmentality – an affirmation of youth as leaders in their community. In India, Arun Agrawal (2005) examines how states create environmental subjects through regulatory strategies and community decision-making. Furthermore, Veronique Benei (2008) illustrates the cultivation of nationalism through formal schooling. In line with these and other studies examining subject-making through various modern institutions in India, I pay ethnographic attention to the dialectical process of ‘self-making and being made’ (Ong, 1996) through NGOs.

Indeed, there are many social forces shaping the subjectivities, practices, and mobilities of subaltern youth growing up in red-light areas including schools, families, neighbourhoods, and popular culture. I pay particular attention to NGOs as a formative cultural force as it offers explicit promises for social change, improvement, and mobility in young people's lives.

Habitus, Field, and Performativity

In my analysis of NGO subject-making, I draw upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) conceptualisation of habitus as tool to examine subjectification. The theory of habitus is a useful tool for analysing subject formation, as it invites consideration to multiple and interactive social forces shaping young people's everyday lives, dispositions, and actions with sensitivity to the temporality of these social forces. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), is the set of socially learned dispositions, often times enacted unconsciously, constructed by past experiences while re-constructed by future experiences. Put simply, habitus is the accumulation of a social milieu starting from childhood that informs future trajectories, but at the same time changes with every new emerging milieu. It is a 'socialised subjectivity' that constitutes and is constituted by past and future experience (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 126). Bourdieu mobilises the theory of habitus to partially explain the probability of social reproduction. According to him, there is a likelihood that the trajectory and experiences emerging through an individual's life typically conform to their original habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 135), therefore fostering social reproduction. Yet at the same time, Bourdieu asserts that the habitus is an open structure, constantly being re-modified through new experience, open to possibilities for change (Bourdieu 1992, McNay 1999a).

The concept of habitus goes hand in hand with Bourdieu's notion of field – a form of social space. Fields are arenas of social competition with their own rules, or as Bourdieu puts it, 'regularities' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). Several fields of competition manifest in people's lives as spaces of struggle for social position and power. Some fields include schools,

workplaces, NGOs, political parties, and more. Each person occupies a particular position in each field, depending on their historical, cultural, social, and economic power as well as their habitus. Each field in young people's life inspires different kinds of actions, practices, moves, and possibilities. According to Bourdieu, the relationship between habitus and the field shape human action and practices (Maton 2012).

The habitus of young people growing in up in red-light areas in Kolkata is deeply altered by NGOs. As I will illustrate in Chapter Four, NGOs are a part of a long history of intervention and development in red-light areas, deployed by the contemporary nexus of international funding and global moral panics. Therefore, being the child of a sex worker or a child in the red-light area predisposes them to being recruited into a developmentalist milieu of NGOs. As I will demonstrate in the following empirical chapters, NGOs in turn restructure young people's habitus and gradually foster what I call an NGO habitus by offering and sometimes enforcing a social milieu made up of middle class aesthetics, rights-based discourses, and activist aspirations and morality. I will demonstrate how the NGO developmental milieu deeply shapes young people's embodiment, aspirations, and future trajectories across different fields of life, including employment, culture and leisure, as well as political practice.

Attention to young people's NGO habitus enables a careful examination of young people's heterogeneous and dynamic subject-making experiences within NGOs and acknowledges the presences of other social forces including families, schools, friends, and beyond. The NGO habitus is expansive, dynamic, and differentiated across individual experience. Bourdieu asserts that individuals who share a class or group habitus will have differentiated individual styles and trajectories within a shared habitus. As I will illustrate, while young people with NGOised habitus share experiences, opportunities, and challenges, in some cases, their practices and mobilities are different. The differences among young people are a 'structural variant' (1977: 87) of the 'durable, but not immutable' (McNay 1999a) NGOised habitus. It is precisely the durability, mutability, and generative nature the NGO habitus that

allows room to theorise young people's everyday dynamic actions, practise, and subjective expressions.

Until recently, most of Bourdieu's writings concern class, offering relatively little engagement with gender (Bourdieu 2000). Feminist scholars have been critically redeveloping Bourdieu's contributions to theorise gender, often times by weaving his work with other feminist theories (Adkins and Skeggs 2005). In my dissertation, along with deploying habitus as a way to understand the generative but not determinative structures of NGOs in young people's lives, I also engage with the concept of performativity and performance to understand the manifestation of young people's habitus in the everyday.

According to Judith Butler (1990, 1993) subjectivities are performative. In other words, subjectivities do not have an ontological core; they are only the effect of repetitive acts, gestures, and enactments that construct coherent subjectivities of class, gender, and sexuality. Intersectional identities of class, gender, and sexuality are therefore understood as repeated stylised bodily performances. They are the 'effect and function' of social norms and socially learned durable disposition (Butler 1990: 185). According to Butler, 'political regulations' and 'disciplinary practices' or social norms shape the citational performances that make subjectivities coherent and legible (186). Butler's theory of subjectivity is deeply linked to theories of agency. Each performative act of a norm either further consolidate norms, or if the iteration fails to meet the norm, it can in turn, subvert or resignify and thus challenge the norm (Mahmood 2005: 19). According to Saba Mahmood (2005), Butler tends to privilege performative acts that subvert and resignify norms as agential. On the contrary, Mahmood builds Butler's theory of agency by moving away from a dualistic framework of consolidation or resignification and instead thinks about the various ways 'norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated' (2005: 23) all as a part of performative agency. Following Mahmood, I use performativity to understand young people's multiple aspirations, embodiments, and performances of class and gendered norms. It is important to note, Butler's idea of

performativity challenges notions of intentional and voluntary agency. Using Butler's notion of performativity, I argue young people's actions, embodiments, and agency are not wilful acts, but regulated actions shaped by the context of time and space, or as I assert, young people's habitus.

Alongside performativity and habitus, I draw on Goffman's theory of social interaction as performance. Erving Goffman (1959) interprets actions in daily life through a dramaturgical metaphor of performance with distinct audiences and stages – front and back. According to Goffman, all actions are social dramas determined by our social surrounding, temporality, and resources. Performance is rooted in the agential and conscious attempt to try on, play, and enact roles and scripts (1959). I draw from Goffman to analyse how young women intentionally improvise particular performances to move through social worlds of the city. I deploy Goffman's notion of performance, Butler's theorisation of performativity, and Bourdieu's notion of habitus to interpret the durability of social structures as well as the conscious and unconscious forms of regulated agency.

While some scholars read Bourdieu and Butler against each other due primarily to the discursive and material difference between the two (McNay 2004), others scholars (Jeffrey 2010) hold the two theorists in creative tension. I also pair the two together and interpret performativity as a practice that both emerges from, and contributes to, habitus. Performative subjectivities of class and gender, I argue, are the repeated, unconscious stylisations entrenched in regimes of power shaped by and displaying an individual's habitus. As I discussed above though, performative subjectivities change over time as an individual's habitus changes. Together, the concepts of habitus, performativity, and performance serve as useful analytical tools to study young people's everyday practices related to work, consumption, and politics in light of their experiences with NGOs and other broader social forces including the city. Approaching the three concepts in a complementary fashion makes room to honour young people's agency through their 'constrained appropriation of the regulatory law' (Butler 1993: xxi), which is often embodied and expressed in the individual habitus. As I demonstrate in greater detail in the next

section, agency is a key theme for scholarship concerning subalterns and youth – two subjectivities that are at the heart of my ethnography.

2.3 Youth: Transitions and Agency

Social science research on children, youth, and young people is burgeoning. Waves of critical youth scholarship – ranging from the new social studies of childhood (Prout and James 1991), the Birmingham School (Hall and Jefferson 2012 [1976], Willis 1981 [1979]), the anthropology of youth (Buscholtz 2002) to youth geographies (Aitken 2001a, Holt and Holloway 2006) – offer new ways of thinking about children and young people especially in relation to the concepts of youth transitions and agency. My dissertation engages with debates on agency as it highlights young people's everyday practices of improving their lives under constrained circumstances. It also contributes to debates on youth transitions foregrounding the role of NGOs in formation and transformation in young people's lives.

Transitions

Historically, polarised constructions of childhood and adulthood have simplistically associated notions of innocence, wonder, and trouble with childhood and independence, agency, and risk with youth (Aitken, Lund, and Kørholt 2007, Cole and Durham 2007, Jeffrey and Dyson 2008). Contemporary scholarship destabilises such static associations by emphasising young people's differentiated lives across time, space, and scale and offer new ways to examine young people's 'transitions' in life. Scholarship on young people's lives has increasingly revealed how young people's journeys from youth to adulthood are non-linear, precarious, fragmented, and variant (Durham 2000, Jeffrey and McDowell 2004, Punch 2002, Langevang 2008). In the global North, scholars argue that conventional rites of passage associated with life courses, such as graduating from school, getting a job, falling in love and getting married, are increasingly overturned, prolonged, and fluid (Valentine 2002, Wyn and Dwyer 1999). Scholars studying youth in the

global South assert new frameworks are required to go beyond linear notions of ‘transitions’ and challenge problematic assumptions of a normative and teleological succession of events and stages in life experiences (Durham 2000, Punch 2002, Langevang 2008). These scholars theorise various ‘border crossings’ (Langevang 2008) from childhood to youth to adulthood through new analytical tools. Scholars such as Henrik Vigh (2009), for example, employs non-linear metaphors such as ‘social navigation’ to highlight the ‘intersection between agency, social forces and change’ in young people’s routings through familiar, unknown, and potentially transformative terrains (2009: 420, 2006). Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) proposes a notion of ‘vital conjuncture: a nexus of potential futures’ to describe ‘critical durations’ in young people’s lives where the combination of ‘structured expectation with uncertain futures’ emerges as an acute period in person’s life where unfolding futures inform interpretations of the past (2002: 871-872). These multiple frameworks to interpret young people’s dynamic and complicated temporal and spatial movements inform my approach to understanding young people’s trajectories after their engagement with NGOs. My analysis is informed by a non-linear approach that troubles normative models of child-to-youth-to-adult transitions.

In the succeeding chapters, I build upon non-normative, non-linear approaches to youth transition in two ways: First, I argue that NGOs can be seen as institutions that serve as a rite of passage in many subaltern young people’s lives. Just as schools, families, and workplaces are imagined as processes of formation and sometimes transformation, the NGOs I examine enable a formative process in subaltern young people’s lives, as they come of age, grow up, or as several young people described in Bangla, *manush boiche*, literally, become human. Second, I demonstrate how post-NGO young people negotiate precarity and promise, aspiration and anxiety, as they begin to transition from the shelter homes or drop-in-centres of NGOs into new worlds. This journey is not only spatial, in that young people come to inhabit physical spaces outside the NGO; it is also temporal as young people see themselves as moving beyond the phase of being in the care, guidance, and protection of NGOs into a phase in which they strive to “stand on

their own feet” (*nijer paye darieye*). Young people and their families in my research unanimously used the phrase “to stand on one’s own feet” to describe a desired vision of adulthood, that encapsulated aspirations for economic independence, security, and respectability. As I will go on to demonstrate, young people articulate these aspirations differently, contingent upon the social conditions regulating their agency.

Agency

Agency is a significant theme in youth studies debates, especially in light of large scale social and global transformations including environmental destruction, migration and displacement, economic restructuring, poverty, social movements, violence and war, known to contribute to the increasing precarity and instability of childhood and youth, especially in the global South (Honwana and Doeboek 2005, Jeffrey and Dyson 2008, Durham 2008, Swanson 2010).

Governments, NGOs, and non-profit organisations typically intervene in young people’s lives under mandates to either protect ‘at-risk’ youth from danger or discipline ‘at-risk’ youth from causing trouble. A central argument in this dissertation is that young people growing up in red-light areas ‘at-risk’ of violence and spiralling poverty, are not passive recipients of NGO interventions, but astute and active mobilisers of NGO development services.

My assertion is situated in a series of debates on young people’s agency. Historically, young people were viewed as humans becoming (Aries 1962). One school of thought emerging in the 1990s that challenged constructions of children as passive subjects of social structures or humans becoming was the New School of Social Studies (Prout and James 1990). This school asserted children were social actors in their own right, participating in shaping their socio-cultural worlds (Aitken, 2001a, Prout and James, 1997). These studies emphasised children’s agency through sites and activities of the everyday. Debates specifically on youthful instead of children’s forms of agency has a longer lineage of scholarship (Mannheim 1972 [1936], See Dyson, 2014 for review). It was not until the emergence of the Centre for Contemporary

Cultural Studies (CCCS) from the 1970s, that youthful forms of agency became central to the theorisation of agency more broadly. The CCCS, also referred to as the Birmingham School, was deeply influenced by Marxist cultural theory and produced a series of foundational studies foregrounding a class analysis of both youth culture and agency (Hall and Jefferson [1976] 2012). These scholars examined working class young people's resistance to and reproduction of dominating cultures and inequalities in industrial urban Britain, emphasising youth agency through prisms of oppositional subcultures (Hall and Jefferson [1976] 2012, Willis [1979] 1981, McRobbie 1993, see Bucholtz 2002 for review).

Many scholars have criticised the Birmingham School for its narrow focus on the global North as well as its predominant attention to young men as principal youth cultural actors (McRobbie and Garber 1993). Since the Birmingham School, emerging geographic, anthropological, and sociological literature has significantly developed scholarly understanding of young people's agency (Aitken 2001b, Boyden 2003, Katz 2004, Skelton 2010, Jeffrey 2012, Kallio 2013). Contemporary scholars have expanded their analysis of youth agency from the Birmingham School in three primary ways. First, scholars are examining young people's navigation of marginalisation beyond class and towards multiple structural oppressions, including race, gender, caste, and sexuality (Maira 2002, Nayak and Kehily 2006, Lukose 2009). Philippe Bourgois ([1996] 2003) in his ethnography of a neighbourhood in east Harlem in New York City known as El Barrio, examined young men's negotiation of race and class inequalities and their search for respect through cultural and employment practices. Far from the streets of New York City, Julie Bettie (2003) focuses on young women's cultural practices in a Californian public school as they confront classism and racism and create cultures of respectability and self-worth. Intersectional approaches to youth lives and struggles, such as Betties' and Bourgois', foreground the multiple social relations and forces in young people's lives.

Second, scholars are looking beyond the global North, paying attention to youth in different parts of the world (Cole and Durham 2006, Mains 2007, Newell 2012). Geographers

especially are dismantling hegemonic representations of youth and youth agency by mapping the spatial and temporal diversities, practices, and politics of young people in multiple global contexts (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004, Katz 2004, Swanson 2010). In South Asia, for example, several studies place non-elite young people as agents interacting with global processes of development, modernity, and economic transformation (Niewenhuyys 1994, Dyson 2008, Lukose 2009, Verkaik 2010, Jeffrey et al. 2008, Jeffrey 2010).

Third, contemporary scholars are increasingly theorising agency beyond the dominant prism of opposition and resistance and exploring multiple forms of agency (Mahmood 2005, Durham 2008, Jeffrey 2012). Scholars in the Birmingham School privileged rebellion and resistance as forms of youth agency with a focus on counter politics and counter cultures. Paul Willis (1981 [1979]), for example, emphasised how working class young lads' practice of 'having a laff' served as a form of resistance against school authority. This approach shaped later scholarship on youth, which also prioritised resistance as a key form of agency. Bourgois (2003 [1996]) and Bettie (2004) in their respective ethnographies examine young people's challenge to dominant notions of respect and their embrace of 'alternative badges of dignity' (Bettie 2003). However, while resistance maybe be recognised as one form of youth agency, this narrow prism of counter-hegemonic agency can foreclose the full spectrum of young people's agential capacity. As I outline in the next section, several studies illuminate other forms of agency, which offer useful analytical tools to examine the modulations of agency expressed by youth in my research community.

From Resistance to Resourcefulness

Scholars are increasingly highlighting different forms of agency among marginalised communities. James Scott (1985), in his influential study of poor people's everyday opposition against oppressive landowners in a rural Malaysia village, describes 'weapons of the weak' as the often invisible, everyday forms of resistance such as 'foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance,

pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage'. For Scott, such acts are examples of agency in constrained conditions (xvi). In another global context, Asef Bayat (2013) examines the practices of the urban poor in the Middle East who are living in deteriorating environments where clean air, greenery, and the urban commons are increasingly privatised. In a context of structural disempowerment by authoritarian regimes and capitalist logic, the urban poor engage in what Bayat calls 'social non-movements,' a quiet, atomised process of encroachment on 'the propertied, the powerful, and the public in quest of survival and to better their lives' (2013:121). Unlike oppositional social movements that are ideologically driven towards collective resistance, such non-movements reflect the largely dispersed 'individual, everyday, and life-long mobilisations' of the everyday (2013:121, Bayat 1997).

Several youth scholars are also concerned with forms of non-oppositional forms of agency and social change. In a review of the geographic literature of youth agency, Craig Jeffrey (2011) maps the departure from 'resistance' in contemporary scholarship on youth agency to the turn towards 'resourcefulness' as a prevalent paradigm through which to theorise agency. Furthermore, scholars studying young people in multiple global contexts have described young people's negotiation of unjust social and economic conditions through creative resources. Jeffrey (2010), for example, presents an ethnography of young men navigating unemployment in small towns of northern India and describes young people's practices of '*jugaad*' – a 'shrewd improvisation' and creative orchestration of the resources at hand to create personal and sometimes exploitative success. Sasha Newell's (2012) study, similarly concentrates on young men's strategies in a context of poverty and unemployment, but in the metropolitan setting of Cote d'Ivoire. Newell highlights young men's practices of 'bluff' – an excessive staging of wealth – as a means to cultivate social networks and respect in order to navigate resources and opportunities in the city. Together, these studies shed light on agency as creative manoeuvring under constrained circumstance and although they focus exclusively on young men, they serve as critical texts that offer new ways of theorising young people's agency.

Furthermore, Jane Dyson (2014), in her ethnography of the working lives of children in the Himalayan Hills in Uttarakhand, India, introduces the concept of ‘active quiescence,’ referring to children’s intentional and energetic participation in community norms through improvisation and humor as way to offer renew and personalise meaning to normative practices. In this study of young people’s participation in agro-pastoral labor and their ‘non-oppositional’ agency in relation to gender and labour norms, Dyson argues that young people’s participation in dominant norms is not straightforward social reproduction, but the improvised usage of available traditions for their own interests. Several studies across global contexts similarly describe young people’s subtle maneuvers in constrained circumstances as agency (Hoffman 2008 in Sierra Leone, Swanson 2009 in Ecuador). In Kolkata, for example, Nandini Gooptu (2009) observes a cultural shift in young people’s responses to exploitative new work economies in the city’s shopping malls. Unlike earlier generations of youth who harnessed trade unions and political parties to collectively mobilise against employers, ‘liberalisation’s children’ (Lukose 2009) practice a politics of personal solutions in the face of systemic injustice by searching for new jobs in Kolkata. Gooptu warns against reading young people’s practices as ‘apolitical’ but instead as a new agential political practice.

In the effort to recognise and make legible young people’s individualised and non-oppositional actions as *political* instead of *apolitical* – or as agential instead of passive – there lies a danger though in celebrating young people’s agency without giving due weight to the structural disempowerment constricting young people’s agency (Evans 2002). There is risk of misreading scholarly recognition of agency as scholarly consent into false neoliberal logics that posit poverty and oppression as escapable through individualised enterprise. Youth resilience and resourcefulness certainly demonstrates a certainly a politics of enterprise, but it needs to be more clearly described as survival in light of deep-rooted structural inequalities.

In my dissertation, through theories of performativity that I outlined earlier, I examine post-NGO young people’s expressions of agency under conditions of poverty and inequality, as

well as in light of the resources they access through NGOs and a city amidst world-class city aspiring reforms. I draw from the scholarship that foregrounds resourcefulness and improvisation as forms of agency in young people's everyday lives. However, my discussion on young people's personal and creative navigation is not celebratory; instead it is a critical account of young people's everyday strategies to survive and improve life in light of structural inequalities. In illustrating young people's individualised and often temporally bounded practices of agency, I draw out the inherent contradictions of individual and compartmentalised progress and personal mobility in a landscape of uneven development perpetuated by NGOisation and urban change. As I explore in the next and final section of this literature review, young people's experiences of inequality as well as their aspirations for improving their lives are not only affected by NGOs, but also deeply shaped and structured by their experiences of the city.

2.4 The World-Class City and Subalternity

Young people's agency and subjectification is not only limited to a world of NGOs but also deeply embedded in the social, economic, and spatial trends of urban change in Kolkata. In the final section of this literature review, I examine the relationship between urban life in Kolkata, NGO subject-making, and youth agency. Furthermore, I inquire how NGO subjectification and youth agency is inflected in processes of urban change in Kolkata. I explore how ethnographic attention to the post-NGO youth lives in metropolitan Kolkata can inform scholarly understandings about class formation and categories in context of rapidly changing and world-class aspiring mega-cities as well as new frontiers of subalternity.

Subalternity and its New Locations: Gender, Class, and Locality

The term 'subaltern,' derived from Antonio Gramsci (2005 [1973]) and reinvigorated in postcolonial theory by the Subaltern Studies Collective, broadly concerns 'the bottom layer of society' (Spivak 2000: 325). While Subaltern Studies held an inconsistent notion of subaltern (Chari 2012) and underwent several rounds of internal and external critique (O'Hanlon 1998,

Spivak 1998, Ludden 2001, Chibber 2012), it nonetheless continues to inspire examinations between fundamental relationships of ‘power, domination, and subordination’ (Roy 2011b). One key perspective on subalternity views the subaltern indiscriminately as the non-elite or “the people,” referring to both a theory of subordination as well as of agency – as in ‘a politics of the people’ (Guha 2012 [1988]). The Subaltern Studies Collective produced scholarship on the agency of the marginalised, including historiographies of peasants’ revolts (Guha 2012 [1988]), popular movements, and criminal riots (Amin 1995). Several contemporary studies deploy the concept of subaltern in a similar vein, focusing on the subordinated in relation to heterogeneous and multiple relations of power, from capitalist production to patriarchy. Studies include ethnographies on rural north Indian peasant women (Raheja and Gold 1994), low-caste Dalit women (Sharma 2011), as well as studies in other regions of the world describing contingent and structural experiences of powerlessness as well as agency among the subordinated. This perspective offers a broad lens to examine communities as subaltern.

Another perspective on subalternity emerges from a watershed critique by Gayatri Spivak, who questions whether the subaltern can ever be legible or audible. In her highly cited article, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988) Spivak asserts the subaltern is unable to speak; she is mute and illegible because the subaltern is always excluded and effaced. The subaltern is never a presence, but rather a ‘place holder of an absence’ (Gidwani 2009: 69). In her later writings Spivak calls for new engagements with subalternity. According to Spivak, contemporary flows of cultural globalisation, economic liberalisation, and digital communication, have ushered new forms and locations of subalternity. In light of rapid globalisation, Spivak asserts, ‘the subaltern must be rethought’ (2000: 326). For Spivak, most scholarship conceptualised the ‘old subaltern,’ who was ‘withdrawn from any lines of social mobility’ (2005: 483:). The old subaltern was without voice; she was a ‘position without identity’ (2005: 475). In today’s world though of rapid flows and exchange, the subaltern ‘is no longer cut from the lines of access to the center’ (326). However, while the new location of subalternity is increasingly permeable, this permeability nonetheless

remains uni-directional: the subaltern can be enrolled into global and dominant desires but the subaltern cannot belong, let alone structurally transform, dominant cultures, classes, and spaces.

My thesis grapples with new forms of subalternity and the configurations of agency, permeability, mobility, and effacement in the context of NGO development and class formation in metropolitan Kolkata. The young people in my study certainly emerge from subordinated worlds. They came of age within various axes of subalternity – caste, class, as well as locality, that is, the red-light area. The ties to the red-light area – intrinsically connected to their class but not always caste – is the most visible form of difference and subalternity. Their social and geographic roots in the red-light area serves as what Ritty Lukose calls a ‘burden of locality’ (2009). Lukose discusses the burden of locality in her study of lower-caste college students in a small town in Kerala, specifically referencing how young people’s non-metropolitan and regional identities inflect their experience of class, caste, gender, and globalisation in India. Similarly, young people growing up in red-light areas also bear a burden of locality. Red-light areas, as I will elaborate in Chapter Four, are historically stigmatised as spaces of depravity, disease, and immorality. More recently, these neighbourhoods are also perceived as zones of development. Young people’s spatial belonging to red-light areas invokes a double move: it invokes a subalternity among youth but it also summons them into a global circulation of development as the ‘children of sex workers’ and ‘red-light area children’ in need of protection and development. It is precisely their spatial subalternity that places them into the flows of resources, training, and education through NGOs – a subject-making, habitus-cultivating project. It is a project that attempts to improve young people morally, economically, aesthetically, and socially beyond their subalternity, and in the words of NGOs, into the ‘mainstream.’ In this dissertation, I am interested in exploring how young people grapple with this attempted movement between subalternity and beyond, between access and exclusion in the larger landscape of metropolitan Kolkata. In the next section, I review of scholarship on metropolitan Kolkata in order to contextualise the aspired ‘mainstreams’ beyond subalternity.

World-Class City Making

It was not until the 1990s and the advent of structural adjustment and market liberalisation that Indian cities began to feature in India's postcolonial plans of development, ushering in significant ideological, cultural, and spatial changes in metropolitan centres across the country (Menon and Nigam 2007). A decade later, starting in the 2000s, several of India's cities began to partake in private-public ventures towards becoming World-Class Cities, a process of urban change rearticulating local economies into global economies. World-class city making refers to the heterogeneous aspirations of a city to emerge as a critical node of technology, trade, finance, and consumption on a global stage. Often times, world-class making manifests through urban changes such as public-private land re-development, the proliferation of shopping malls, business enclaves, and more (Roy 2011a, Ghertner 2011, Chalana 2010, Baviskar 2004). World-class city making is a multi-vocal and disaggregated project rippling through several global cities in the South, including Indian metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Kolkata.

Kolkata joined the ranks of world-class aspiring cities in 2001 as the Left Front government of West Bengal, led by the Marxist wing of the Community Party of India, once popular for its agrarian reform policies, was reincarnated as an entrepreneurial 'new' communist government. The new Left, arguably devoid of progressive politics (Roy 2007), sought to attract private sector investment for urban development and spatial restructuring to create the comparable world-class city (Basu 2007). Since then, Kolkata's urban landscape is undergoing an urban revival with the development of hi-tech satellite towns, construction of new fly-overs, gated housing plazas, amusement parks, multi-storey shopping malls and multiplexes, all of which mark the city as a space of technology, leisure, consumption, and modernity. It is no then surprise, when in 2011 the new Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee rose to power with the Trinamool Congress Party having defeated 34 years of Left Front Rule, she vowed to make Kolkata into London (Bose 2011).

Sapna Doshi (2013) suggests scholars theorise world-class city making from two vantage points. The first perspective is steeped in debates on metropolitan urbanisms and emphasises political economic and policy perspectives. From this perspective, world-class city making acts as a process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) as a result of state sponsored urban renewal projects, beautification drives, and alliances with global finance through the development of privatised parks, malls, mega projects, elite enclaves, special economic zones, and peri-urban new towns (Nijman 2010, Anjaria 2006, Banerjee-Guha 2009, Roy 2011, Shaktin 2011). The second perspective emphasises the role of the cultural and spatial desires and practices of the ‘new’ middle classes that remake the city towards new world-class standards (Fernandes 2004, Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008, Baviskar and Ray 2011). Leela Fernandes (2004, 2006, 2011) argues there is an emergence of a ‘new’ middle class since liberalisation. The newness of this middle class is associated with the production of a new social and cultural identity that lays claim to the benefits of liberalisation: jobs in the new economy, global forms of entertainment, urban space, leisure, and consumption, all of which are associated with the making of the world-class city. The new social and cultural desires of the middle class are articulated through the market (Fernandes 2004), civil society (Baviskar 2004) and the state (Bhan 2009, Ghertner 2011) and mostly in urban and metropolitan India. Read together, both of these frameworks render world-class city making as an amorphous process. As Ananya Roy (2011c) asserts, world-class city making does not emerge from homogenous urban strategy imposed by a central government, but through the practices, projects, and policies of varying scales from state governments as well as the ‘subjective spatial desires’ (Doshi 2013: 1) of the elite and middle classes who contribute to a ‘regulating fiction’ (Robinson 2002: 546) of world-class standards.

Both perspectives on world-class city making stress the socio-spatial segregation between the middle-class and the urban poor. They illuminate antagonism between the world-class city and the ‘unintended city’ (Sen 1976). For example, scholars emphasise how the production of

the world-class city pivots on displacement of the urban poor through slum evictions (Dupont 2008); the criminalisation of urban poor (Anjaria 2011); the rise of middle-class juridical activism (Bahn 2009); 'bourgeois environmentalism' (Baviskar 2004), and an arguable hegemony of the new middle class (Fernandes 2004). Such processes embolden a violent divide between the urban middle classes and the subaltern. On the other hand, debates on Indian urbanism and middle-classness also stress how the world-class city reflects a contradictory process that seeks to inculcate a set of world-class aesthetics, desires, and practices across a broad class spectrum through the 'democratisation of aspiration' (Ghertner 2011:301). Asher Ghertner (2011), for example, describes how slum residents in Delhi desire to integrate a 'world-class aesthetic' into their own sensibilities. Ghertner further argues that slum residents are not an obstruction to the world-class city but important vectors in world-class city making. For Ghertner, slum residents remake the aesthetic for their own everyday improvements as they 'both oppose and take up the vision' to improve their own everyday life (281). Baviskar and Ray (2011), in their discussion of middle class politics in India, similarly trouble the notion of middle class hegemony and class compartmentalisation. They argue the boundaries of the middle class in post-liberalisation India are no longer bound to white-collar jobs, degrees, and exclusive consumption practices. The universalisation of job precarity (Gooptu 2009), the increase in unemployment among the educated (Jeffery et al. 2008), and the proliferation of consumer cultures across classes, destabilise cultural markers of class, making class boundaries increasingly porous.

My dissertation is concerned with how NGO subject-making and post-NGO youth agency contributes to the destabilisation of categories of middle class and subaltern. It illuminates the tension between the rigidity and permeability between the two in a world-class city. I argue that an NGO habitus is ambivalently entangled with diffused notions of a world-class city aspiration. As NGOs 'develop' youth in red-light areas beyond subalternities of sex work communities, young people develop aspirations and tastes reflecting world-class class

standards but also of subalternity. Like the slum residents in Ghertner's study, I will show in this dissertation how young people both oppose and take up their 'development' as they interact with consumption cultures associated with the world-class city. In turn, I argue that post-NGO young people both trouble and appropriate the distinction between middle class and subaltern.

Between Middle Class and Subaltern

One way scholars conceptualise the muddling of class differences is by re-configuring the boundaries of the middle class. In some studies, the middle class appears as hyphenated or qualified categories, such as the aspiring middle classes (Fernandes 2006), the lower-caste middle class (Saavala 2001), or the subaltern middle class (Pandey 2009). Gyan Pandey (2009), for example, proposes the notion of a subaltern middle class to describe the rise of Dalit communities into financially upwards, educated, and professional life styles. In Pandey's study, Dalit professionals can make claims to the occupational and wealth status of the middle class, yet they continue to remain tied to their subalternity as Dalits, bounded by the violence of caste hierarchies. This conceptualisation is limited to subaltern communities who have the economic capital to even assert a claim to middle classness, which is not the case for most post-NGO youth in my research community.

Another way scholars theorise the cultural access and permeability of subalternity is through the notion of subaltern cosmopolitanisms (Gidwani 2006, McFarlane and Jeffrey 2008, Kothari 2008). Jeffrey and McFarlane (2008) define non-elite cosmopolitanism as having the 'capacity to mediate between different cultures or social worlds (241).' Often this cosmopolitanism is a strategic resource. However, at the same time, non-elite cosmopolitanism is limited in its effects; it is often temporal and sometimes even contradictory. Subaltern communities may have become acquainted with 'modern forms of desire' (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003) and access cultural codes of the upper echelons, however these forms of desire rarely lead to inclusion and self-representation in dominant worlds. The framework of

subaltern cosmopolitanism signals the contained, contingent, and fragmented access of the new subaltern into the middle class, while simultaneously highlighting the lack of inclusivity and belonging she faces.

Drawing from subaltern cosmopolitanism, I examine subaltern young people's post-NGO class mobility and fixities emphasising the intersections of class with gender, as well as, locality and space. I explore the daily life of young people after their participation in NGOs and examine how they mediate their gendered spatial and class-based subalternity in a landscape of hyper visible middle-class cultures of world-class aspiring Kolkata. As I will show, one of the key tropes young people use to mediate their identity, difference, and desires for mobility is respect and respectability.

Respect and Feminine Respectability

Respect and respectability are critical to the study of class and gender formation. Beverley Skeggs (1997) illustrates, in her influential study on working class women in England, how respectability is critical to the development of class categorisations and class embodiment and is inscribed through gender (1997: 2). Respectability, according to Skeggs, is a concern for those who do not possess it: the subaltern classes. Skeggs describes how working class women in England negotiate and accrue value to their subaltern positionality through culturally respectable performances. Philippe Bourgois (1996), in his in-depth ethnography on young men in Puerto Rican Harlem, tracks young men's search for respect through resisting dominant rites and norms and constructing localised forms of respectful masculinity. In India, respect and respectability are similarly gendered and class inflected. Craig Jeffrey et al (2004) argue young men in northern India pursue normative forms of distinction vis-à-vis education in light of underemployment and economic insecurity. Similarly, Nitya Rao (2011) in her study of domestic women workers in Delhi observes how women workers embody and practice trendy urban styles to compensate for the disreputability of their labour. Together, these studies demonstrate how the pursuit of

respect is fragmented and contingent on gender, class, space, and social relations. Furthermore, as Richard Sennett (2003) asserts, respect involves mutuality. It emerges not just from how we see our selves but also in how we are recognised by others. This mutual process is not always harmonious; often times it is incongruent and even contentious. In this dissertation, I track young people's gendered search for respect and respectability in their everyday lives through employment but also cultural practice. Moreover, I study young people's delicate navigation of holding self-respect and desires for social respectability in harmony, and some times, in tension with the wider world.

Respect and respectability are certainly class inflected in West Bengal. Historically, respectability in West Bengal was associated with the elite, genteel Bengali middle classes of the colonial era – the *bhadralok* – literally the respectable people (*bhadra* means worthy or respectable, while *lok* means folk). From the late 19th century, the *bhadralok* were spearheading nationalist projects against British rule and mobilising domestic social reform (Qayum and Ray 2003). An influential construction of respectable femininity also emerged during this time in the form of the *bhadramahila*– genteel, bourgeois, respectable woman – differentiated from the subaltern woman who was construed as a woman in need of development (Chatterjee 1989). The *bhadralok* were distinguished by their 'refined behaviour and cultivated taste' (Scrase 2002: 327).

Interestingly, while the *bhadralok* were deemed superior in cultural, moral, and intellectual disposition, they were not always associated with wealth. Since the partition of Bengal in 1947, the *bhadralok* classes also underwent incremental downward economic mobility (Scrase 2002).

In contemporary India, the *bhadralok* are no longer the dominant middle class group in Bengal, especially with the diversification of the region as well as with the onset of liberalisation and emergence of new economies. However, the construct of *bhadralok* respectability continues to have deep resonance in Bengal today. Qayum and Ray (2003) assert that a new class and configuration of the *bhadralok* has emerged in West Bengal, who they argue are apart of the 'global elite' – 'an educated, world-travelling class created by and invested in the Indian national

project of modernity' (2003: 524). As such, the contemporary *bhadralok* can be seen to resemble Fernandes' notions of the 'new' middle class discussed earlier. Additionally, while *bhadramahila* femininity is relevant as a marker of distinction between the cultured versus the subaltern, other new respectable femininities are also prevalent in the urban landscape. Smita Radhakrishnan (2009), for example, discusses a new 'feminine respectability,' in urban India aligning with the aesthetics and practices of global modernity while maintaining a distinct national belonging.

As I illustrate, the various moral and cultural visions of India's disparate urban middle classes – from old *bhadralok* and the new middle classes, to the *bhadramahila* and new respectable femininities – play a role in the vision of NGO-led youth development. NGOs working with young people partake in a cultural, aesthetic, and moral development of the subaltern classes. Further, circulating tropes of respectability are reinforced through social forces beyond NGOs. In my ethnography, I will examine how post-NGO young people emerging from subaltern cultures of red-light areas navigate hegemonic and counter-hegemonic notions of respect and respectability as they strive to live and improve their everyday lives. I demonstrate how young people both contest and embrace middle-class cultures while both effacing and reclaiming subalternity. In turn, I argue, young people post-NGO practice and perform liminal class subjectivities between middle class and subalternity that trouble class boundaries but not class inequalities in the world-class city. With NGOised habituses, they both contest and embrace subaltern and middle class dispositions, practices, and spaces in their everyday life.

2.5 Conclusion

The theories and debates outlined in this chapter inform the empirical heart of this dissertation: my ethnography of everyday life of youth post-NGO. The discussion of NGOisation, NGO subject-making, youth, transitions, agency, subalternity and world-class cities helps orient the empirical stories, vignettes, and case studies of youth post-NGO in metropolitan Kolkata. The ethnography of post-NGO youth from Kolkata's red-light area will examine their practices and

pathways of work and employment (Chapter Five), consumption and leisure (Chapter Six), and conceptions and practices of making change (Chapter Seven). Before presenting my ethnography however, in the next chapter, I will first outline the methodology informing my inquiry, fieldwork, and writing.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology: From Practitioner to Researcher

3.1 Introduction

It was the thick of monsoon when I arrived in Kolkata. Like previous trips, the principal task upon arrival was to find a place to stay. When I came to hear of a room available for rent in a Mrs. Chadhuri's flat off of Rashbehari Avenue, I made my way to the building in South Kolkata and rang the doorbell. A young woman opened the door. We looked at each other quizzically. In an ambivalent second of confusion and recognition, we realised who the other was. "Sahar?" she exclaimed in disbelief. "Jhimli?" I asked. We embraced, like friends do, who have not met for years.

I first met Jhimli ten years ago at an NGO shelter home for daughters of sex workers and victims of trafficking. As I noted in the introduction, when I first arrived in Kolkata, I was a 23 year old enthusiastic, development worker from the United States assigned to teach "spoken English" to residents living in the shelter home, residents like Jhimli. Jhimli, age 19, had lived in the shelter home for six years. Her journey to the shelter home was convoluted. Jhimli spent her early years in Sonagachi red-light area, where her mother worked as a sex worker. At the age of eight, after a traumatic incident of child abuse, Jhimli was taken into government custody and started living in a government home for children in need of protection. Eventually, Jhimli transitioned to the NGO shelter home.

I never expected to cross paths with Jhimli the way I did that August afternoon in 2011. I was a doctoral student embarking on fieldwork in search a middle-class residence I could call home for a year. As for Jhimli, what was she doing? When an elegant, elderly woman approached us and introduced herself as Mrs. Chaudhuri, the landlady of the flat, I soon realised what Jhimli was doing. She was doing her job, opening the door, just as domestic workers are expected.

I open this chapter with Jhimli to underscore how my scholarly inquiry, theoretically and methodologically, is shaped by and intertwined with personal experience and inquiry. Tariq Jazeel and Colin McFarlane (2007, 2010) invite scholars to conduct research ‘careful of and attentive to our own locatedness in the field’ and its role in knowledge production (2010:114). The inquiry underpinning my dissertation precedes my task as a doctoral researcher; it traces back to observations and queries arising ten years earlier when I started working for NGOs between 2003-2006. During my practice as a development worker from the Indian diaspora, I was curious about the lasting effects of ‘development’ on young people growing up in NGO shelter homes and drop-in-centres. Sometimes I was astounded at the cosmopolitan opportunities that NGOs offered young people from trips to Hyderabad for the Asian Social Forum to visits to Washington DC. At other times, I was doubtful whether NGOs were improving young people’s everyday lives on the ground. My query was further heightened when I returned to the United States to a ‘post-NGO’ landscape of career possibilities in international development, youth work, as well as graduate study. The social, economic, and political windows my experiences as an NGO worker unfastened were full of promise. I suspected my experiences were asymmetrical to my development counterparts, the subjects of development, such as Jhimli. This troubled me. I was curious and concerned about the aftermath of young people’s lives, like Jhimli’s, post-NGO. How did spending formative years of childhood and youth influence her sense of self, aspirations, and opportunities? What kinds of social and economic immobility did NGOs produce in Jhimli’s life? How did growing up with NGOs shape young people’s political orientations and practices amidst inequalities? Years later, in 2011, I returned to Kolkata to investigate the role of NGOs in effecting young people’s lives in the city. As someone who participated in the NGO development project, I wanted to better understand how NGOs interact with the urban processes to engender change in young people’s lives. This chapter explains the methodology of research I conducted in Kolkata between August 2011 and September 2012. First, I outline the rationale behind the ethnographic research design of this

study. Then, I outline my recruitment strategy, methods, along with a discussion on the participants in my research. I conclude with reflections on my positionality and my process of analysis and writing.

3.2 Research Design: Why Ethnography?

My research approaches debates on NGOs, youth, and subalternity in Kolkata through the post-NGO lives of ‘subaltern’ subjects of development from red-light areas. My research asks questions about NGOs and the city through the everyday lives and experiences of youth. It investigates young people’s construction of their sense of self, attentive to NGOs and the city as both resources and obstructions in the process of youthful self-making. Further, my research seeks to examine the social mobilities and fixities NGOs propel in young people’s urban lives by following young people’s obstacles, privileges, encounters, frustrations, and sense of ease in the world-class city. Finally, my research examines how NGOised, classed, and gendered dispositions trouble and perpetuates class boundaries in the city. Essentially, my inquiry demands attention to the ‘fleshy, messy, indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz 2004: x) of young people post-NGO as ‘data’ to unravel the promises, hazards, and contradictions of NGOs and city life in metropolitan India. Thus, I decided to undertake an ethnographic research process as it allows me to effectively analyse the intimate entanglements of NGOs, city life, and subalternity at a scale of the everyday through a variety of tools.

An ethnographic methodology offers the tools for sustained explication of young people’s lives through immersive and situated research. It provides methods to sift and examine young people’s experiences, practices, and perspectives through interviews and focus groups interpretations, but also, through participant observation and deep hangout. This combination of methods makes space for the tension between participant narrative through interview, group participant analysis in focus groups, and also researcher interpretation through observation. I utilised a range of ethnographic methods over 13 months in Kolkata between August 2011 and

September 2012. Granted, ethnography is sometimes criticised for being limited in scale and scope, offering only a localised glimpse bounded in a particular time and space; however, one of ethnography's strengths lies in offering situated fine grained insight into critical events, structural factors, and social processes relevant to broader worlds. In the case of this dissertation, I address global concerns related to NGOisation, social inequality, and urban change through a localised ethnographic focus on young people's social worlds of NGOs, red-light areas, and metropolitan Kolkata.

An ethnographic approach to my research maximised my positionality as someone with history with NGOs, youth, and red-light areas. My previous friendships with youth communities offered the foundation and rapport for me to cultivate relationships of trust with participants that allowed us to have conversations on sensitive issues about youth experiences with NGOs, including their vulnerabilities, desires, aspirations, and frustrations with their experiences of NGOs and more broadly, the city. My past familiarity with NGO youth programmes and city's red-light areas heightened my awareness of research topics and methods that trigger discomfort and suspicion among red-light area communities and NGO communities. Conducting research in red-light areas is a complicated task. Research is not a novel project in red-light areas. Just as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) found research to be the 'dirtiest word' in indigenous communities, similarly the practice of research or what residents of red-light areas call "survey" triggers suspicion (1). There is a long history of surveillance in red-light areas by police, NGO workers, public health workers, researchers, documentarians, social workers, and journalists, particularly in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and anti-trafficking efforts (Shah 2013, Ghosh 2005). The aggressive culture of research has rightfully fostered anger, distrust, and what Shah calls 'surveillance fatigue' (2013:553) among red-light area residents members. Far too often, sex workers and their families have been subjected to intrusive, insensitive questions – particularly related to sexuality and sexual behaviour. They have been approached as objects of curiosity because they are exceptionalised or stigmatised as sex workers or children of sex workers. Much

of the research conducted in red-light areas, especially for public policy, concerns public health, violence and abuse, or interventions and activism. These studies rely on quantitative metrics through the use of surveys, census, and questionnaires. In some cases, they also rely on narrow case studies of individuals – sex workers, children, brothel owners – offering anecdotal insight behind statistics and metrics.

For my research, I wanted to avoid the triggering signifiers of “doing surveys” associated with census or questionnaires and conduct research that appeared less abrasive and offer more integrated approaches to conducting research with communities through ethnography. At the same time, the embedded nature of ethnography can be a more illusive and sometimes deceptive research process. I wanted to conduct research in a way that would make my participants feel comfortable but also cognisant of my research practice. I attempted to foster awareness and comfort among participants in a number of ways. First, I chose to conduct research with youth, NGOs, and communities with which I had previous ties to as a former NGO worker. My relationship history with these communities offered a foundation of trust to build upon for my new task of research. Second, my research questions were pivotal to fostering ease among my research community. My inquiry was not related to experiences of sex work, trafficking, or even life in sex work economy, common topics of research in red-light areas. Rather, my inquiry centred on NGOs as the primary object of study but through the lens of young people’s urban experience. Third, I employed ethnographic methods that offered multiple avenues to investigate young people’s lived experiences post-NGO with reasonable transparency and consent, but also with the acknowledgement that the knowledge produced was my interpretation of moments, conversation, and narratives. In the following sections, I describe and outline each category of research participants informing my ethnography, my recruitment process, and the various methods of research I employed with each participant category.

3.3 Recruitment and Methods

The people featuring and informing my research include forty post-NGO youth, 16 staff members of NGOs and funding agencies, 10 current youth NGO members, 10 community members and family members of young people living in red-light areas, as well as myself. I provide a list of post-NGO youth participants' names, ages, and other biographical and occupation information in Appendix I. To establish my research community, I first decided to recruit post-NGO youth participants, as they are the key actors of my ethnography. Once I established my post-NGO youth community, I selected NGOs, funding agencies, and red-light areas communities to conduct research with based on young people's connections and associations.

To generate my post-NGO research community, I decided to start where my inquiries began – with young people I befriended and acquainted during my tenure as NGO worker between 2003-2006. Beginning with familiar and established youth networks appeared to be the most productive way to start generating my research community. Unfortunately, I lost touch with many youth during my years in the United States and England. However, there were three with whom I remained in touch with through occasional phone and email correspondence. Prior to returning to Kolkata in 2011, I informed these three friends regarding both my research and arrival plans. Upon arriving, with their help, I acquired the contacts of other youth I once knew and began to build a set of contacts and construct my research community.

I also attempted to connect with post-NGO outside of my known circle of young friends and acquaintances. This proved to be challenging however. In order to locate unknown young people after their participation with NGOs, I contacted five different NGOs working with young people in slums and red-light areas. I asked the NGO directors to introduce me to young people who had 'graduated' or moved on from their programmes. The young people NGOs introduced me to tended to interact with me as if they were spokespersons for their NGO. They appeared to speak to me as they would to a potential funder, with great praise for the

organisation. As weeks passed, it became evident that it was difficult to persuade these youth of my critical research interest, especially because my initial introduction to them was through their childhood NGO. This introduction seemed to implicate my research inquiry as an NGO sponsored effort, which influenced young people's participation in my research. Therefore, I abandoned this strategy and singularly focused on developing a snowball sample through my post-NGO youth friends and acquaintances. Generating my research sample through young people who were friends or acquaintances had benefits. First, conducting research with and through young people I was familiar with provided a foundation of trust and assurance that I continued to cultivate during fieldwork. These participant-friends were also invested in recruiting other young people into my research and helped me identify other post-NGO youth to include in my sample. Second, for newly enrolling participants who I previously never met before, my friends and acquaintances' recommendation provided assurance and validation of my research as independent of NGO agendas. I could be seen as a 'third party' to some degree.

The post-NGO youth in my research community consist of forty young people, including 18 women and 22 men. All participants are between 20-32 years old. The young people in my research community come from five different red-light areas and surrounding slums, all of which are designated as Below Poverty Line (BPL) neighbourhoods. Over half of the youth participants (22) have ties to Kalighat red-light area in the South of the city. Other red-light areas that young people are from include, Tollygunge (2) and Khidderpore (2) and in the north of the city, Bow Bazaar (7) and Sonagachi (4). Three participants, although enrolled in a NGOs working with "red-light area children" have origins in neighbourhoods far from the red-light area. They arrived in NGO shelter homes due to risks to child abuse in other contexts. Even though almost of my participants have roots in a red-light area or surrounding slums, when I met them in 2011, they were dispersed across the city, some continuing to reside in the red-light areas, others in far corners of Kolkata and its suburbs, and one in a small village in West Bengal.

My research community is also differentiated in terms of ethnicity, caste, and religion. Thirty-two of my forty youth participants are ethnically Bengali. The others are “Hindustani” – a common term used in Bengal to refer to communities from Northern and Central India. Unlike ethnicity, religion and especially caste are less straightforward in the lives of my research community. During my fieldwork, I chose not to inquire about caste identities, as it appeared to be a sensitive and uncomfortable topic of discussion in red-light areas. Generally speaking, it is difficult to definitively classify red-light area residents along lines of caste and religion; especially as sex workers take on new caste and religious identities for themselves and their families over the span of their professional careers by frequently changing identity markers including names and appearances. For instance, it was very common for several of my post-NGO youth participants to biologically identify as one religion but culturally identify and embody another. Let me provide an example to illustrate the complexity of caste and religious categories with my post-NGO youth participants. One participant, whom I call Protima, was born to Muslim parents originally from Bangladesh. Protima’s mother left her marriage early because of ongoing family violence, realizing only after her departure, that she was pregnant with Protima. She arrived in Kalighat and eventually partnered with a man and started to live with him. Protima was born and was given a Hindu first name and the surname of her mother’s new partner, who decided to father Protima. When Protima was eight years old, her ‘father’ deceased. Years later her mother partnered with another lower caste man. Later on in life, Protima married a lower caste Bengali man. Protima therefore identifies as “Muslim” but also “Bengali Hindu.” Like Protima, several of the young people in my research community were born of inter-caste or inter-religious parents or were biologically one religion but culturally another. Furthermore, names and surnames did not always align with young people’s cultural origins; they changed over time for several participants. Even though the intersections of caste, religious, and gender inequalities were pivotal to several mothers’ and children’s arrival to the red-light areas, these identities were slippery and fluid during their duration in red-light areas. Among post-NGO

youth research participants, religion and caste were never clear-cut, with the exception of a few cases. Due to this thorny terrain, I do not fix caste and religion onto the identities of young people featuring in the current form of my ethnography, nor do I integrate a caste and religion based analysis in my discussion of their lives. While these two prisms of analysis are beyond the scope of this dissertation, they are areas of research I would like to investigate in the future.

All young people and other research participants appear under pseudonyms. In some cases, I have obscured identifying factors such as specific occupations, while keeping true to the nature of their identity and experience. For a reference list of all youth participants and their corresponding age, sex, neighbourhood, medium of NGO intervention, and occupation, see Appendix Two. In the next section, I outline the various ethnographic methods I conducted with post-NGO youth participants, NGOs staff people, current NGO members, and red-light area community residents. All fieldwork was conducted by me in Bangla, Hindi, and/or English, depending on the linguistic preference of my participants.

Observation and Deep Hanging Out

Among my post-NGO youth research community, 16 young people served as key ethnographic participants with whom I spent a great deal of time conducting observation and deep hangout. Ethnographers are known to build organic relationships with the people they study ‘violating the canons of positivist research by becoming intimately involved in the lives of the people’ (Bourgois 2003:13). The primary method in my research was observation and ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) – that is, informally immersing myself in the lives of post-NGO youth, a few of whom were friends. These young people with whom I conducted deep hangout included young people I had prior friendships with as well as youth acquaintances who I only came to intimately know over the course of fieldwork. I chose these 16 young people, as they represented the diversity of key trajectories and lifestyles from my broader post-NGO youth participants. I spent several hours and days with these key participants. I accompanied them to the movies, attended

birthdays, weddings, and *pujas*; we shared meals, and struck *addas* at chai stalls, parks, and each other's homes. I hung out with post-NGO youth one-on-one as well as in small, intimate friendship groups. These 16 young people in turn feature more prominently in my ethnography. During fieldwork, I was particularly attentive to three everyday arenas of daily life that emerged as timely concerns for my research community: work and employment, consumption and embodiment, and political practice. These three spheres constitute the ethnography of my empirical chapters.

Among the key 16 post-NGO youth participants, five also served as 'participant-mentors' of my research. Participant-mentors are young people I consulted to develop my frame, analysis, and arguments over the course of fieldwork and writing. During fieldwork, I frequently turned to these five young people for advice and feedback on my research process and content, such as interview styles, nature of questions, or emerging analyses on the field. These young people were chosen as 'participant-mentors' because they expressed enthusiasm and concern for the evolution of my research and expressed a desire to share their own ideas and advice.

I also spent a great deal of time doing participant observation in one specific red-light area in the locality Kalighat. I wanted my research to be informed by the sounds, sights, and events of red-light areas. Even though young people in my research are from five different red-light areas, I decided to conduct participant observation only in one red-light area in the locality of Kalighat to develop a deeper understanding of the neighbourhood where nearly half of my post-NGO research participants had childhood origins. Furthermore, Kalighat also happened to be the red-light area where I had greatest familiarity. During my years as an NGO worker, I spent two years conducting art workshops in Kalighat's red-light area and became acquainted with the community and space of the neighbourhood. Many residents are also familiar with me. Therefore, Kalighat served as a fitting neighbourhood to conduct participant observation. During fieldwork, I went to Kalighat two to three days a week for a few hours, mostly visiting post-NGO youth, but also having conversations with mothers, sex workers, community

members, current NGO youth members, and NGO staff members.

Interviews

Interviews were central to my research process. I conducted various interviews with post-NGO youth, NGO and funding agency staff members, as well as red-light areas community members. For all interviews, I chose a semi-structured style. Unlike structured interviews which often lack space for flexibility or unstructured interviews which can ‘wander off in any direction’, a semi-structured format was conducive to providing depth, breadth, as well as direction for more specific research questions (Leech 2002: 65). Throughout most interviews I carried an ‘interview guide’ (Dunn 2000) to refer to, but there were many interviews, especially with red-light area community members that I conducted without a guide in order to appear as informal as possible because of participants’ heightened awareness and negative associations with past research interviews in red light areas. Through every interview – whether with youth, NGO professionals, or community members, I became a more proficient interviewer. I continued to change the phrasing and sequencing of my questions based on lessons from prior interviews in order to improve my clarity and the flow of the interview. For example, my first interview questions were significantly re-worded and re-ordered during my later interviews. It is important to remember the narratives from my interviews are not entirely representative of my research community; rather they offer ‘a diversity of opinions and experiences’ (Dunn 2000) through situated, everyday lives. Certainly, shared themes and experiences emerged across some interviews, but at the same time, each interview presented variance among my interviewee sets of post-NGO youth, NGO youth, NGO staff members, and community members in red-light areas.

Post-NGO Youth

I conducted extensive semi-structured life history interviews with forty post-NGO youth between the ages 18-32 to investigate how young people understand their own individual

experiences and imbue a sense of meaning to their experience of growing up with NGOs, post-NGO (Valentine 1997). These interviews lasted from 1 – 2 hours and were digitally recorded. My interviews covered topics of childhood, NGO experiences, education, work, love, leisure, morality, personal ambitions, and reflections on NGOs. I also conducted a second round of interviews with ten individuals from the 16 post-NGO youth I chose as my core research community. Among these 16, only ten were available for second interviews. In my second interviews, I followed up and delved further into the themes raised in first interviews. My second interviewees were chosen because they were expressive and covered a diversity of experiences consistent with my larger research sample.

During interviews with post-NGO youth, differences in class position became an important consideration for me, especially when deciding upon an interview site. Unlike participant observation, which generally took place in the everyday spaces of young people's lives, including red-light areas, drop-in-centres, homes, or elsewhere, many of my research participants wanted to conduct their interviews in other spaces besides their own home or neighbourhood. In some cases, young people expressed concern that their family homes in the red-light area were too cramped or too crowded with eavesdroppers. In other cases, young people did not want to meet in NGO drop-in-centres because they were no longer associated with them or because they felt they could not speak freely at the centre. I also preferred not to conduct interviews in NGO spaces for fear of casting the interview as something sourced by NGOs. The best option for many youth was somewhere *baire*, outside in the world. *Baire* varied greatly – it could mean a chai stall, an expensive national coffee shop chain, my home, a park, or a street corner. Most young people did not suggest a space themselves and left the decision to me. I wanted to select a place conducive to a digital recorder and a space that would allow them to feel at ease so they could respond freely to the interview questions. However, such places were tricky to come by in Kolkata, particularly because of the heightened class demarcations of public spaces.

Each youth participant embodied and expressed varied class desires, comfort, and mobility. In order to select an interview site, I found myself ‘class profiling’ my participants. I would consider who might desire meeting at Café Coffee Day Express over Rs.80 cappuccinos and who might prefer cups of Rs. 2 chai on the street, as long as the street was quiet. Who would feel comfortable meeting me at my no frills, simply furnished flat in a ‘posh’ South Kolkata neighbourhood? The process of class profiling made me anxious at times; I did not want to place my participants into boxes assuming their limited mobility or discomfort with particular places. Yet at the same time, my compulsion to ‘class profile’ reminded me of how variant post-NGO youth are in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital. This dialogical process of class-profiling and suspending class assumptions also contributed to refining my analyses for my ethnography on young people’s variant and contradictory experiences of class mobility. For example, in some instances, I was surprised at some participants’ comfort and desires to be interviewed at a higher end coffee shop. These instances were generative moments for my research where I learned more about young people’s class practices. In other instances, I was affirmed when some participants avoided certain spaces and chose others for interviews. There were some occasions, especially in the earlier stages of fieldwork, when I chose a space that was less comfortable for a participant and in turn affected their ease in the interview. Over time, I improved my ability to elicit young people’s suggestions and preferences. Furthermore, in several cases, the interview settings enriched the details of ethnography and contributed to my task of describing young people’s post-NGO subjectivities and their engagement with the urban social world.

NGOs

I also facilitated semi-structured interviews with 16 NGO professionals, lasting for 1-2 hours, including funders, NGO directors, NGO project managers, and fieldworkers in their workplaces. These interviews were recorded on my digital recorder. These representatives

occupied diverse positions in NGOs from executive directors, programme managers, to field-based teachers. These interviews took place in a range of workspaces from conference rooms to drop-in-centres in slums. The interview covered topics such as organisational goals, nature of youth programming, assessment methods, perceived intended and unintended effects on young people, and perceptions of local and global trends of NGO work. In my interviews, I also asked NGO representatives to reflect on the trajectories of their former youth participants' lives post-NGO. My interviews with NGO professionals allowed me to 'see the other side of the coin' as it were, the perspective of facilitators of development in tandem with post-NGO youth, that is, the beneficiaries of development. Interestingly, several young people, post-NGO, transitioned into roles as NGO staff members. However, my interview set of NGO representatives does not include post-NGO youth staff members

The NGOs I selected for this research were the organisations post-NGO youth participated in as children and adolescence. These NGOs I selected also served as instructive cases because of the differences of scale, orientation, and especially ideology related to youth development and sex work economies. All organisations appear under a pseudonym, with the exception of one, Durbar. Among NGOs appearing in my dissertation, two feature centrally. These two organisations, which I call Jibon (Life), and Adhikar (Rights), were particularly formative for my post-NGO youth participants. They were the two organisations young people cited as central to the development of their social and political aspirations and practices.

Jibon is a self-identified anti-trafficking NGO focusing on child protection and women's rights, with funding from the U.S. State Department of Trafficking in Persons. Jibon is a medium sized NGO with three shelter homes, drop-in-centres in multiple red-light areas, as well as programmes in the rural districts of West Bengal to promote anti-trafficking consciousness. In 1993, Jibon actively recruited young girls from red-light areas – primarily daughters of sex workers – into long-term resident shelter homes. It also started operating drop-in-centres with range of activities over the years. In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, their drop-in-centres offered

after-school academic coaching, youth groups, sari-making skill training, as well as opportunities for off-site vocational training. As I will explain in greater detail in the next chapter, Jibon is an organisation that aligns with sex work abolitionist agendas of anti-trafficking. This position shapes the inflection of their programmes and organisational culture.

The second organisation is Adhikar – a smaller organisation that operates in two red-light areas: Kalighat and Khidderpore. Established in 2002 by group of teenagers from Kalighat under the guidance of middle-class mentor-activist – Adhikar began as a community based organisation focussing on adolescent sexual health and gender justice. Adhikar is funded by one national child right's funding agency. It is also supported by occasional donations from middle-class contributors or one-time project grants from small-scale local foundations. Over the years, especially since obtaining the financial support from a national child right's funding agency, Adhikar's agenda and discourse began to include anti-trafficking and child protection. Adhikar operates a drop-in-centre from noon to 11pm with various structured "sessions" for junior members (ages 6-13) and senior members (ages 13 plus). The sessions include education on sexual health, child rights, anti-trafficking, gender justice, and human rights. This organisation differs from Jibon in that it is purely based in red-light areas through drop-in-centre work. It is also smaller in scale with funding from national sources. Furthermore, it does not have an abolitionist stance towards sex work. Rather, it ideologically falls under what Prabha Kotiswaran (2011) calls 'middle-class feminist' position towards sex work, a position that supports sex workers but not the sex work economy.

Two other organisations I discuss, albeit peripherally, are organisation I call Kala (Art) and an organisation known as Durbar (Unstoppable). These two organisations feature in the lives of many post-NGO participants, but were less formative for my participants. Therefore my references to these organisations remain minor in my ethnography. Kala is a smaller art-education organisation. Unlike the other organisations, it has a very explicit and singular methodology towards youth development – art education as a means of empowerment for

participating children and teenagers. It is funded by a medley of international and national funding sources. The second organisation, Durbar, is the only organisation appearing without a pseudonym, because of its exceptionally recognisable operation of a sex worker's union. Durbar, a sex-worker's rights organisation operates the well-known and sole sex worker's union in the country. Durbar also has a substantial child and youth centred programming; however, the post-NGO youth in my research did not directly identify Durbar as formative institution in their childhood and adolescence, even though some participants attended Durbar programmes. However, interestingly, some of the post-NGO youth are now employed at Durbar. Durbar is a well-funded organisation with international, national, and government and foundation funds.

In my analysis, Jibon and Adhikar emerge as central NGOs, while others are peripheral in the stories, narratives, and anecdotes because post-NGO youth considered them as more influential in the social, economic, and political lives. Even though I highlight these two NGOs over others, this dissertation is not about these organisations in particular. The featured NGOs serve as cases to analyse how NGOs more generally attempt to regulate youth and how youth attempt to exceed its regulation. They also serve as sites to examine larger trends of the effects NGOs and NGOisation more broadly produces in young people's urban everyday lives, post-NGO.

I also conducted research interviews with two staff members from two other NGOs that work beyond red-light areas and instead operate programmes for 'slum children,' 'street children,' and 'railway children' instead of 'red-light area children.' I conducted research with these NGOs in order to develop a comparative perspective on NGO youth services and youth experience beyond red-light areas. In this dissertation I do not draw out an explicitly comparative analysis, however, this knowledge shapes my dissertation narrative, themes, and arguments.

NGO Funders

I also conducted 1-hour recorded interviews with four programme managers from four funding agencies. Two of these agencies were large-scale international funders based in the global North with development programmes across the world. One was a smaller international funding agency based in Europe with programmes in South Asia and Africa. The last was a national capacity building organisation for children's and youth development in India. Each of these organisations funds and builds capacity for either or both child protection and anti-trafficking activities in West Bengal. This sample of funders offers examples of prominent types funding organisations operating in Kolkata, varying in scale and capacity from global north funders to small-scale local, national funders.

NGO Youth

In order to maintain perspective on how NGO programmes in drop-in-centres and shelter homes are changing over time, I also conducted research with young people currently participating in the following NGOs: Jibon, Adhikar and two NGOs working beyond 'red-light area children' and the red-light area. In these NGOs, I observed the activity in various drop-in-centres, attended workshops and sessions, and conducted semi-structured interviews with four young people participating in NGOs. Certainly, my presence in these sessions altered the dynamics of these workshops, but at the same time, several of these youth members were accustomed to 'foreign visitors' such as volunteers, funders, or researchers like myself. I found it useful to compare the changing youth development activities and discourses from the memories of young people coming of age with NGOs between the 1990s –mid 2000s and participating members in 2011-2012.

Community Members in Red-light Area

I also conducted less formal interviews with 10 red-light area residents and community members, four mothers, and six community residents in Kalighat and Khidderpore. These interviews were also semi-structured and the least formal of all. They were conducted in interviewees' homes and in alleyways and generally lasted 30 minutes to an hour. These interviews were not recorded because of the heightened sensitivity to research practices in red-light areas. In these interviews, I asked general questions to elicit community members' opinions on NGOs and perceived NGO effects on youth and the broader community in the red-light area. In my interviews with mothers, I explained that I was not concerned with "arrival stories" to the red-light area or "sex work stories." I made this clear in order to disassociate my research with research on victimisation. Instead, I centred my inquiry on experiences, opinions, and interpretations of NGOs, recording "arrivals to the red-light area" narratives only if initiated by the participant. I also consulted with my participant-mentors to assist in setting up interviews with community members who were distrustful of NGOs and outsiders.

As I was conducting research in red-light areas, my youth participant-mentors warned to be careful as a researcher, especially when it came to interviews with community members: "Don't record anything" or "Don't write stuff down." They warned me against "worst practices" they had witnessed. For instance, in recent memory, one researcher distributed surveys inquiring about sexual practices among residents. The survey caused uproar in the community. Therefore in my interviews I avoided the use of recorders and other technologies, including pen and paper. I listened attentively and wrote up field notes after each visit.

Focus Group Discussions

Based on themes prominently emerging in my interviews with both post-NGO youth and NGO professionals, I moderated five focus group discussions with 15 post-NGO youth on two broad themes: class and politics.

The focus group discussions were designed to elicit responses to issues and themes I was puzzled by over the course of individual interviews and participant observation. They allowed me to interpret early findings and curiosities through structured conversation with groups of young people with diverse perspectives. In my focus group discussion, I used open-ended questions or hypothetical scenarios that fostered discussion and led to a ‘synergistic effect’ (Cameron 2000) where participants contested ideas and opinions and in some cases reached consensus. Focus groups also allowed me to witness young people engage with and challenge their peers’ opinions and in some cases rethink their own.

All focus group discussions were conducted in my home and lasted for three hours. Each group discussion had five post-NGO youth participants. The participants of each focus group discussion were selected based on NGO affiliation to ensure some familiarity between the participants in the group. Young people who considered Jibon as their primary NGO of adolescence and childhood were in one group, and young people who considered Adhikar as their primary NGO of the past were divided into two other groups. As I was pairing individuals for each focus group discussion, some of my participant-mentors expressed nerves at being paired with youth they had not been in contact with for a number of years. I was nervous about the group dynamic, but to my surprise, most focus groups evolved into extended friendly *addas* – a cultural concept and practice in West Bengal, which is the equivalent to ‘hanging out.’ Some of the focus groups also led to spontaneous sleepovers in my flat. Months later, I came to know that some of the focus group discussions led to enhanced bonds and friendships. For example, some young people who met during a focus group discussion now meet regularly as friends over the weekends. In other instances, some participants bonded over shared experiences, such as job exploitation or family alienation, and exchanged strategies for coping and changing their conditions.

A Note on Sequencing

It became apparent to me early on that the sequencing of my methods was critical in cultivating rapport and ensuring participant comfort. My sequencing varied for different participant sets.

For post-NGO youth, who I knew from before, a typical sequence of methods included the following: 1) reunion meeting, 2) research consent, 3) deep hangouts, 4) interview, 5) series of deep hangouts, in some cases, 6) second interview, and 7) focus group discussion. For post-NGO youth I was less familiar with, my sequencing consisted of: 1) introduction, 2) consent, 3) interview, 4) a series of hangouts, 5) second interview, in some cases, 6) focus group discussion with deep hangouts interspersed.

For NGO staff members, my sequencing was more straightforward. It consisted of an introduction or reunion meeting followed by gaining consent and then an interview. With some red-light areas community members, I began with hangouts, especially if they were mothers of post-NGO youth who were my friends, and then requested consent for an interview. With others, I started with consented interviews and followed up with visits and conversations. Finally, the primary methods I employed with current NGO members consisted of consent and participant observation in NGO sessions, sometimes accompanied by deep hangouts at drop-in-centers in between formal NGO sessions.

3.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

In the tradition of feminist ethnography (Abu Lughod 1990, Viswesaran 2003), I aim to conduct research that is ‘committed, passionate, positioned, partial but critical knowledge’ (McDowell 1992a: 413). Feminist scholars have prioritised the strategy of situating knowledge as a means to avoid universality and false neutrality (Rose 1997). I am aware that my research is rooted in the lives of particular young people, NGOs, and red-light areas, whose actions and narrations during research, are shaped by my own presence and positionality as a former NGO worker and now researcher. As I will go on to describe below, in the tradition of feminist geography, I conducted

and wrote this ethnography with the recognition of dynamic positionalities as well as the embodied and limited nature of knowledge production. McDowell 1992a, McDowell 1992b, Rose 1997, Nagar 2002).

I am an outsider in the world of red-light areas, but like participants in my research community, I also embody multiple and shifting subjectivities contingent on moments, contexts, and spaces of research. Sometimes my status as a DPhil candidate at Oxford emerged in the foreground, sometimes my history as an NGO educator, and sometimes my role as a *bandhu* or friend. Sometimes my wealth and class standing was muted, and sometimes my foreign, diasporic Indian American Muslimness were glaringly visible. I did not conceal or evade my subjectivities or positionalities, but was sensitive to their effect on my performance as researcher. I extensively thought about my comportment whether in a red light area or in the office of an international development agency. Just as I would switch languages in order to conduct research – English, Hindi, Bengali all of which I am fluent in – to meet my subjects – I also switched cultural comportment. There were instances when I would intentionally dress up and dress down, when I would stress my affiliation with Oxford or reduce it to a mere footnote in conversation. This process of ‘code switching’ or what feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (1987) calls ‘world travelling’- moving through multiple social worlds - was not done out of deception, but out of respect and hospitality towards my research community (Madison 2005: 99). Adjusting my comportment to be appropriate in the world I was in – whether it was a street corner or an NGO gala – while also maintaining my personal integrity required a delicate balance. However, this practice of cultural shifting felt natural. It was not far from my usual *modus operandi* of performing myself appropriately across diverse social and emotional landscapes. Further, my prior experience and familiarity with the slang, norms, and aesthetic conventions of marginalised youth communities in red-light areas enhanced my ability to code-switch (2005: 104). At the same time, through this process, I became aware of the privileges I have that allow social fluidity between spaces and cultures that are fundamentally class-inflected, especially in contrast to many

of the subaltern young people I interviewed.

One aspect of my identity that I was particularly conscious of was my past as an NGO educator. This history both opened and foreclosed opportunities of connection and trust between my research participants and me. On one hand, my history as an NGO educator could render me as an unsafe person with whom to share NGO reflections. For example, a few youth participants felt the need to praise the NGO I formerly worked at, in case I would take offense to their criticisms. I responded to these rare situations by expressing my own critique of my NGO as a means to demonstrate my willingness to receive critical feedback. For instance, when young people wished that their NGO experience had emphasised formal schooling instead of arts-education, I shared how over the years I have questioned my own relevance as an arts-educator a decade ago, in a context where other basic needs were not being met.

In some cases, my new avatar as a researcher caused confusion. A few young people thought my research was a new NGO project, which might include fun “workshops,” weekend residential trips outside of Kolkata, or possible stipend-based work. These young people were often disappointed when they realised that my research would not involve such field trips or stipends. For the most part however, I believe my history as an NGO educator enabled me to conduct more effective ethnographic fieldwork by building upon ‘insider’ knowledge, prior bonds of trust, and long standing rapport from my work in Kolkata many years before. Particularly, in relation to some of the key post-NGO young people appearing within my ethnography, I was more than just a former NGO educator; I was also a friend. Our prior friendship allowed for my acceptance in the intimate lives of these young people.

At times my friendship with these young people also was a source of anxiety for me. Throughout my year of fieldwork, the boundaries of friendship and research blurred, challenging me to explore what it meant to be an ethical researcher as well as an ethical friend. As Jodie Taylor (2011) describes, with ‘intimate insiders’ – that is, researchers conducting work among friends – sometimes it is hard to detect whether something is said ‘on or off the record’ (14).

Further even with full disclosure and consent, anxieties emerge regarding when it is ethical to use intimate knowledge for research or when observation becomes 'privileged eavesdropping' (Burke 1989 quoted in Taylor 2011: 14). There were some topics of conversation that I concluded to be clearly 'off the record,' for research and were meant only between friends. For instance, several young people discussed their love and sex lives with me, however, these discussions were narrated with such personal intimacy that I interpreted their revelations were meant for a friend, not a researcher. Therefore, I do not greatly emphasize romantic and sexual relationships of young people in this dissertation, even though it constitutes as a sphere of daily life that is influenced by NGOs and the city. As a researcher working among friends, I attempted to draw some distinct boundaries between friendship and research in order to ensure an unambiguous and solid ground for friendship.

Sometimes however, the boundaries between conversations among friends and discussions with research participants were not always clear. For example, there were several informal hangouts after which I took extensive field notes. One evening, after a casual deep-hangout with some participants, I walked my friends to the bus stop. It was late and I informed them how my night was not over, especially because now I would return to my flat and write about our conversation. One participant, jolted in response. "You will write about tonight?" He asked. "Yes," I said and felt deeply uncomfortable. The night ended with his shock and my discomfort. After a few days, we met up again and we had an extended conversation about the process of 'participation observation' and 'deep hangout.' I attempted to further elucidate my research process and make myself available for any questions and concern. Through this process I also tried to alleviate my own anxiety. After our conversation, he appeared more comfortable, yet my anxiety remained and remains. Throughout fieldwork and writing, I tried to channel my discomfort into a productive sensitivity to the lines between friendship and research.

The boundaries between friendship and research were ever-present over the course of

fieldwork and writing. They were further heightened in my mind as research participants recounted bitter and hurt feelings of “being used” (*babohar kora*) as case studies by NGOs workers and mentors, a phenomenon I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Seven. Young people sometimes felt betrayed by NGO workers, volunteers, and researchers like myself. These young people recounted common instances in which they shared personal stories and narratives to NGO workers which were later abstracted into “case studies,” to be used in grant proposals or in media interviews for publicity without any direct or sustainable efforts to improve young people’s everyday lives. In one instance during fieldwork, I shared my anxiety with one of my youth participants and participant-mentors named Deb. I told him I was afraid that youth participants might feel that I am using them as well, similar to the ways they feel they have been used in the past by NGO workers and other researchers. Deb responded: “Back then, we were younger. We weren’t able to choose what we wanted to do. Now we are choosing.” Despite Deb’s reassurance of his informed consent to research, the balance between friendship and research is delicate. It remains a source of anxiety and reflection and shaped my practice of reciprocity and accountability towards my wider research community.

Reciprocity and Accountability

I am aware and appreciative of the time and space every member of my research community offered me. While I did not remunerate my participants, I tried to reciprocate their generosity in alternative ways. For the NGOs professionals, I volunteered my time and skills to their organisations. I assisted with English translation, documentation, and report writing, and provided creative writing workshops for their youth members. I will also reciprocate NGO generosity by sharing my research in different mediums. I will send e-copies of my dissertation to all participating NGOs and funding organisations. With post-NGO youth communities, I will offer oral reports of my arguments and analysis in a collective forum when I return to Kolkata after my viva. During fieldwork among youth communities, with a few exceptions, I provided

meals and snacks during interviews and made myself available to young people for advice or assistance. Whenever interviews or hangouts took place in public settings, I took responsibility of covering costs for any meals, drinks, or activities consumed. Furthermore, for my many friends, I ensured that I was not always ‘working’ but also practicing friendship by offering an ear during times of distress, spending quality time for leisure, and sharing stories about my personal life.

3.5 Field notes, Analysis, and Writing

After all hangouts, informal conversations, or observations, I wrote down ‘jottings’ (Emerson et al. 1995) – small reminder notes – in my field notebook or pieces of paper. I would type extensive field notes after each ‘episode’ within 24 hours on my laptop in my Kolkata flat. At first, I experimented with taking notes during conversations, but after my first attempt, I quickly realised it inhibited my ability to listen with mindfulness and in some cases made my conversation partner uncomfortable, even though nothing was explicitly expressed. Thereafter, I changed my method and wrote jottings and longer field notes after each episode. I transcribed all recorded interviews with post-NGO youth and NGO and funding organisation staff members.

My process of analysis began with the onset of fieldwork. After writing every field note and transcribing every interview, I would identify and make notes of key themes in my notes and transcriptions. Upon returning to Oxford in September 2012, I re-read all my field notes and transcriptions adding newly observed themes. I chose not to use any coding technology and instead decided to intuitively select core themes to inform the arc of my chapters, while integrating other key themes in my sub arguments. I wrote this dissertation in Oxford and New York City. As I was writing my dissertation, I regularly consulted with my youth ‘participant-mentors’ to share and receive feedback on select emerging chapter arguments and conclusions over long distance Skype calls and “whatsapp” text messages. For example, I sometimes clarified the connotation of particular words or phrases used by post-NGO youth. In other instances, I

shared how my analyses evolved and whether my conclusions resonated with participants. At the same time, there remained some academic arguments I struggled to share with my participants, especially those addressing specific debates and theories such as performativity. Therefore, there remain several aspects of my dissertation that I did not verbally share with my research communities but will attempt to do so when I return to Kolkata to share my final findings.

My ethnography is a composite of life histories, ethnographic portraits, dialogue, and stories emerging from personal observation, interviews, and focus group discussion. I mobilise these particular genres to write against a static notion of post-NGO youth and instead draw attention to the 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) among participants by revealing core features shared by youth growing up with NGOs as well as the diversity of their dispositions and experiences. I weave my ethnography between individual and collective narratives to shed light on critical social structures affecting marginalised, post-NGO youth but through the lens of individual actors. Throughout my chapters, some participants from my research feature as protagonists and repeatedly appear in this dissertation to shed light on different aspects of post-NGO life and experience. The recurrent appearances also serve to remind the reader of young people's multiple subjectivities that come to light in different moments and contexts.

Writing ethnography, especially about subaltern communities, is a thorny endeavor. Colin McFarlane and Tariq Jazeel (2010) offer a useful perspective for responsible post-colonial knowledge production, especially in relation to research and representation of the subaltern. In line with Gayatri Spivak (1988), McFarlane and Jazeel believe in the inevitability of speaking *for* the subaltern. According to them, this recognition can enable a path to responsible research. My practices of consulting with my participants in the 'field' and at my desk writing, especially through participant-mentors are an example of my efforts towards more accountable research. I expressed analyses and arguments from my view, but often times after consulting with my research participants. Furthermore, in my writing, I also make myself visible as an actor in the ethnography to illuminate my own 'critical positioning within the structure of power' (McDowell

1992a: 413) and its effect in interviews, hangouts, and essentially ethnography. Like all ethnographies, my research is situated in space and time – particular red-light areas, NGOs, and young people's lives in Kolkata. It is also located in the historical and evolving relationship and interaction between my research participants and me, which situates the 'data' of my arguments and conclusions. Further, my participants' memories and reflections of their past, their experiences of the present, and their hopes for the future deeply shape the narratives, stories, and dialogues that constitute this ethnography.

3.6 Conclusion

The stories that follow in the next three chapters emerge from my interactions with the people I met, the moments in which I encountered them, the exchanges and relationships that unfolded over the course of 13 months of fieldwork. My ethnography is also guided by previous years of work experience in Kolkata with marginalised youth in the context of NGOs. My positionality and the positionality of my research community situate my story and offer one interpretation of NGO development in metropolitan India. This is not a universal or representative narrative. However, this story's analytical emphasis offers a new lens to study NGO development in rapidly changing urban context: a lens that foregrounds the stories of post-NGO youth within a theoretically informed analysis.

As a research project that centers the voices and agency of subaltern young people's experiences in an environment of NGO subjectification, I try to honour the dignity and agency of my research participants while demonstrating sensitivity to NGOs and NGO professionals who work to improve the lives of marginalised communities. In my research, I strive to practice a delicate balance of recognising the well-meaning intentions and significant impacts of NGO programming while maintaining a critical lens to the ways NGO development might reproduce marginality. Essentially, my intention is to practice solidarity with youth and with NGO workers through research. Striving for solidarity does not mean yielding to NGO practices and cultures,

nor does it suggest uniformly agreeing or supporting young people's interpretation or criticisms of NGOs. Solidarity in this context means to witness the tension between programmatic intentions, effects, and youth experiences and reflections in order to collectively pause and create generative space for a more critical understanding and practice of NGO youth development.

In the next chapter, I provide context to the history and contemporary presence of NGOs in Kolkata's red-light areas. I delineate the various discourses circulating and constructing Kolkata's red-light areas, as well, illustrate young people's experiences of enrolling and growing up with NGOs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Locating NGO Development in Kolkata's Red-light Areas



Figure 1: A lane in red-light area in Kalighat (2012) Photo: Sahar Romani

4.1 Introduction

One afternoon, as I was walking from Kalighat Metro station on S.P Mukherjee Road to the red-light area, a few tour guides approached me. These men, usually loitering around exits of the metro station are known to invite foreigners to a tour of Kali Temple, a 200 year old landmark and pilgrimage site, in exchange for money. “Kali Temple? Kali Temple?” they asked persistently in English. “No,” I responded and kept my pace. They changed tactic. “Mother Teresa? Mother Teresa?” they asked alternatively, perhaps hoping to lure me to visit the famous hospice established by Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, a popular destination for foreign

tourists and volunteers in Kolkata. “*Na, dada,*” I refused in Bangla and continued on my way. “She’s going to Butterfly Foundation,” one of the men remarked to the other, referring to one of the several NGOs working with children and women in the red-light areas. The two men turned away and I proceeded.

Ten years ago, whenever I went to Kalighat, tour guides and middlemen, like the ones from that afternoon, occasionally approached me to visit the temple or Mother Teresa’s hospice, both long-standing institutions of Kalighat. I imagine if I were a man, I would have also been discreetly approached to visit the red-light area, another popular association with Kalighat. However, that afternoon, the guide’s offhand recognition of me not as a tourist or Mother Teresa volunteer, but as someone headed to an NGO was new. It was revealing that Kalighat is no longer known just for the temple, Mother Teresa, and sex work. It is now also known for its high concentration of NGOs.

In this chapter, drawing from secondary sources as well as from my fieldwork, I contextualise the role and significance of NGOs in Kolkata’s red-light areas. Kalighat red-light area, of course, is not an exception. Sonagachi, another famous red-light area in Kolkata, is similarly known not just for its sex work economy, but also for its activism, NGOs, and development aid. Sonagachi is the neighbourhood Melinda Gates visited in 2004 to fund a 200 million dollar HIV/AIDS prevention project in India (Times of India 2004). Similarly, beyond Kolkata, in other metropolitan cities of India, localities notoriously known as red-light districts are correspondingly recognised as sites of NGO development and activism serving sex workers or women in prostitution (a linguistic difference determined by political orientation of the organisation), and their ‘at-risk’ children – the new subalterns.

According to Spivak, contemporary forms of globalisation are producing a new subaltern. Historically, the subaltern was isolated and erased from centres of knowledge and power (Spivak 1988, 2000). In the current climate of rapid connectivity and democratisation of development, the new subaltern is enrolled into global networks of knowledge, resources, and

governance. As Spivak asserts, unlike old subalterns who are silenced, new subalterns emerge in global circuits of recognition, but not on their own terms. The new subaltern, typically the poor “third world woman” – the peasant, the domestic worker, the prostitute/sex worker – is recruited into global flows especially through developmental technologies including micro-credit schemes, international aid, state empowerment programmes, and NGOs (Didur and Hefernan 2003).

Red-light areas in Kolkata exemplify a site of new subalternity. As historical locations of marginality, stigma, and underdevelopment, red light areas are now vital locations for global developmental funding, local activism, as well as national and international NGOs that produce and serve the new subaltern. In this chapter, I survey multiple NGO development agendas circulating in Kolkata’s red-light areas, drawing on scholarship as well as policy documents. In the first section, I provide a historical glimpse of state interventions against prostitution dating back to British colonial rule in order to contextualise historical continuities and discontinuities in current disciplinary regulation in red-light areas. Then, I turn to the contemporary moment and outline prevalent development agendas in Kolkata’s red-light areas, particularly those operationalised by NGOs. The key agendas shaping NGO development in red-light areas include HIV/AIDS, anti-trafficking, sex workers’ rights, and child rights. I argue that collectively, these discourses create a multi-vocal environment in which young people come of age and develop an NGO habitus. In the second section of this chapter, I concentrate on one red-light area in the locality Kalighat, my primary fieldwork site, and draw on interviews and my ethnographic field notes to demonstrate the common ways young people are recruited into NGO programming and participate in NGO subject-making.

4.2 Development Interventions and Assemblages

Red-light areas and sex worker communities in Kolkata have a multifarious and robust history of state intervention and reform. Since colonial rule, a diverse set of actors including administrators,

missionaries, and nationalist social reformers have regulated and intervened in the economies of sex work, what was then called prostitution. The British colonial regime has lasting impacts on the contemporary perceptions of sex work through their historic practices of regulation and surveillance. The 1864 Act XXII – popularly known as Cantonment Act – was instituted during the height of a venereal disease panic among British officers and soldiers. In order to prevent the spread of venereal disease among British soldiers, the Cantonment Act quarantined prostitutes serving colonials into urban enclosures called *chaklas* and *lal bazaars* (literally, red markets) in cantonments (Banerjee 1998, Legg 2009). This enclosure was a method to differentiate prostitutes serving British soldiers from ‘common’ prostitutes beyond the *chaklas* serving ‘native’ population. Prostitutes in *chaklas* were registered and required to undergo regular medical examination, and if infected, were detained in lock hospitals (Legg 2009). The Cantonment Act, however, did not prove to be effective. Soon after, the colonial regime administered the 1868 Indian Contagious Diseases Act (Act XIV) – taking its cue from the Contagious Diseases Acts in England. The primary concern of this legislation was again to protect British soldiers and sailors from venereal diseases that they might contract from the ‘common prostitutes’ (Banerjee 1998). Through this legislation, prostitutes beyond cantonments were also coerced to submit to registration, periodic medical examination, and geographic confinement to particular areas in the city. This spatial, moral, and social quarantine of prostitutes contributed to the ‘otherness’ of prostitutes as women of disgrace, disease, and depravity both in the colonial and nationalist imaginary. Ever since the 19th century and the British regime, Kolkata’s red-light areas have been sources of multiple ‘panics’ related to morality, public health, and human rights spawning a dynamic socio-legal-medical-moral framework of surveillance and intervention into contemporary times (Ghosh, 2005).

In the contemporary moment, historical discourses and public anxieties of contagion continue to haunt sex workers and the now more spatially identifiable ‘red-light areas.’ Since the early 1990s, the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS has loomed over sex worker communities and

red-light areas in Kolkata. Further, moral panics related to sexual violence against women have catalysed aggressive international efforts against sex trafficking. In addition, the universalisation of United Nations sponsored paradigms of child rights and child protection have inspired specific programmes targeting children at risk of trafficking and children in red-light areas. It is no surprise then that red-light areas in Kolkata's urban centres are populating with NGOs that serve as local agents for global agendas of development (Kotiswaran 2011b). Starting in the mid 1990s, NGO-operated reproductive health clinics and child protection drop-in-centres sprouted along the lanes and bylanes of many Kolkata red-light areas, changing the neighbourhood's spatiality and sociality. Middle-class NGO workers, peer educators, foreign volunteers, and activists began circulating through red-light area landscapes. Informal education programmes and a whole range of rights-based awareness generation campaigns and trainings became commonplace. The diverse flows of development ideologies and funding contribute to the production of a unique 'assemblage of development' (Ong and Collier 2008, Li 2007, Sharma 2008) in Kolkata's red-light areas. Like Aradhana Sharma (2008) in her study of women's empowerment programmes in north India, I employ the concept of assemblage to capture the 'conjunctural and evolving ensemble-formation' (2008: 2) of heterogeneous institutions and ideologies that elbow against each other in the lanes of red-light areas and in the childhoods and adolescence of young people growing up there. I would like to draw attention to four prominent frames of development that significantly shape the composite of NGO activity in Kolkata's red-light areas: HIV/AIDS prevention, sex worker mobilisation, anti-trafficking, and child protection and rights. This assemblage of development partly shapes the social landscape in which many young people come of age.

HIV/AIDS Prevention

With the detection of the first Indian HIV/AIDS case among women in sex work in 1986, sex workers became an important category for national AIDS prevention policy (Ghosh 2005). The

National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) in 1992 identified sex workers, a term coined in the 1980s, as a high-risk group in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Multiple foreign bodies, including the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) along with the Indian government, steered HIV/AIDS prevention efforts across India with special attention to red-light areas and sex worker communities. Kolkata's red-light areas, especially the largest red-light area – Sonagachi – emerged centre stage in these efforts with the success of curbing HIV/AIDS infection rates through a unique STD-HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP).

SHIP, originally instituted by the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, a government body and a consortium of local NGOs, pioneered HIV/AIDS reduction efforts in Sonagachi in 1992. It became a model project for HIV/AIDS prevention (Jana et al. 2004). Several scholars and activists argue that the peer-mobilised SHIP, also known as the Sonagachi Project, initiated a localised culture on HIV/AIDS prevention and heightened awareness of public health through peer-led education and community participation in Sonagachi as well as in other red-light areas (Cornish and Ghosh, 2007, Nag, 2005). The presence of peer educators, mostly sex workers themselves, and community-run STD clinics in the lanes of Sonagachi not only reconfigured the physical landscape of the red-light area with clinics and identifiable peer educators but also politicised the landscape. Some scholars argue HIV/AIDS prevention efforts mobilised a kind of 'watch-care system' of self-regulation and control (Ghosh 2005: 55). Other scholars assert HIV/AIDS prevention work became an opportunity for sex workers to transform resources into political opportunities to address limited access and inequalities related to health care and protection for sex workers and their families (Kotiswaran 2013).

In the HIV/AIDS frame of development, sex workers and their communities are not just victims but 'change agents' able to negotiate with clients and customers (Kotiswaran 2011a:8). The goal of these programmes is to protect women from infection and empower them to take control over their bodies. They are no longer 'prostitutes' but 'sex workers,' or in Bangla,

journokarmi. SHIP's prevention strategy was based upon a discourse of sex worker rights and dignity, making the issue of HIV/AIDS and STD prevention and protection a community responsibility as well as a right. Within a few years of SHIP, sex workers successfully leveraged HIV prevention resources to address 'structural issues' affecting their communities, such as health, education, political representation, access to credit, and social stigma (Kotiswaran 2013). SHIP quickly led to the formation of the sex worker's organisation and union, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), which has become the leading voice of another prominent frame of development in Kolkata's red-light areas: sex worker's rights and the legalisation of sex work.

Sex Workers' Rights and Legalisation

DMSC, also called Durbar (translated as Unstoppable), is a sex worker-led and operated organisation working across red-light areas in Kolkata as well as with sex workers who congregate in less formalised spaces in the city. Founded in 1995, Durbar is a member-based organisation mobilising sex workers around a number of social and political initiatives including workers rights, the fight against exploitation by landlords and police, coerced AIDS surveillance, and children's access to schooling and education (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay 2007, DMSC 1996). In 1999, Durbar took over SHIP and now operates STD/HIV health clinics across several red-light areas in the city. Since then it also launched a number of other programmes for sex worker communities, including a sex worker-owned community bank called Usha Multi-Purpose Co-operative, with branches in the well known red-light areas of Sonagachi and Kalighat.

Durbar campaigns for the legalisation of sex work and mobilisation of sex workers. Like other sex work advocates, Durbar views sex work precisely as work (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, 1997). From this perspective, sex work is comparable to other forms of unorganised, physical, and emotional labour including care work, domestic work, street vending,

and some forms of service work (Shah 2006, Kotiswaran 2011a). Sex work, like any other form of labour, is considered to have advantages and disadvantages, which workers negotiate and manoeuvre as active agents. Durbar advocates for de-exceptionalising sex work as the exemplar exploitative economy linked with criminalisation and instead demands the recognition of sex workers' rights.

Durbar's rights-based framework also extends to its child and youth programmes. In 2005, the children of many sex workers came together to form their own organisation within Durbar called Amra Padatik (translated as 'We are the Foot Soldiers'). Similar to Durbar, Amra Padatik has a rights-based approach and mobilises 1500 child and youth members across Kolkata and its suburbs – all of whom are children of sex workers (Sircar and Dutta 2011). Amra Padatik's organising efforts led to the opening of an Indira Gandhi Open University study centre in the heart of Sonagachi, where children of sex workers can study for college through a long distance degree programme. They also continue to organise youth rallies in their neighbourhoods and in public spaces on a range of issues including Children's Day and Anti-Drug Day. Moreover, Amra Padatik continues to politicise the identity of sex workers' children by encouraging young people to actively claim identities as '*journokormir santaan*' (children of sex workers) as an act of resistance to and reclamation of deep-rooted societal stigma towards sex workers' children (Sircar and Dutta 2011).

Anti-Trafficking

A third prominent discourse circulating within red-light areas is anti-sex trafficking. Like HIV/AIDS, the fight against human trafficking, especially sex trafficking, is a leading global concern. India's primary legislation against trafficking is the longstanding Immoral Trafficking in Persons Act (ITPA). According to several activists and scholars, anti-sex trafficking efforts are largely influenced by a conservative 'global sex panic,' fuelled by abolitionist movements consisting of U.S feminists, religious conservatives, as well as, U.S. foreign policy (Kotiswaran

2011: 6, Shah 2007). For example, the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, created under former President George W. Bush, releases ranks of national governments receiving U.S. aid, to evaluate their performance in anti-trafficking efforts through measures of prevention, prosecution, and protection (Kotiswaran 2011:7). The fear of low rankings, and its resultant reduction in foreign aid, leads the Indian government to actively support civil society efforts against trafficking (Kotiswaran 2011). Although sex worker advocates like Durbar are also organising against trafficking, the hegemonic anti-trafficking narrative is firmly situated within a discourse of abolition (DMSC 2006).

A tradition of sex work abolitionism is not new in India. Abolition has a notorious history entangled with post-war international geo-politics (Banerjee 1998, Ghosh 2005). According to Kotiswaran (2011) the contemporary Indian abolitionist position conceptualises prostitution as a severe form of violence against women (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1996). Under this paradigm, prostitution is not analogous with any other form of work because it is argued to commodify and subordinate women. Women in prostitution, according to this perspective, are victims in almost all cases; rarely are they change agents.

Most NGOs operating in red-light areas working with sex worker communities have an anti-trafficking component, many of which are embedded in abolitionist agendas. In the early 1990s, one anti-trafficking organisation, Jibon, which features as a formative NGO in the lives of many of my research participants, opened its first centre in the Kalighat red-light area. Jibon is a self-identified anti-trafficking NGO in Kolkata focusing on child protection and women's rights, previously funded by the U.S. State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Although Jibon is not explicitly abolitionist, it unequivocally works to prevent "second generation prostitution" – that is young girls' enrolment into sex work economies. Further, Jibon refers to sex workers as "women in prostitution" instead of sex workers. The linguistic difference between terms represents the distinction between an abolitionist inclined perspective

that interprets commercial sex as work as violence in contrast to a legalisation perspective, such as Durbar's, that view sex work as *work* (Shah 2004).

Not all organisations addressing trafficking are abolitionist per se. Some, like Durbar, are oriented towards sex work advocacy. Other organisations, fall between the extremes of abolition and sex work advocacy. One in-between position, what Kotiswaran (2011) calls 'middle ground feminist,' represents a position against the industry of sex work and its current hierarchical system of brothels, pimps, and madams. This position however simultaneously also stands for the rights and autonomy of sex workers (Sundar Rajan 2003). Middle-ground feminist perspectives to sex work, as embodied by organisation such as Adhikar, are often muted by well-resourced abolitionist inspired anti-trafficking discourses.

Child Rights

The fourth key political force informing development work in Kolkata's red-light areas are discourses and legislation on child rights. This frame dovetails with anti-trafficking initiatives seeking to protect children and youth from the harms of trafficking. In India, during the wake of the 1990 World Summit of Children, the Government of India ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC). In 2000 the Government of India designed legislation to implement India's commitments to the UNCRC as well as other international conventions through the Juvenile Justice Care and Protection of Children Act (amended in 2006 and 2010). The Juvenile Justice Act targets two categories of children: juveniles in conflict with the law and children in need of care and protection (Bajpai 2003). The latter category formally includes trafficked children, but in NGO practice, in also includes children in red-light areas.

Organisations like Jibon, Durbar, and Adhikar that are differently positioned across the sex work abolition and legalisation spectrum all operate programmes concerning children. All of these organisations employ a rights-based framework towards children and youth development.

Aligning with the UNCRC, these organisations give prominence to the three Ps – children’s protection, provision, and participation. Protection is a pivotal agenda behind organisations such as Jibon and Adhikar, which host shelter homes for girls or drop-in-centres for boys and girls in the red-light area as safe spaces. Further, mandates of provision are integrated into these programmes as young people are provided with school scholarships, mid-day meals, and snacks, as well as vocational trainings to promote skills in economic stability. Participation is increasingly a more visible and popular component to youth programming. Several organisations, like Jibon, have a series of participatory programmes for young people where they become ‘peer supporters’ or ‘youth motivators’ and train as leaders to advocate for both children’s rights and protection in their communities. Durbar’s Amra Padatik is also modelled after a participatory and youth-led framework. Adhikar, with its fundamentally youth-operated model, prides itself for its commitment to youth participation. All of these organisations leverage the international buzz around participation and employ several young people within NGOs as fieldworkers to implement grassroots level programmes. Despite ideological differences on trafficking and sex work, these NGOs among several others, deploy similar rights-based discourses on children’s right from school and education to campaigns against violations of rights, such as child labour, child abuse, or child marriage. These NGO activities, campaigns, and programmes normalise a vocabulary and consciousness of rights and protection towards children and young people.

The four development agendas outlined above – HIV/AIDS, sex worker mobilisation, anti-trafficking, and child rights – are engendered within red-light areas through NGOs, activists, and funders influencing the lives of communities, especially young people. These frames of development, while distinct, do not have rigid boundaries. As a development assemblage, these four discourses rub up against each other in the tight lanes of red-light areas. They sometimes intertwine with one another through the lived experiences of residents who partake in one or all of these agendas, creating a diverse and multi-vocal development culture in the red-light areas and the consciousness of its residents. In the next section, I present a detailed picture of Kalighat

red-light area, my primary field site, to demonstrate how the assemblage of development I discussed above maps onto the lanes and lives of the red-light area.

4.3 Kalighat Red-light Area: NGO Subjectification and Habitus Making



Figure 2: *Boro Gali* (The Big Lane) in Kalighat (2012) Photo: Sahar Romani

Kalighat's red-light area, a cluster of lanes and bylanes not far from the famous Kali Temple, is home to a number of NGOs. The heart of the red-light area is known as "Boro Gali" – "the big lane." At the mouth of this wide alley stands Durbar's two-storey office building, with a branch of Usha Multi-Purpose Bank. Immediately inside the lane, next to Durbar's office, a bright mural is painted on uneven brick walls with the English words "Access, Advocacy, Action, Awareness" sponsored by the Ireland-based Hope Foundation (See Figure 1). Boro Gali is a short 100 meter stretch, strewn with small homes clustering against each other, clotheslines, mixed generations of residents, and corner shops dotting down towards the banks of the Adi Ganga – a canal of the Hooghly river. Within this crowded landscape, eight NGOs operate, including Jibon and

Adhikar – each providing anti-trafficking, child protection, and child rights programmes in their own inflection with resources from multiple national and international funding agencies. Most of these NGOs are housed in small rooms (*ghar*) within a larger *basti-bari* (slum tenement), open for children and youth from afternoon until late into the night. Some of these NGOs intimately neighbour one another. Beyond *Boro Gali*, in other lanes and alleys of Kalighat, lie several more NGOs.

Each of these organisations articulates at least one of the key discourses discussed above through various forms of programming, campaigns, and services. Durbar remains the only organisation promoting a discourse of sex worker legalisation, but their large-scale base of fieldworkers, peer supporters, and clinics make their agenda notably visible and audible to the red-light area community. Other discourses such as anti-trafficking, HIV/AIDS prevention, and child rights are embodied by several other organisations with various inflections.

The spatial assemblage of NGO development affects the sociality of young people coming of age in Kalighat, influencing their childhoods, adolescence, and as I will go on to show, their futures in significant ways. For young people growing up in Kalighat red-light area and its surrounding lanes, NGOs feature in their everyday lives through drop-in-centres or shelter-homes, mentorship from middle class activists, participation in youth groups, encounters with foreign volunteers, recruitment and attendance in rallies and vigils such as AIDS day and Children's day. Almost all young people growing up in Kalighat's red-light areas and its surrounding lanes – whether they are children of sex workers or not – participate in NGO programmes in some form or another. Nearly half of the young people in my research community come from homes and families in Kalighat red-light area and its surrounding areas; the others are from other red-light areas across the city. For these young people, NGOs play a formative role in their sense of self as well as their trajectory in life. Several young people described NGOs as spaces where they grew up and came of age, or as they would say in Bangla, *manush hoiche*, literally, became a human being. As Rinky, a 26 year old woman who grew up

participating in Adhikar and Jibon programming, said to me one day in a group discussion:

“From a young age, I came of age with NGOs. NGO blood has entered my body.” Binod, a 23-year-old man who participated in Jibon and now works for Durbar, explained: “At Jibon, an NGO, I use to wear half-pants (shorts) [an expression signifying boyhood]. Now, I wear full pants [an expression signifying manhood] and I work for Durbar, also an NGO.” These statements by Rinky and Binod are not unique. They represent sentiments expressed by young people in my post-NGO research community referencing the significance of NGOs in their lives.

Even though NGOs were typically a significant social force in most young people’s lives in red-light areas, the experience as well as the effects of coming of age with NGOs vary. Attention to young people’s coming of age experiences points to the heterogeneity of experience and effect of NGO development. Drawing from Aradhana Sharma (2008), I conceptualise NGO development agendas and activities in young people’s lives as a ‘social drama’ – a process that emerges between multiple actors, including young people, families, middle class staff workers, foreign volunteers, and diverse programmes across each organisational funding cycle. Through the lens of a social drama, NGOs appear not as a static force, but as flexible and malleable within an overarching plot of youth development. The social dramas of growing up with NGOs is diversified through young people’s dispositions, the NGO(s) they participated in, the middle class activists they encountered, and the resources they accessed in particular moments. The differences of experiences are not arbitrary, but in Bourdieu’s words, they are a ‘structural variant’ of a shared social and structural environment and habitus of growing up in a red-light area (1977).

Joining and Coming of Age with NGOs

The young people I conducted research with participated in NGOs as ‘children’ and ‘subjects of development’ from the mid 1990s to the late 2000s. Young people in Kalighat were initiated into

NGOs by diverse motivations over different periods of time. I would like to draw attention to two popular NGO recruitment and initiation narratives, described to me by young people who participated in a number of NGOs, but most significantly in Jibon and Adhikar. I offer these narratives not to suggest that all young people experienced similar trajectories, but to highlight some of the shared rites of passage into NGO participation and subjectification for young people in Kalighat and in other red-light areas.

The first narrative concerns young people coming of age with NGO drop-in-centres. Thirty-one out of forty of my post-NGO research participants spent their childhood and adolescence in drop-in-centres. Between the ages of 8-15, it was common for a child in Kalighat to hear about a coaching centre or a drop-in-centre, a place where a middle-class activist, typically called *dada* (elder brother), *didi* (elder sister), or aunty offers art classes or academic tuitions as well as a “tiffin,” an early evening snack. The child would then attend the centre out of “greed” – as some put it – for free, delicious snacks. The temptations of boiled eggs, chowmein, or Bengali sweets in the evenings compelled her to return for another workshop, another tuition session, and another NGO activity until she began to genuinely develop interest in the trainings, workshops, and youth groups of the NGO. In several cases, before a child even realised they were attending an NGO, and far before they begin to comprehend what the three English letters of this acronym represented, they found themselves actively engaged in youth groups and discussions at the drop-in-centre where they learned about all kinds of things through “*kebela*” (games): HIV/AIDS, child rights, violence against women, and gender justice. Protima, now 22, for example, recalled how she never went to an NGO until she started hearing her friends praise the “centre” they were attending. Her friends bragged about the new games they learned and snacks they ate. Curious, Protima decided to attend Jibon’s centre too. Eventually, children like Protima, appreciated the drop-in-centre not just for snack and games but for the frequent youth discussions with an adult mentor that resembled an “*adda*” – roughly understood as ‘long, informal, and unrigorous’ conversation (Chakrabarty 1999). Furthermore,

in NGO centres, it was common for a young person to feel their voice was valued and their opinion about the world mattered.



Figure 3: An arts education session at an NGO drop-in-centre in a city red-light area (2007) Photo: Sahar Romani

Some young people attended multiple ‘centres,’ receiving academic tutoring at Jibon and perhaps beautician training and dance classes at Durbar. Bijoy, 24, a young man from Boro Gali for example, regularly attended dance classes through his teens at Durbar while being an active youth group member at Jibon. Several others similarly divided their time between NGOs, visiting different centres to meet different needs, in spite of the organisations’ ideological differences. Other young people attended just one NGO centre such as Jibon or Adhikar and expressed pride over their loyalty to one NGO over another, or in some cases, to attending a class of one *didi* or *dada* over another. Interestingly, even when some children were loyal members of one NGO, it was not uncommon for their mothers and siblings to be associated with a different NGO. For example, several mothers active in Durbar’s sex worker’s union had children enrolled in the more abolitionist-leaning Jibon. In essence, it was common for children,

women, and families in the red-light area to strategically and creatively mobilise NGO resources and discourses to meet their needs.

Young people's degree of participation in NGO drop-in-centres also varied. Some were actively involved in numerous programmes, taking the lead in youth groups and trainings, while others attended irregularly or had long periods of absenteeism. Deb, a 23-year-old young man, for example, was an active member at Jibon's drop-in-centre in Bow Bazaar red-light area through his childhood and youth. He was instrumental in organising performances on child labour or participating in a variety of leadership trainings. Tushar, a 19-year-old man also from Bow Bazaar and a former member of Jibon, on the other hand, attended his education tutorials, but was quieter and less involved in the extra-curricular events. A little under half of the youth participants in my research who grew up with NGOs attended a drop-in-centre consistently for years, like Deb, rising up through trainings into youth leadership positions. The others, like Tushar but with varied experiences, meekly participated through some NGO programmes and eventually lost interest or were pulled towards other personal and life obligations ranging from school to work to family concerns.

The second NGO initiation concerns girls and young women in my research community who came of age in NGO shelter homes. Nine out of 16 women lived in a shelter home for a significant period in their life. Starting in the late 1990s, Jibon opened a shelter home for 'at-risk' girls in red-light areas and recruited heavily from Kalighat. In this scenario, typically a girl or her mother came to hear about a shelter home, referred to as a hostel or home – usually operated by Jibon – where other girls from the neighbourhood had moved. In some cases, the girl was excited about the prospects of joining and living in the hostel, where she heard she could study, have her own bed, make a lot of friends, and come home during the annual Durga Puja, the designated holiday period during which young women visit their families. In other cases, the girl was reluctant to move to a far-away hostel. It is likely she overheard too many stories from hostel girls who visit during the pujas about the restricted mobility within the hostel, the strict

supervision by its staff members, and the designated chores for residents, such as cleaning the bathrooms or cooking. It is possible she did not want to move to the hostel in spite of her mother's insistence that such a residence was safer and better her future. Some young woman had more traumatic arrivals, while others had more organic and playful initiations. Neela, now a 26-year-old young woman for example, recalled how she cried for days upon arrival. Drishti, also 26, on the other hand, recalled how she was delighted with her new surroundings at the shelter home, particularly because for the first time in her life she had her own bed. Some young women decided to leave the hostel after just a year of residence, while others chose to stay. During fieldwork, I came to hear of a few young women outside my research community who lived in the shelter home for only a year. Others, such as Tara, now 25, spent nearly a decade in the shelter home because she did not have a home of return. Keya on the other hand, now 28, who spent over a decade in the shelter home, could always go back to her mother in Kalighat red-light area but preferred the hostel, particularly because through it she accessed a better school.

Whether a girl arrived to the hostel by choice or by her guardian's insistence, once at the hostel, she was enrolled in either a government school or in shelter home-based vocational training with supplementary informal education. Vocational training included sari-making, tailoring, catering, beautician training and other kinds of predominantly 'feminine' vocations. Along with education or vocational skill training, another key component to growing up in the hostel included attending discussion groups, residence meetings, and trainings and workshops on various NGO development related issues, including violence against women, child labour, reproductive health, trafficking, and human rights. Several creative arts programmes were also interspersed through hostel life depending on funding, resources, and staff and volunteer expertise. It was common for young women to attend art therapy classes, poetry writing workshops, or other forms of art classes. In 2011, Jibon was no longer recruiting young girls from red-light areas. However, since then several newer anti-trafficking organisations operate large-scale shelter home for girls, such as the NGO Butterfly Foundation.

Despite the variegated experiences of growing up at a shelter home or growing up with multiple drop-in-centres or just at one, there were some shared experiences across shelter homes and drop-in-centres that collectivised young people as “NGO kids” or “NGO *bachchara*” cultivating a structure of feeling (Williams 1977). One commonality was young people’s immersion in discourses on violence against women, child rights, and women’s rights. In shelter homes, regardless of whether a girl placed greater stress on formal education or vocational training, all girls spent their years attending what NGOs call “awareness generation” workshops on various human rights issues. These workshops were critical in cultivating young people’s orientation towards patriarchy and feminism (*naribadi*), violations and rights. Subsequently, young people in drop-in-centres became well versed in a grammar of violation and rights that they were encouraged to identify in their neighbourhood including child prostitution, child labour, and a denial of education. Through an ensemble of workshops, youth groups, residential trainings, it was common for young people coming of age with NGOs to develop a consciousness around key agendas of abolition, sex workers advocacy, child rights, and HIV/AIDS as well violence against women.

A second experience youth growing up with NGOs share is the cultivation of desires for a future beyond their present conditions of poverty and stigma. Almost all NGOs offered young people vocational trainings and educational support as means for young people to build a ‘better future.’ Along with traditional forms of vocational training I outlined above, by the mid-2000s, income generation programmes began to include trainings for low-level jobs in new economies, such as fast food, retail, hotels, and customer service. In drop-in-centres, young people were also able to access information for vocational trainings opportunities at other learning centres. Along with vocational training, these NGOs encouraged school-based education, offering tutoring, scholarships, and assistance in school admissions. Both Jibon and Adhikar, for example, encouraged young people to imagine economic futures beyond the sex economy and red-light area.

Another shared experience among “NGOs kids” was the bonds of mentorship they developed with middle-class NGO activists and staff members. Many of the *didis*, *dadas*, and auntys of NGOs became key confidants, role models, and mentors. One young man, Milan who is now 28, referred to Adhikar’s director as his “second mother.” Drishti, also felt her childhood NGO art teacher and now employer whom she called “aunty” was her role model. As a matter of fact, Drishti often dressed like her aunty, mirroring a similar body language and aesthetic. As Vicky Lawson and Sarah Elwood (2013:13) describe in anti-poverty programmes in the United States, middle class activists and poverty professionals working with the poor exhibit ‘somatic and behavioural norms’ that can serve to discipline the poor. Similarly, NGO *didis*, *dadas*, and auntys instigated a moral and aesthetic development of youth in red-light areas through everyday interactions and interpersonal relationships.

The active presence of NGOs in young people’s neighbourhoods and ultimately in young people’s lives deeply affects their habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus, as I described in Chapter 2, refers to the set of socially learned dispositions or a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1984: 170) that generates judgments, tastes, cultural practices, preferences, and comportment often times enacted unconsciously. During my interviews, discussion, and conversations with post-NGO youth, several young people emphasised the formative role NGOs played in their social, aesthetic, and moral self. Several young women attributed the way they dress, speak, eat, think and behave in the world to the influence of NGOs. “I learned how to talk – from there [an NGO],” stated one woman. “I learned how to think there,” expressed another. Others described NGOs as a “platform” – a space where their opinions and feelings are solicited, heard, and often challenged and transformed. NGOs became spaces where they realised their aesthetic, political, moral, and social preferences, abilities, and desires. This NGO habitus – emerging from young people’s socialisation in NGO job trainings, non-formal education, schooling, human rights and empowerment workshops, and relationships with activists and staff members – shapes the way young people reflect on their past, engage with their present, and plan their future post-NGO.

As I will go on to demonstrate in the following chapters, young people's everyday trajectories reveal diverse experiences post-NGO. This assortment of experience again signals the 'structural variants' within a collective NGO habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 86).

4.4 Conclusion

International media depict red-light areas as zones of danger and exploitation for women and children, where young women are trafficked and sold into sexual slavery, and children, as the 2005 Oscar-award winning documentary portrayed, are 'Born into Brothels' (Briski 2005). In contrast, several activists and scholars highlight Kolkata's red-light area as exceptional grounds of activism where communities are powerfully advocating for the legalisation of sex work (Shah 2005). I alternatively emphasise a more complex picture of NGO development in Kolkata's red-light areas and point to the competing and complementary discourses that shape NGO and activist practices. These NGO discourses, I suggest, are not always polar or isolated; rather they jostle against each other and create a multi-vocal social milieu of NGO development in red-light areas like Kalighat. Key frames of HIV/AIDS prevention, anti-trafficking, sex work legalisation, and child protection circulate through NGOs and manifest through similar core technologies of vocational training, formal and informal education, drop-in-centres, political education, and in some cases, long term shelter home residence.

Young people's experiences of these NGO discourses and practices nevertheless vary and so do their effects on their lives post-NGO. Young people coming of age in red-light areas participate in NGOs in various ways – some attending drop-in-centres, others growing up in shelter homes, some throughout childhood, while others only for a year or two. Moreover, some young people attend one NGO, while others attend multiple politically variegated organisations, sometimes serially and in other cases simultaneously. Young people develop particular pathways through NGOs and have fairly diverse experiences on a day-to-day basis. These varied social dramas of NGO development and NGOisation are formative and contribute to cultivating an

NGO habitus, influencing young people's desires of economic independence and social mobility, as well as, their meanings of respectability as they navigate a life in the world-class aspiring city of Kolkata. In the coming chapters, I examine the effects of development on young people's subjectivities and mobilities. Further, I pay close attention to the ways in which young people receive and mobilise this assemblage of development – its morals, values, and resources – to “make it” in life and in the city.

CHAPTER FIVE

In Search of Respectable Work

5.1 Introduction

One hot July evening over a cup of roadside tea, Seema Masi and I talked about her daughter Neela. Twelve years had past since she lived with her daughter under the same roof. These days, Seema Masi hardly saw her daughter. When Neela was 13 years old and Seema Masi was working as a sex worker in Kalighat, she had wanted to send her daughter away to a shelter home run by Jibon. “I was always worried about her, especially when I was working,” she explained. But that year, in 2000, the shelter home was only accepting girls who were at-risk of being trafficked; Neela did not qualify. To find a way to admit her into the shelter home, Seema Masi’s live-in boyfriend approached Jibon and told them that he was Neela’s uncle and was worried about Neela’s wellbeing because her father was an alcoholic and was planning to sell her into the sex trade. The lie worked, and Neela was accepted into the shelter home.

I asked Seema Masi if she was pleased with her decision to send Neela away to the shelter home 12 years ago. Sipping chai from a flimsy plastic cup, she said: “Over there, Neela did her studies (*pora-shona*). She wouldn’t have been able to do that if she was living with me. They prepared (*toiri koreche*) her for life and now she’s standing on her own feet – *nijer paye dariyeache*.”

The metaphor of standing up on one’s own feet is commonly used across India to refer to notions of confidence, security, and social mobility (Klenk 2003, Jeffrey et al 2008). Several scholars demonstrate how disadvantaged communities across class and caste turn to modernising vehicles such as schooling (Da Costa 2008, Rao 2010), higher education (Jeffrey et al 2008), technical training (Cross 2009), and new state sponsored government schemes (Nambiar 2013) for the promise of social and economic mobility. NGOs in red-light areas are similarly imagined as modernising forces that can offer a better future for new generations. Like Seema Masi, many mothers and guardians in Kalighat sent their children to NGO shelter homes,

hostels, and drop-in-centres between 1990s and early 2000s. They believed their children could grow up with greater chances of living a better life, that is, a life beyond the universe of red-light areas. For these families, NGOs were often imagined to have the capacity and resources to provide children with the economic and social skills as well as the cultural practices to create futures beyond subalternity. If Seema Masi was not able to provide Neela with protection, education, and job skills while growing up, the NGOs could. And according to Seema Masi, they did.

Many young people who grew up with NGOs expressed the desire to stand on their own feet through the means of education, vocational training, or other opportunities offered by NGOs. The expression – standing on one’s own feet – is a prominent refrain articulated by mothers, NGO workers, and young people themselves when measuring their ability – or inability in most cases – to be economically and socially ‘successful’ post-NGO. The idea of success, however, is not a neutral measure. The notion of success is shaped by values, morals, and discourses situated and influenced by an intersection of social forces, including NGOs. It is also shaped by gender. For most young people, both women and men, post-NGO success pivots on achieving economic independence, often attained through employment. However, economic autonomy alone is not enough for post-NGO youth to feel successful. Many young people post-NGO desire economic independence not just through *any kind of work*, but through particular kinds of work recognised as “*bhalo*,” meaning good or respectable. Respectable work, however, is highly gendered and looks different for men and women shaping the kinds of economic and social pathways available and rendered as desirable.

Work and employment are not new experiences for young people either before or after their duration with NGO. For many of these youth, waged-work has been a regular feature of their childhood and early adolescence. For example, young women in shelter homes recount their first *rojgaar* or daily earnings as teenagers being compensated for weekly cooking duties in the shelter home. Young men, growing up in red-light areas, fondly recount one-night jobs as

waiters or greeters at social events such as weddings and birthday parties in the city. Similarly, young people also participated in stipend-based work at the NGOs themselves as part-time peer supporters in red-light area drop-in-centres. *Rojgaar* is interpreted as episodic income, which is not linked to identity or status. Post-NGO work on the other hand is imagined as a *chakeri* or a job, that is, steady employment promising a sustainable *maina* or monthly income, as well as respect and respectability.

Respectability is a powerful means of distinguishing between classes (McDowell 2007). As I noted in Chapter Three, Skeggs (1997) argues that respectability is a crucial signifier of class that shapes individual embodiment, access to networks and possession, and a sense of one's self. Respectability is also inscribed through gender and social relations, producing different values, expectations, and signifiers for men and women across contexts. For example, for some Puerto Rican young men in Harlem, New York City, amidst an economy of limited employment opportunities for entry-level working class men, dignity is sought through masculine cultures of violence and self-destruction (Bourgois 1996). In the geographically distant small North India city of Meerut, where rural employment opportunities are in decline, young men cope with un/der employment by aspiring for and leveraging from socially dominant forms of cultural distinction, such as symbols of education, while rejecting marginalised identities and traditional forms of labour (Jeffrey et al 2004). In contrast, urban middle-class professional young women in the information technology industries of India risk their respectability if their professional ambitions begin to eclipse their family commitments (Radhakrishnan 2009). On the other hand, subaltern women working as domestic workers, whose labour serves middle and upper class families, struggle to attain respectability and thus invest in strategies of embodiment to accrue respectability (Rao 2011). Collectively, these examples suggest that the search and practice for respect is essentially fractured and contingent on spaces, conditions, and resources.

In Kolkata, respectability is primarily possessed by the middle classes who are ‘defined against the masses’ (Skeggs 1997: 3). Historically, the *bhadralok*, the respectable classes in 19th century Bengal, were constructed as a class against their subaltern others. The construct of the *bhadralok* continues to shape contemporary class constructions. According to Qayum and Ray (2003: 524) a younger generation of *bhadralok* – India’s educated and cosmopolitan global elite – persist as vanguards of respectability as well as modernity in Kolkata today. Unlike the respectable middle classes, subaltern youth communities in Kolkata’s red-light areas are ‘massified and marked as other’ (Skeggs 1997: 3) as at-risk youth or children of sex workers. These subaltern youth in red-light areas are acutely aware of their social position and representation. They ‘recognise the recognition of others’ (Skeggs 1997:4). This ‘dialogical form of recognition’ (Skeggs 1997:4, Sennet 2003) shapes young people’s aspiration to individualise themselves through new status markers, obtained in most cases, through work and employment. Securing *bhalo kaaj* is crucial to young people’s transition from marginality to mainstream, subalternity to respectability. It signals the ability to stand on one’s own feet.

In this chapter, I argue, that in most cases, post-NGO youth in Kolkata search for respect through work and employment that is valued and defined as ‘respectable’ in dominant culture. Respectable work however is not always attainable for subaltern young people, in which case, many youth strive to re-work notions of respectability to align with their own social and economic conditions (Jeffrey et al 2008). I present vignettes of five different livelihood paths pursued by young people in my research community. The work trajectories I discuss illustrate the varied gendered pathways of respectable work in post-NGO youth consciousness and their convergences and divergences from NGO discourse. The work paths to be discussed are often not exclusive to each other and include domestic work, NGO-based social work, rejection of employment through marriage, administrative office work in new economies, and work in sex work economies. Three of the cases I present conform to dominant notions of respectable work, one case rejects employment as a feasible path to respectability, and the last example troubles the

very notions of respectability. Through my discussion, I examine how young people interpret their work trajectories as respectable or disreputable in relation to NGO notions of respectability. I also describe young people's strategies of reworking dominant notions of respectability to harmonise their social realities with their economic conditions. The trajectories and meaning-making practices of young people are influenced by their habitus – their 'unconscious framework' (Holt 2008: 233) partially shaped by their childhood in red-light areas and in NGOs.

This chapter draws on employment themes and patterns emerging from interviews with post-NGO youth. The ethnographic crux of the chapter however is shaped by vignettes of five young people with whom I conducted multiple interviews as well as observed and frequently spent time with over the course of thirteen months. Each of these case studies illustrates struggles, predicaments, and opportunities other young people in my research community expressed in interviews, informal conversations, and focus group discussions. I choose these particular five cases because each of their work journeys offers rich examples of either common or exceptional experiences that assist to contextualise young people's navigation of opportunities and constraints towards respectability and social mobility.

Through the use of life histories, I was able to pay attention to young people's experiences of personal agency and structural constraints. Before presenting the five different cases of work journeys, I first discuss visions and goals of youth development work in red-light areas of the city to contextualise post-NGO young people's aspirations for new economic and social futures within youth development discourse.

5.2 Sex Work Economies and 'Mainstream' Economies

Most NGOs operating in red-light areas encourage young people to aspire to futures outside sex work economies. In order to understand and analyse the nature of NGO youth development and especially vocational and job training in red light areas, it is important to contextualise NGO

positions towards sex work economies, which I argue is the ‘other’ economy and culture against which most NGOs imagine alternative youth futures. As discussed in Chapter Four, there are three common positions on sex work among most NGOs: sex work advocacy, abolition, and middle ground feminism (Kotiswaran 2011a). The sex work advocacy position, embodied by Durbar, is the only position and organisation in red-light areas supporting sex work as legitimate and respectable work. In contrast, the abolitionist position, embodied by Jibon, as well as the middle ground feminism adopted by Adhikar, rest on theories of exploitation against women. Sex work or prostitution, according to both organisations, reinforces violence, inequality, and the subordination of women and is therefore exploitative. As Kotiswaran (2011a) critically notes, both abolitionist and middle ground feminists theorise exploitation as a political condition instead of an economic condition. For Kotiswaran, this distinction is important because NGOs argue against some forms of exploitation while accepting other forms of exploitation. For instance, middle ground feminists and abolitionists rally against exploitation in the sex economy, but not against other exploitative labour economies. The only exceptions are child labour economies, which are also openly reprimanded by international human rights development networks. Many types of work beyond sex work and child labour however also subject workers under social relations of violence, inequality, and subordination. Yet, these other economies are not contested to the same extent as sex work. Kotiswaran asserts that sex work is exceptionalised not because of economic exploitation, but because of moral and political conceptualisations of exploitation, which are embedded in society’s anxiety over the commodification of sex. This conceptual difference between a political and economic interpretation of exploitation is an important delineation for my discussion on the paths of work NGOs promote as respectable.

Both Adhikar and Jibon actively promote economies beyond sex work as respectable. Jibon has an extensive vocational training programme geared especially towards girls and women. Several young women both in shelter home and drop-in-centres grew up attending long-

term courses in sari-making, tailoring, cooking and catering, and book-making. Other kinds of trainings were also offered, although less systematically, including computer training, hospitality training, and mechanic training, the latter exclusively offered to young men. NGO motivations to equip young people with employment skills beyond the sex economy are rooted in a moral and political vision of ‘mainstreaming’ young people – a term many organisations use to describe their process and goals for youth development. ‘Mainstream’ generally refers to economies and cultures beyond illegality and stigma. I argue, however, that in most cases young people are encouraged to access mainstream economies and cultures that are steeped in legalised and normalised economic and social inequalities. Whereas the injustices in sex work economies inspire political and moral NGO intervention, injustices in ‘mainstream’ non-sex work economies do not evoke such indignation. Exploitative non-sex work economies continue to be normalised as morally and legally acceptable – if not appropriate – forms of labour for the urban Indian poor. Among these economies is domestic labour, which I discuss in the following section through the lens of Protima’s story. Protima is a young woman who sought work outside the sex work industry, but quickly discovered that her only alternative was domestic work. Her case makes evident the economic and social instability of the domestic labour economy and the tension between the personal aspirations of post-NGO youth and the structural constraints that they face.

5.3 The Poverty of Domestic Work

There are more domestic workers in West Bengal than in any other state in India (Ray 2000b). Kolkata has a long and unbroken history of domestic servitude embroiled in unequal social relations of caste and class between employer and servant. In the 19th century, rural migrants came to the city to work as servants for the *bhadralok* classes (Qayum and Ray 2003). Most domestic workers were what Qayum and Ray call ‘family retainers’ – servants, mostly men, who lived and worked in one household through multiple generations. With urbanisation, the rise of

nuclear families, and the spatial reconfiguration of *bhadralok* classes from *zamindari* (estate-owning) homes to *flat baris* (apartments), family retainers are waning and new modes of domestic work are proliferating. Qayum and Ray classify three other modes of domestic work: live-in full-time servants, live-out full-time servants, and live-out part-time domestic workers who work for several employers for a range of tasks. Part-time domestic work is the most common form of domestic work today. Most part-time domestic workers, according to Qayum and Ray, live and commute from peri-urban fringes of the city or, as in Protima's case, from urban *bastis*.

"I do *barir kaaj* (domestic work) in Ganguly Para, the middle class area of Kalighat," explained Protima, during our first interview over a cup of foamy coffee at a local pastry shop. Protima is 22 years old. She was raised in Kalighat's Boro Gali by her Bangladeshi migrant mother. Protima is Muslim by birth, but culturally grew up both Hindu and Muslim and later married into a lower-caste Hindu Bengali family. Protima lives in a *basti* a few lanes away from the red-light area in Kalighat, behind the neighbourhood's central bazaar, along the edge of the Hooghly River. Everyday before and between her own house-chores, she goes to work in Ganguly Para. Once at work, she fetches water, washes dishes, mops the floors, and hand washes laundry for a middle class family. She works twice a day for 4-5 hours total and gets Rs.500 (£6) a month in return. "That's nothing for a month!" she exclaimed. She also works at another home where she fetches water everyday from a community tap, earning Rs.100 (£1.25) a month, but the household owners never pay her salary on time, so Protima recently quit. Growing up, Protima did not aspire to be a domestic worker; she had other dreams, such as starting a clothing boutique or becoming a social worker. Yet, Protima has not found success in securing sustainable work beyond domestic labour.

Protima is from Kalighat's red-light area. Like most children growing up in Boro Gali in the 1990s, Protima was socialised with NGO programmes and services all around her. When she was in Class 5, she started attending Jibon's drop-in-centre around the corner from her home for

educational support. As she got older, she also started participating in vocational training programmes to gain employable skills for her future.

As a Class 10 student, Protima came to hear of a fashion design course Jibon was organising for young women in red light areas through the reputed National Institute of Fashion Design (NIFT). Jibon set up a 3-month course where young women could attend NIFT at no cost and learn design, tailoring, and clothing production skills. The course was full-time, five days a week. In order to participate, Protima and her friends took leave from school. According to Protima, several of her friends from Kalighat began dreaming about starting their own boutique one day. When their course ended though, their dreams came to a halt as they returned to school to sit for final exams. After a three-month gap from school, Protima was behind in her studies and yet the 10th standard exam – *madhyamik* – was imminent. Protima could not bear to take the exam because she had lagged too far behind in her studies, especially after missing a significant period of classes for her fashion design training. In the midst of all this, Protima was also undergoing her first adolescent heartbreak. Distracted and despondent, Protima decided to dropout of school, as did the other teenage women in her NIFT cohort from Kalighat. All of these women felt that NIFT set them back from their academic track. Protima now regrets this decision. To her disappointment, the NIFT training did not open any doors for a future career. Protima and her peers had certainly developed skills in fashion design, but did not have the opportunities or necessary guidance to put their skills to productive use.

After quitting school, Protima pursued the attractive possibility of working as a social worker through an NGO. Protima was increasingly becoming involved at Adhikar as a youth member at a drop-in-centre that was just a few houses down from her own. Adhikar was one of the first NGOs in Kalighat to start employing youth as community workers, particularly because of its participatory model of development. In 2005, Protima accepted the opportunity to be a part-time fieldworker at Adhikar's for Rs.300 a month (£4) and assist with daily workshop sessions at various drop-in-centres. But unlike her colleagues – other young people from

Kalighat – who conceived of and facilitated sessions and workshops, Protima found herself relegated more and more to undesirable housekeeping tasks such as mopping the centre’s floors, and fetching and delivering snacks for children rather than conducting social work she was hired to pursue. Her female colleagues contributed to housekeeping duties once in a while as well, but her one male colleague never did. Protima was the youngest among the group of youth workers with the least experience and confidence. Her colleagues did not extend any peer support. Instead, they mistreated her to such an extent that Protima decided to quit the job. Protima believed she was not getting the respect she deserved.

In 2006, Protima stopped participating in all NGO activity. She eloped with her boyfriend Bipul and immersed herself in domestic life, especially after giving birth to two daughters. Bipul is an electrician but his continual illness interferes with his ability to work. His monthly income sustains the family’s needs, but cash is always tight. Bipul earns around Rs. 6000 (£73) per month – which pays for rent, electricity, school tutors, and meals for seven members, including Protima’s mother and Bipul’s father. The household runs a daily budget of Rs.150 a day, almost £2, but that is still not enough to cover all of their expenses. Thus, Protima continues to search for well-paid work. In 2010, Protima found a job as a domestic worker. It is the job she continues to have today.

Protima has been offered work at other NGOs in Boro Gali to work as a caretaker – watching children, washing dishes, cleaning the facilities – but the hours conflict with Protima’s own child-rearing responsibilities. Furthermore, Protima does not want to go to an NGO to do work that resembles domestic work. According to Protima’s mother, if her daughter is going to clean and cook, she might as well do it in someone’s home. There was no need to do *that kind of work* at an NGO, her mother told me one evening during an informal interview in her small home in Kalighat.

The only mode of waged work that continues to be available to Protima is domestic work, whether in a home or in an NGO. Protima however keeps searching for other work: “I

want to do good (*bhalo*) work,” she said to me. As she described it, she is searching for “*halka-phulka kaaj* (light work)” or “*bose kora kaaj*” (sit down kind of work.)” “I am not asking for a job where I’m earning loads, but just a bit more – at least Rs.1500 rupees (£17) a month. Some money I can share with Ma, some money I can spend on myself.” Part-time would be ideal for Protima, that way she can continue managing her own household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and care-taking of the children, she explained in our interview.

In 2010, with the hope of finding better employment, Protima decided to start regularly attending *micchils* (rallies) for the local chapter of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) political party office. One of the local party leaders encouraged her to participate in political rallies with prospects of a job in a year. The job was described as “sit down kind of work” as a cashier at the new government-run public toilet facility opening near the famous Kali Temple. In the sweltering summer of 2012, Protima was offered the job. Upon accepting, Protima was working seven days a week from 2pm to 10pm, with only one holiday per month. She was earning Rs.2000 (£24). Every morning before work, Protima took care of her usual household chores, as well as her other duties as a domestic worker. The extra cash made it worthwhile for Protima. But two months into the job, she received notice that her salary would be cut by half to a mere Rs. 1000 (£12). The long hours were not worth the meagre salary and Protima is again in search of a job to supplement her domestic work.

Among the 18 women in my research community, Protima is one of four other women who continue to search for *bhalo kaaj* (good work) but inevitably find ‘opportunities’ limited to domestic work. A glimpse into Protima’s life offers two important insights about young women’s experience within the domestic labour economy. First, Protima does not consider domestic work as *bhalo kaaj* (good work). For her domestic work is just *kaaj*. Protima desires “*bose-kora kaaj*” or “sit down work” as well as better paying work. In her experience, domestic work is not an opportunity; it is a default occupation that many young women in red-light areas or slums partake in, especially those who did not enrol in schools, vocational training

programmes, or NGOs. Domestic work, whether at a household or in an NGO, is typically an underpaid occupation, increasingly feminised and regarded as unskilled (Ray 2000).

In spite of the devaluation and exploitation of domestic work, NGOs consider domestic and manual work as appropriate alternative occupations to sex work. Their need to condemn sex work leads NGOs to tolerate alternative unregulated economies such as domestic work, even if those economies are also embroiled in their own forms of inequality and precarity. The NGO differentiation between these two economies, both of which can be exploitative, reveal how NGOs conceptualise exploitation not on economic terms, but rather on political and moral terms rendering sex work as unjust and domestic work as just, even though both forms of livelihood rarely offer social mobility (Kotiswaran 2011). Domestic work is deemed as superior because it is allegedly moral and legal.

Protima's frustration and struggle as a domestic worker is not rare. Jhimli, age 29, is another example, of a woman feeling trapped in low paying work economies. She moved to Jibon's shelter home when she was ten years old. During my fieldwork, Jhimli was jumping between jobs at an Ayah Care Centre, where she was caring for the elderly and disabled for Rs. 50-70 (£1 or less) a day, and an NGO, where she worked as a cook earning Rs.110 (almost £2) a day. Like Protima, Jhimli was concerned with finding "*bhalo kaaj*." In a conversation with her about employment at the Ayah Centre, she explained: "To be honest, I don't want to look after elders, or clean potty. I mean I don't have such a problem with that work, but maybe I can find some *bhalo kaaj*, good work." I asked Jhimli what kind of *bhalo kaaj* she wished to find. "Work in a showroom, in a boutique, in an office," she answered. She desired jobs in an economy that do not demand manual labour, but instead reward creativity, self-presentation, and intelligence.

A second insight that emerges from both Jhimli and Protima's cases is how "*haater kaaj*" or "manual skilled work" is promoted by NGOs as a viable economic and social occupation for women. However, in most cases this training does not translate into a secure career path. As discussed in Chapter Four, vocational training or income-generation programs in Kolkata NGOs

are feminised and utilise the manual dexterity of young women. Other trainings, such courses in car mechanics that were offered to some young men, are not even considered for women. Granted, NGOs are increasingly providing other vocational training programmes to women, such as computer skills, desktop publishing skills, and hospitality services via corporate social responsibility programmes. This variety of vocational training, however, did not exist during Protima and Jhimli's tenure with NGOs. The opportunities available to Protima and Jhimli encourage women like them to accept jobs that are again feminised and undervalued. Further, these limited opportunities reinforce class-based notions of manual work as appropriate occupations for subaltern women. Moreover, the different types of vocational training typically do not include training on business practices and knowledge on relevant labour markets. This omission reinforces young people's role as workers rather than potential businesswomen or entrepreneurs. Reflecting on her years of learning sari-making, Jhimli shared: "We just learned how to stamp saris with different [design] blocks. We didn't know anything about cloth, about dye, about sales. What kind of skill-[building] is that?" Drishti, another young woman who grew up in Jibon's shelter home similarly expressed her frustration with the partial training she received when learning sari-making. According to her, trainees did not get any "*gyan*" (knowledge) or "details" about the industry of their skill; they just learned how to be workers who "stamp saris" (*chaap marna*). Like Protima, neither Jhimli nor Drishti were able to utilise their *haater-kaaj* skills to secure satisfying employment.

Women like Protima and Jhimli perceive themselves as economically unsuccessful. Furthermore they express ambivalence about their degree of respectability. On the one hand, these consider themselves to be more respectable than sex workers. As another young woman research participant said: "I could've gone into any *keharaap raasta* [literally, bad path, serving as a euphemism for sex work] but I did not." On the other hand however, these women also recognise their current position as domestic workers to be the bottom in the hierarchy of labour economies. Therefore, they continue to search for work they wished they could have – work that

is better paying and outside the realm of manual labour; work that is *bhalo* or respectable, work that is “*bose-kora-kaaj*, sit down work.” Despite their involvement with youth development NGOs, these women were tracked into particular kinds of occupations based on structures of gender and class as well as structures of morality. Although these women find themselves in legal, ‘moral,’ jobs, these positions nonetheless, and all too often, involve unregulated low-paid and labour intensive work.

Besides attempting to build young people’s employment futures through traditional vocational training, NGOs also attract and recruit young people into the NGO social and development sector as social workers. Nearly 50% of the young people in my research community did work at NGOs as social workers for at least one year during their career paths. Fourteen out of forty continue to work in NGOs today. Abir is one such young man. In the next section, I discuss the story of Abir, whose work journey illustrates how NGO work can be a ‘contradictory resource’ for young people in terms of social respectability and economic mobility (Jeffrey et al. 2008). Through Abir’s case, I show how NGOs sometimes offer cultural mobility at the expense of economic stability.

5.4 The Allure of NGO Work

When Abir was in his first year of university in 2009, he landed his dream job: social work at his childhood NGO, Jibon. His position as “Youth Motivator” entailed doing what he knows best – facilitating discussions on children’s rights and protection, attending youth leadership trainings across the country, representing young people from red light areas at global summits, and getting paid Rs. 6000, nearly £73 a month – a hefty sum for Abir – enough to cover daily expenses at home, pay for his mother’s long list of medicines, indulge in a smart phone or a glistening gem on his left ear lobe, and build a small savings account in the bank. Abir was assigned to an internationally funded project called Youth Action - a leadership programme for young people

to address sexual violence in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The India chapter was housed at Jibon and Abir was one of the key facilitators behind the programme on the ground.

The rise of participatory and professionalised development is spawning a new workforce within Kolkata's NGO economy (Ebrahim, 2001). Many NGOs – especially NGOs working with marginalised groups – are increasingly offering stipend-based, but also salary-based job contracts within NGOs for community-driven social work. Subjects of development, like Abir, are trained not only for their own personal empowerment, but also for leading their peers and communities towards greater development. In the NGO economy, markers of marginalisation – such as gender, caste, and family occupation – do not obstruct job opportunities, but rather can attract job opportunities. Popular target categories of NGO development that are deemed as vulnerable such as “girl-children” “child labourers,” “children of sex workers” are recruited as workers in NGOs. Abir, as a son of a sex worker living in a red-light area, is an example of a case of young person who grew up as a subject of development and aspires to be a facilitator of development.

The first time Abir walked into Jibon's drop-in-centre was in 1999 when he was 10 years old. He started attending the centre first for academic tutoring, but enthusiastically started to participate in their youth group, residential workshops, and campaigns related to child rights, trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and other related issues. Growing up, Abir spent a significant part of his days and evenings at Jibon. “Whatever I got in life, I got from there,” he explained to me one afternoon.

Abir received his first “*naukari*” or “job” from Jibon. In 2005, Jibon began to host the international programme Youth Action through its drop-in-centres. As an international participatory programme, Youth Action employed young people as Peer Supporters on a monthly stipend of Rs 500 (£6), which eventually increased to Rs. 700 (£8.50). Abir was one of the first Peer Supporters. In 2008, Youth Action decided it was time to have three full time staff persons planning and implementing programme activities. Many young people from Jibon's

various drop-in-centres across Kolkata applied for the job. Abir was the only male candidate whose mother was a sex worker. He secured the position, along with two women – one whom was a former sex worker and another who was the daughter of a sex worker. Abir attributes his job success to his level of trainings and, as he said in an interview, his “knack for creativity.”

As a Youth Motivator, Abir’s workdays were busy and full, so much so that he was unable to continue attending university evening classes. Not wanting to forego an attractive salary that was supporting his mother and a job where he felt he was learning more about the world than any textbook, Abir decided to let his studies go. He dropped out of university and immersed himself in his job at Jibon. During his five years of employment with Youth Action, Abir enjoyed the rewards of being associated with an international project not just economically but socially. His job fostered cosmopolitan opportunities including travelling to conferences, meeting celebrities for social causes, and appearing in the press as a youth leader. His job also endowed him with respect and esteem within his neighbourhood. As a child of a sex worker, Abir appeared to be on a path that was socially and economically promising.

In November 2011, when I met Abir for our first interview, Youth Action was unexpectedly coming to an end. The international project no longer had funds to sustain youth-led advocacy against sexual exploitation. The management at Jibon was desperately seeking alternative grants to continue the project, but prospects for securing funds were grim. Abir and his other young colleagues were abruptly facing the prospect of becoming unemployed. “We have our jobs until the end of the month...Everyone is tense. If they don’t get funding beyond November, then what?”

After three years of leading an internationally recognised, dynamic youth project at Jibon, Abir had not anticipated the threat of closure. “Youth Action was such a great programme, I never thought it would shut down.” He sat across a table from me in his shared office that he was slowly packing up by purging files and taping up boxes of material. “My supervisor used to

tell me, Abir, don't think this is your *bhobhisbot*, future. Look for better work, better work. If you have this today, don't think you'll have it tomorrow. I used to think, no, that won't happen."

At the end of the month, Youth Action did shut down. All but two Youth Workers lost their jobs; Abir was among the lucky ones. Months later, when I met Abir for a second interview, he was still receiving a pay cheque from Jibon. Jibon managed to carve out a position for him as a full time staff member managing a range of disparate duties at the shelter home. Abir was no longer a part of an international project; nor was his salary as high as it used to be. In his new job, he was paid half of his old salary – Rs.3500. "And it isn't enough," he confessed. "My mother is really ill – we constantly need medicines for her." His mother suffered from multiple ailments – from high blood pressure to chronic gynaecological conditions. Abir's salary is sole source of income.

In the summer of 2012 in our second interview, Abir was questioning his career choices. "When I completed higher secondary, perhaps I should've left Jibon then and focused on my studies. I could've found any side job and finished my college." Indeed, his mother's health had been one of the primary reasons Abir had decided to drop out of university in the first place, but the allure of his position as a social worker also influenced his choice. I asked Abir if Jibon mentored him through his decision to drop out of school. He defended Jibon, explaining that the organisation had always supported his educational pursuits, he explained. Jibon even tried to adjust his working hours so he could attend evening classes. But the truth is, after a long day of work, Abir was too tired to study. "It's my failure that I couldn't continue [my studies.]" Unfortunately, the lack of educational credentials affects Abir's experience of work as well as his future prospects, even within the NGO economy. Due to his lack of a college degree, Abir cannot imagine himself moving up in Jibon. As he explains, he feels he may be experientially qualified (as a young man from the red-light area), but he is educationally under-qualified.

No matter how much experience you have, education matters. Even after three years of working here, can I write my own reports in English? I have to give my reports in Bengali to my supervisor, she types it in English and passes onto the management or funders. She has some input, but so do I. The thinking behind the report was mine. But who gets the benefit? Whoever wrote the report in English. I'm not upset with

her or anything. Nothing like that. But look, she is more educated and that's why she has a better salary. Along with being displeased with his new salary, Abir expressed ambivalence towards his duties at the shelter home where he mostly manages the stocks of inventory – keeping count of beds, fans, toothpaste tubes, etcetera. The work is more administrative than he desires, although he does get to facilitate a residents' meeting once a month. More importantly, Abir questions the security of his job. After witnessing the collapse of an international programme and the lay-offs of multiple colleagues, Abir now believes that the NGO sector can be risky. As he explained, "I dream to have a fixed job where I no longer have to think about what's next.I'm really afraid of contracts or of situations like the one I am in now. I never imagined this before." Even though Abir always thought he would work for an NGO, he is looking for new work outside the NGO sector.

Abir's experience points to a number of recurring themes in my interviews with 18 other youth social workers. First, Abir, like other young people, initially joined Jibon for the sake of educational support based on the widespread belief in India that a good education leads to a good job (Jeffrey 2008). And yet as the years went by, Abir and others dropped out of school or could not keep up with their studies because of the tempting opportunities offered by NGOs – an experience that I discussed in Protima's case as well. In repeated conversations with Abir, he reiterated his "one regret": dropping out of school during his tenure at Youth Action.

Like Abir, many other young people dropped out school or university. Milan, a 28 year old who started his own NGO in 2011 left school during Class 11, because according to him, he became too preoccupied with being an NGO youth leader. Although he had the monetary support of his family to start his own business and eventually his own NGO, he also regrets his decision to end his education. Drishti, now 26, also dropped out of school before she completed Class 8. She made a decision as a child not to pursue her studies while living in Jibon's shelter home. Although she never felt academically inclined, she believed that she was tracked away from education towards vocational training before she was mature enough to make an informed

choice about her educational career. Fortunately, she participated in an NGO-sponsored art therapy-training programme, where she has now found a job as an art therapist. Unlike Abir, Drishti, did not express regret when we spoke, perhaps because she believed her position as an employee was financially secure.

Secondly, Abir's story highlights the popular desire among many young people to have a career in social work, specifically NGO work. Abir's growing desire since childhood to work at an NGO was not rare. His aspiration was shared by twenty of the forty post-NGO youth in my research community. Like Abir, many of these youth, felt they had been *toiri kora* or prepared to work for NGOs. "NGOs are in our blood," a young person once told me, as a way to explain how she was socialised to work for NGOs. Another young person, who regularly worked for NGOs, described how he had an "NGO soul." Interestingly, young people who were not employed at NGOs would occasionally ask me: "Can you get me a job in an NGO?" For most youth, being a social worker at an NGO was attractive for a variety of reasons including the creative nature of the job, its association with knowledge-based and office-based economies, the resemblance to *sewa* or social service, the high esteem of social work among local communities, and the access it provided to typically inaccessible cultural capital – the third facet of Abir's story.

For subaltern young people like Abir, being a social worker at an NGO provides cultural capital that is less likely to present itself in other kinds of work: trips abroad, media publicity, meetings with celebrities and political figures, as well as respect and clout in local communities. Sanjay, a 23 year old, who also worked with Jibon on the Youth Action project, believed he acquired a greater "position" in his neighbourhood through his job. "First, nobody knew me or what I did. But today, I've got quite a name in my *para* (neighbourhood.) Everyone knows who I am and that I work for Jibon." In 2005, when Sanjay travelled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for a conference and returned home – a *basti* near the Tollygunge red-light area – his neighbours began to see him differently. He was one of the first in his locality to acquire a passport and

travel to the other side of the world and back in an airplane, a novel mode of transportation. Before his employment, when Sanjay was just a youth group member of Jibon, his family was concerned by all of the hours he spent at the drop-in-centre. Once Sanjay secured a position as a social worker at Jibon, and of course a passport, he was no longer a source of concern and became instead a source of pride. Sanjay reported that since his employment, “People in my *para* began to take Jibon more seriously. They began to feel that Jibon really is doing something for us.”



Figure 4: Youth NGO worker facilitates a workshop for children at a drop-in-centre (2012). Photo: Sahar Romani

Drishti shared a similar experience. Drishti is now an art therapist for Kala, an NGO founded by her art therapy teacher who trained Drishti when she a teenager at Jibon’s shelter home. Employed as a staff member since 2007, Drishti has travelled to London twice, met Hilary Clinton during her Kolkata tour 2012, photographed in local newspapers, and has a number of foreigner friends. Drishti’s mother lives in Kalighat’s *Boro Gali*, where residents are

aware of Drishti's forays into cosmopolitanism. According to Drishti, her family and community in Boro Gali "don't know exactly where I went or who I met; they don't have that awareness, but they know I am going or meeting someone important."

It is important to note that Drishti, Sanjay, and Abir's employment with NGOs is entangled with international networks and funding. Other youth social workers, who worked for smaller community based organisations or had started up their own grassroots NGOs, did not share similar experiences of cosmopolitanism, but enjoyed other resources such as community endowed respect and esteem. Irfan, for example, once a child labourer and now a social worker, started up his own community-based organisation in Khidderpore at the age of 21. Irfan does not have the international connections to receive invitations from Brazil, but he enjoys other kinds of capital, such as being called "Irfan Sir" by young children in his neighbourhood. Similarly, Dheeraj (24), a young man who worked as a computer teacher for 12 months in 2008 at Jibon felt his job experience was identity-altering: he was given the title "Sir" on the job – an ascription he never imagined for himself. The same goes for Sanjay in his neighbourhood. These days, if there is trouble in the neighbourhood, people go to Sanjay. "If there is a problem, whether a girl has eloped or if there was a child marriage, then everyone comes to me. They ask me to accompany them."

Despite the various cultural benefits of social work, NGO-based social work also has its downsides, particularly economic, which has led young people to become disillusioned with NGO-based employment. This is the final point that emerges through Abir's story. NGO work used to be Abir's dream job, but now Abir is actively looking for work in other sectors. As a fieldworker, he encounters an age-based glass ceiling. Even though youth social workers like him have the "practical experience," as Abir says, to be excellent fieldworkers, the chances of professional mobility towards managerial and better-paid positions in NGOs are grim. This lack of mobility is often attributed to the lack of necessary skills, such as the ability to communicate in English or educational qualifications for acquiring a better paying position. Being a

fieldworker, as socially valuable as it may be, remains structurally undervalued within NGO employment hierarchies.

During a focus group discussion with youth social workers, some of my research participants felt that their employment as social workers was a greater benefit to NGO management than for themselves. Jhimli was offered a job at Jibon – once her shelter home – as a Shelter Home Night Care Taker. They offered a salary of only Rs.2000 (£25) a month. “We were once *their* girls,” she explained, “so they think they’ll use us for such a low salary.” Jhimli believed if the NGO hired a candidate from elsewhere, they would have to pay at least Rs. 3000. “But they just use us.” Jhimli decided not to take the job. General attitudes of being undervalued or as many young people said – “being used” (*babobaar*) – signals a kind of “NGO politics” that young people often ascribed to NGO management – something I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Six. Youth social workers sometimes felt that their employment at Jibon or Adhikar was a greater benefit to the organisation than to themselves. After all, being youth social workers meant that they were successful ‘case studies’ for the NGO to showcase and secure funding.

Through Abir’s story, as well as other illustrating cases, I demonstrate how employment at an NGO as a social worker is a contradictory resource for subaltern youth (Jeffrey et al 2008). On the one hand, young people gain cultural capital that fosters social respectability and is often times inaccessible to poor young people in living in *bastis*. On the other hand, youth social workers positioned at the bottom of NGO hierarchies typically face grim prospects for economic mobility in spite of their earned respectability. Post-NGO youth regularly complained about their low salaries and attributed their immobility from lower rungs of NGOs staff structures to their history as subjects of development. It was common for youth social workers in NGO economies to feel socially successful through their forays into cosmopolitanism and access to cultural capital and social respectability. However, the economic precarity of their jobs challenged their economic independence and their ability to stand on their own two feet with confidence.

In this chapter so far, I have described two different work and livelihood pathways – NGO work and domestic work – to illustrate common experiences of post-NGO youth in my research community in pursuit of economic stability and social respectability. In the next section, I tell the story of a young woman named Tara. Her case exemplifies another path pursued by some post-NGO young women. Unlike Protima's case discussed above, Tara's is a story of rejecting employment through the pursuit of marriage, one of the many respectable paths for women in NGO women's rights' oriented communities.

5.5 The Occupation of Marriage

Marriage is a common pathway of social mobility for many young women in India, whether or not they grow up with NGOs. Marriage practices vary across regions, classes, communities, and families in India (Puri 1999, Donner 2002, Grover 2009). Similarly the pursuit and meanings of marriage also vary across my research community, spanning the spectrum of 'love marriage' to 'arranged marriage' (Grover 2009). Highly gendered, marriage is nonetheless also important for men across India. However while marriage is pathway to economic security and stability for many women, for men, marriage typically is a marker of having attained economic stability. Among the 20 women in my research community, 14, all of whom are in their 20s, were married by the end of my fieldwork in September 2012. Some young women pursued arranged marriages either having elders or Jibon staff members make matches on their behalf. Jibon facilitated marriages for women in its care, especially those who did not ostensibly demonstrate a strong capability for economic independence. More commonly, however, women in my research community pursued marriage on their own after participating in the popular rites of romance and courtship.

Among the various forms of love marriage, one significantly contested marriage practice I would like to draw attention to is elopement or *paliyen biye kora*. Elopement is a phenomenon that Henrike Donner (2002) also describes in her study of marriage in an urban neighbourhood

in Kolkata. In Kolkata's red-light area, elopement is generally perceived as an irresponsible, risky, and hasty decision towards marriage. In the middle class NGO imagination, eloping pivots on the trope of an under-aged woman in a *basti* who runs away with a poor, unemployed lover leading to an unhappy situation that might result in domestic violence and sometimes abandonment. Middle class NGO workers as well as elders in Kalighat actively discouraged young women from early marriages and elopement, especially with men who were economically insecure. This disapproval constructs elopement as a sign of failure, foreseen as a barrier to standing on one's own feet. Four young women in my research community eloped, Protima being one of them. At first, their marriages stirred uproar among family and NGO communities. With time however, these women either left their marriages or were accepted by their communities, as in Protima's case.

Elopement, however, is not always a story of hasty and blind love. Tara, a 25 year old, pursued marriage through elopement but her path signified anything but rash love; rather, it suggested an attitude of judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Tara lives near Garia, in a lower-middle class suburb of Kolkata. When I met her for an interview in her home, she was three months pregnant and lying on her bed in compliance with her doctor's instructions of "strict bed rest." "This is what I do all day," she said, "I lie on this bed and get bored. So it's just me and this *boka-box* (idiot box)", she said, pointing to the small screen television placed above her showcase.

Tara's home consists of one spacious multi-purpose room serving as bedroom, dining room, and living room with an attached closet-sized kitchen. She feels she has everything she could ask for: a gas connection, a refrigerator, porcelain dishes, and even a fish tank. The fish tank belongs to her husband, Babai's. "It's like his second wife," she joked. But then she continued, "Honestly though, Babai is very good to me. I never thought he would love me this much." When Tara married Babai in 2009, she did not love him. Her decision to marry him was not based on love, nor was it an arranged marriage facilitated by a family elder, or even by Jibon.

It was a personal decision based on practicality. As she says, “It was a *raasta*, a path, to have a new life,” that would take her away from her life at Jibon’s shelter home.

I first met Tara in 2004 at Jibon’s shelter home, where she was one of the few young women who did not have a history of residing in red-light areas or being trafficked. She grew up with her mother and stepfather in North Calcutta. However, her home was not safe. When I asked Tara about her childhood, she did not want to talk about it. She said, “Let’s just say, my home was a red light area for me.” Leaving behind what I imagine was a home of sexual abuse, Tara lived under Jibon’s care for six years where she made some lasting friendships and studied until Class 12. At that point, she also secured a job at a women’s magazine as an administrative assistant and moved to Jibon’s Working Girls’ Hostel. Once she had an income, she was earning Rs. 3000 (£36), rupees a month, one third of which would go to Jibon for lodging costs. At this point in her life, Tara also made the decision not to pursue higher education. Tara had excellent marks in school, “I could’ve gone to college” she said, “But with such little money, tell me, what shall I take care of – myself, my soap, my food or my books, or my admissions fees? I couldn’t manage. I didn’t have any one behind me, anyone ahead of me. So I left school and didn’t consider college as an option.”

Between 2008-2009, Tara began to strategise how to build a life for herself beyond Jibon’s facilities. During her last year at Jibon, the organisation actively encouraged long-term residents over the age of 18 to transition out of shelter home care to new facilities – government hostels, family homes, or any independent housing arrangement beyond Jibon. Many of Tara’s friends were attempting to arrange new homes for themselves. Some long-term residents who had families were returning to their childhood homes, although this was not an option for Tara. She did not maintain ties with her parents, nor did she have the desire to return to them. A few others, who were lucky enough to get decent jobs, were struggling to find a way to set up their own living arrangements in the city’s suburbs. Yet, finding a space to rent in Kolkata or its more affordable peripheries is not easy for single women. Many young women reported their

unsuccessful attempts at securing a rental lease, as landlords commonly do not rent residential properties to single women without the guardianship of a parent or husband.

Some young women began to consider marriage as a viable option for security after Jibon. Tara's friend Arpita, for example, did not have a job, nor did she have a family to whom she could return. She decided to get married instead with the support of Jibon. Arpita's marriage provoked Tara to consider marriage more carefully. "I never thought too seriously about marriage before," explained Tara. Yet, Tara had many boyfriends. As she elaborated, young women at the shelter home used boyfriends to make life easier. She could have lunch with one boyfriend and get a lift to work from another. During the days leading up to Arpita's wedding, Tara seriously began to consider whether there was a prospective husband among her pool of boyfriends.

At that time, I thought, I need a boy...who can feed me, keep me, give me clothes, who can provide for me, and liberate me [*mukto korte parbe*] from my daily tension...I needed something like that...[some one who] could hold me down in one place. So out of all the boys, I married the best – Babai. Because he was the only boy who had his own home, a house...he has everything – it would be better for me.

Tara was drawn to Babai because not only because of the economic security he could promise, but also, as she explained to me, because of his love for her despite of her "background" as an girl from an NGO shelter home. Babai lived across from the shelter home, his balcony looking onto the shelter home's balcony. While Babai was aware that the shelter home was designated for daughters of sex workers and survivors of trafficking, he did not know of Tara's personal past. Tara explicitly told Babai she would never tell him about her past, and according to her, he did not ask questions. Furthermore, Tara also knew that marrying Babai would not interfere with her desire to work and pursue a career. "I knew that if I married Babai, I would not have any problems for my work. Babai encouraged me to work."

On the night of Arpita's wedding, Tara decided to elope with Babai. According to her, although the decision to marry was made suddenly that night, it was no less informed and came after considerable thought and deliberation (*soch samaj ke*). I asked Tara if she loved Babai:

I never loved anyone. Perhaps after living together over a period of time, we have something going (*ektu jomiye che*), the fact that my husband and I have been together for two years. He's a simple man. [For example], if you bring a puppy home— and I am not comparing him to a dog —over time you begin to love it [the puppy]. Similarly, after being with each other, I feel love for him [*bhalo bhasha jomegaiche*].

After Tara's marriage, she and Babai moved into the modest but comfortable home in which they now live. During her first year of marriage, Tara continued to work at the women's magazine press but then decided to quit and chose to live a life as a housewife. At one point in our interview, I asked Tara if she felt any fear when she decided to elope and start a life with Babai. She looked me in the eye and said, "I had no fear. I knew that if Babai ever left me, I could take care of myself, earn for myself. I would not be at a loss."

Tara's narrative illuminates three very important insights about marriage as a possible post-NGO pathway. First, women like Tara – women who demonstrate academic and social capability as well as economic independence – sometimes decide to invest in marriage as a strategy for future security. Even though other options might be available to them, some of these women choose marriage, as a primary vehicle for economic stability and social respectability, while aware of the risks their choices might entail. Furthermore, it is important to remember that in some cases, marriage is actively promoted by NGOs like Jibon, especially for women who, unlike Tara, do not demonstrate the entrepreneurial savviness or academic aptitude to succeed on their own post-NGO. In the cases of women like Tara however, Jibon discourages marriage as an economic pathway. Further, Jibon especially frowns upon marriage if it is considered to threaten a woman's employment and education. Keya (28), for example, another young woman who grew up in Jibon's shelter home, arguably was a Jibon poster-child since childhood. From an early age, she was celebrated as an excellent student, an outstanding singer, and an energetic activist. Keya regularly featured in Jibon's pamphlets and media campaigns as she embodied the right kind of 'girl-power.' She had the potential to be the icon of post-NGO women's empowerment. Yet, when Keya decided to quit her job and marry a man twice her age and start a family, several staff members at Jibon were presented with a dilemma.

On the one hand they wanted to respect Keya's personal decision, but on the other hand, they felt her choice of leaving her job and choosing to the life of a housewife was a step backwards. Her decision of move to a small town and live as a housewife, financially dependent on her husband, strongly resonated with tropes of women's disempowerment in the NGO imaginary.

It is important to read Keya and Tara's pursuit of marriage though not as a move towards disempowerment. Rather, their choice of marriage echoes modules of agency beyond the registers of resistance and counter-hegemony. As Saba Mahmood (2005) asserts, it is important to interpret agency as not as synonymous to resistance but as a 'modality of action' (157). Tara and Keya's choice of marriage is likewise embedded in a modality of agency steeped in a judicious opportunism that strives towards stability, well-being, and respectability. Tara took an informed risk and is happy with the consequence. "I never thought I would attain such happiness (*sukh*)," she recounted. During my interview with Tara, she explained how in her early 20s she desired to "do everything for myself by myself." Over time though, Tara began to feel that her desire for complete self-reliance was "childish" (*chotobelar nesha*). Today, her modality of action reflects her new desires to live a "*sadharan* or "ordinary" life as a comfortable and respectable housewife in a lower-middle class neighbourhood.

Another important point emerging from Tara's narrative concerns the role of love in marriage. Tara's choice to marry Babai has little to do with love. Her choice of boyfriends and her eventual choice for a husband were determined by material security more than romance. Tara certainly felt affection for Babai, but she only began to love him after a period of time. Tara's marriage narrative troubles constructions of "love marriage" and "arranged marriage," binaries that often position love and personal choice against rationality and family compliance (Grover 2009). Through Tara's story, marriage is judicious opportunism, a decision to meet her needs of survival even though its ostensibly a 'love marriage,' or as they say in Bengal, '*nijer biye*, a marriage of one's own' (Donner 2002).

The final point that Tara's case suggests is the anxiety women 'subjects of development' face in being accepted as life partners by men in the 'mainstream.' Even though Tara is not from a red-light area, she grew up associated with an NGO known to work with people from red-light areas. Like Tara, all women in pursuit of heterosexual relationships in my research community expressed varying degrees of anxiety related to gaining acceptance by boyfriends or future husbands because of their histories, families, neighbourhoods, or "backgrounds." Rinky, a young woman from Kalighat red-light area who now works as a social worker for Adhikar, once recounted to me her cathartic confession to her boyfriend about her mother's previous occupation as a sex worker. Alternatively, Uma, another woman in Kalighat, expressed relief that she married her childhood sweetheart from Boro Gali because they both bore the stigma of being from "the red-light area." Not all men and their families from the red-light area and its surrounding lanes were open to marrying women within the community. Protima, for example who grew up in Boro Gali married a man a few lanes away from the red light area. While he never expressed concern with her family background, his family did not accept their marriage until Protima became a mother.

Marriage plays a significant role affecting respectability in women's lives. Some women participate in marriage without much economic consideration, such as Protima. She eloped for love. Others like Tara, invest in marriage as a strategy for economic stability as well as social respectability that comes with living a lower middle class normative life in ordinary neighbourhood of the city. Through Tara's case I illustrate how marriage can serve as a rational "*raasta*" even if it is secured through elopement. For young men though marriage ushers different social connotations. From my research community, only one young man is married. Unlike women, marriage was not rendered as a possible path to respectable security, as much as it was a marker of having achieved stability as a provider. Young men's relationship to marriage is unfortunately beyond the scope of my present work and remains an area of inquiry for future research.

In the next section, I present an uncommonly successful work journey achieved through participation in the new consumer service economies of the world-class city in India. Neela, who I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, aspires for social and economic respectability that is legible in dominant narratives of post-liberalisation and she is among the few in my community who was successful in fulfilling her aspirations.

5.6 “New” Consumer Service Economies

What are we all working towards? A corporate job, na? But then NGOs don't prepare us for it. You're not going to get too far with just an education. What do NGOs give – a little bit of education, a little vocational training, do some block printing here, do some stitching there – but nothing that will really prepare us for the world. What do you need to prepare nowadays? Computer skills... how to present yourself [professionally]. We didn't learn any of this. [Neela]

Neela – short for Neelofar – is 26 years old and does not have a “corporate job.” Her employment more closely resembles jobs of the office world, unlike the other forms of employment described earlier. Neela works as an Administrative Executive for a restaurant hospitality company where she manages logistics, tenders, emails, phone calls, accounts, and databases. She received a raise in 2012 and now earns Rs. 9000 (£180) a month – a well paying salary that leaves her with a disposable income. Neela's job is an example of emerging forms of employment in the rapidly growing post-liberalisation economies of consumer services, including sales, marketing, leisure, entertainment (Gooptu 2009). These post-liberalisation consumer service industries, along with IT or information technology industries are dominantly perceived engines of national growth as well as individual mobility in contemporary India (Gooptu 2009). However, post-NGO youth who secure employment in consumer and service economies – in retail or call centres for example – generally do not experience social mobility. Instead, they find themselves at the lower rungs of these new economies subjected to long hours without much promise for mobility (Gooptu 2009). Neela, however, is a rare example of someone in my research community who secured a job within the new economy of consumer services and encountered social mobility. Achieving this success has not been easy, however. According to

Neela, it has been a long journey in the coming, much of which she pursued on her own, despite having grown up with an NGO.

Neela moved to Jibon's shelter home in 2000 when she was 13 years old where she was supported to attend formal school and graduate from high school. In 2008, during her first year of college, Neela enrolled in a new work trainer's programme at the well-known seven star hotel, the Taj Bengal. This training programme was piloted by Jibon in collaboration with the company's new corporate social responsibility scheme. Professional training at Taj Bengal sounded promising to Neela until she realised this training was for housekeeping.

Why shall I do training in housekeeping? And at Taj Bengal – be it housekeeping, laundry, or whatever – people working there are just 'normal' without much education. Somebody just went to school until Class 8 or Class 7. What am I suppose to do there? I know I have an education – sure it's not a lot – but I'm still studying for a degree. At Taj Bengal, I felt like I wasn't climbing up, I was climbing down.

For Neela, Jibon did not present her with work and livelihood opportunities that appeared economically and socially promising, or on par with her urban aspirations. As Neela explained to me, she felt she had a "status" to live up to. Neela is not sure where this sense of status came from, but it is something she always felt, she said. She avoided work propositions involving forms of *baater kaaj* or manual work such as catering, working, tailoring, domestic work, or cleaning floors. Taj Bengal was her first and last exception.

After completing her course with Taj Bengal, Neela decided to take matters into her own hands. At the end of the year, she moved out of Jibon's care and into a friend's place. She started calling up everyone in her contact list in search of a job: old staff members from Jibon, friends she met from Jibon's drop-in-centres, "phone friends," and online chat room friends. Over the span of a year, she moved out of the shelter home, quit college, and worked a range of temporary jobs. She was an insurance company call operator for a couple of months until she could not longer tolerate her supervisor's sexual harassment. Then, she made a living by regularly temping as a social greeter at promotion events - registering dogs for a dog show or handing out gifts to children at a mall for World Children's Day. She also worked as a phone operator for a large multi-national.

After a year of precarious and unreliable work, Neela secured a long-term job in 2009 with the help of an aunty, a former NGO staff member with whom Neela maintained regular contact with over the years. The aunty was invested in Neela's financial security and future mobility and introduced Neela to her sister, an ambitious businesswoman who was keen on starting up restaurant chain in the city. Neela was offered a job in her budding company with a starting salary of Rs.6000 a month. Today, Neela is still working at the restaurant management company. She is earning Rs. 9000 and is looking forward to future promotions. She also returned to college through a long-distance degree programme. Her boss promises to gift Neela a laptop if she graduates.

In my research community, Neela's case is an exception. There are three key differences between Neela's trajectory and that of other young people's with whom I worked. First, Neela traces her 'success' to her personal persistence for aiming high. She also prides her ethic of hard work and will power. Neela's 'success' though can be highly attributed to the sponsors in her life: a former NGO staff member, her boss, her friends who opened their home to her when Neela first left the shelter home. These social network and their corresponding community resources continue to enable Neela to achieve her desires for financial security and growth. In spite of her ambivalent relationships with Jibon, Neela's network of support stems from the relationships she made at Jibon. This suggests that affiliation with NGOs can provide social capital that extends beyond formal forms of development. I came to know of other young women, beyond my immediate research community who, like Neela, were 'sponsored' to varying degrees by adults they met at Jibon. One young girl was adopted by a foreign volunteer and is now at a reputable boarding school in North India. Another woman was unofficially taken under the wing of an aunty from the organisation and continues to serve as her mentor. These rare but significant cases point to the important role interpersonal relationships play between facilitators of development and subjects of development.

Second, Neela is also atypical in the sense that her income is solely for herself. Unlike Abir, who supports his mother, or Protima who shares her income when she has one with her mother, or Jhimli who lives with her mother and shares household costs, Neela's income serves her alone. Neela does not have a strong relationship with her mother. She has forged a family of mentors and caretakers outside of her biological family. Every now and then she inquires about the needs of her younger brother, but his livelihood does not depend on Neela. Neela's mother, no longer a sex worker, works for an US based company operating in Kolkata's red-light area that seeks the "restoration for women in prostitution." Neela's mother provides for herself and her son.

Third, Neela's promise of organisational mobility in new economy jobs is atypical. For Neela, a combination of luck, resources, support, and determination leads to her exceptional mobility. Other young people who accessed new economy jobs, such as Deepak who worked at a retail department store in a shopping mall or Deb who secured a position at a call centre, started at the bottom tiers of their companies and remained there until they finally decided to quit due to long hours, disrespect from supervisors, and the lack of any professional mobility. Neela's experience of mentorship and support in a fast-paced, professional work environment is atypical. Unlike Deb or Deepak who are 'massified' (Skeggs 1997) as a redundant youth workforce in large company, Neela has a personal bond with her employer that extends beyond a professional relationship. Now Neela has developed a familial relationship with her employer who vows to "groom" Neela into a promising businesswoman.

Neela's rare ability to "stand on her own feet" in economically and socially normative ways of moving from a red-light area to the middle class and from marginalised to mainstream is a success story for her mother. It is also a success story for Jibon. A youth programme staff member from Jibon expressed pride over Neela's journey during an interview with me. According to this staff person, Neela was truly independent, unlike for example, Abir. Whereas Abir continues to rely on the Jibon and is therefore "not independent", Neela has secured a path

on her own with a promising future. There are very few people who share Neela's experience. Among my research community, only two young people perceive and express themselves as economically and socially successful in a normative sense.

Interestingly, these few exceptions are integral to the on-going success of NGOs. Although rare, these limited but legible economic and cultural success stories are often strategically broadcasted to funders to secure and consolidate resources. These stories can also affirm staff members of the value of their work and reproduce the need and hope of NGO development work in red-light area communities. This phenomenon is not limited to youth development or anti-trafficking NGOs in Kolkata; it is a common occurrence in development work globally. Across development practices, including the proliferation of microfinance (Roy 2011b) and literacy programmes for rural women, a few exceptional case studies can effectively bolster existing practices whether or not they effectively enable social change for the poor. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) contend in the context of education institutions, the controlled mobility of a few people in each generation serves to legitimate and perpetuate the symbolic violence of institutions against the majority for whom mobility remains out of reach. The same applies to the institutions of NGOs working for youth development. Neela is acutely aware of her success and what it means for Jibon. As she told me one evening, often times staff members from Jibon call her to give interviews "here and there" so that she can narrate her story of transformation. Neela informed me that she evades these requests, even though staff members tell her it is a good opportunity for her. Neela though doesn't believe such publicity is an opportunity for her. "It only benefits them (*sirf unka fayda hai*)," she said flatly. Her mobility from "daughter of a woman in prostitution" to independent, upwardly mobile career woman legitimates Jibon's development work. Annual reports, funder applications, and development news stories, underscore the symbolic progress of young people like Neela while simultaneously casting a shadow on the struggles of Protima, Abir or ignoring the arguable success of Tara. In the final section of this chapter, I present a vignette of a woman I call Amrita. Unlike Neela, who

affirms conventional notions of respectability, Amrita's story – and her career path into the sex economy – troubles the very meanings of respectability.

5.7 Opportunities in the Sex Work Economy

Amrita does not stand out in a crowd. Barely five feet tall, hair pulled back in a thin ponytail, and always wearing a pair of simple, round wire glasses, Amrita appears demure and discreet. At first glance, no one would realise she is a successful businesswoman. Amrita has been running a *baipsha* or business on her own since she was merely 24. Now, at 32, Amrita considers herself to be an exception among her generation of women in Kalighat.

No girl in Kalighat has done what I did. Standing on my own feet, building my own two storey home and then spending 2 lakh rupees to throw my little brother a wedding. No one did this! No one did this by running their own business. And where is that business running from? From my very own home!

Amrita's business is part of the sex economy in Kalighat's red light area. She runs a "*room bhara*" or room rental service for flying sex workers – sex workers who do not reside in the neighbourhood but commute into the red-light area for work on a daily basis. In other words, Amrita runs a version of a brothel, one that her mother started after retiring from sex work. In 2004, when Amrita's mother died, Amrita inherited the business.

The sex economy is highly differentiated in red-light areas across Kolkata and within Kalighat. There are three commonly known modes of sex work organisation: the *chukri* system (a temporary bondage system often associated with authoritarian brothel owners), the *adhiya* system (where a sex worker partially shares her incomes with a brothel keeper), and the system of independent sex work (where a sex worker operates independently, sometimes renting rooms from landlords or brothel keepers) (Kotiswaran, 2011a). Amrita's business is arguably a cross between *adhiya* and an independent mode of sex work. In keeping with most independent modes of sex work, flying sex workers rent Amrita's room on an hourly or daily basis. Amrita's *ghar* or room is in a larger *basti baari* or slum tenement typical of those found the city's slums. The *baari* consists of seven *ghars* or rooms like Amrita's, each rented by different people, who also run

similar room rental businesses as Amrita. Amrita pays nominal monthly rent to a landlady of the *baari* for her *ghar*, which she then rents out to multiple flying sex workers throughout the day. But like in the *adhiya* system, many of the flying sex workers who rent facilities, reside throughout the day at Amrita's place and are sometimes even assigned customers through Amrita. Although Amrita preferred to describe her business as a *room bhara* business or room rental, but other NGO workers in the neighbourhood described the activities of Amrita's *baari* and *ghar* as a part of the *adhiya* system.

Growing up, Amrita did not imagine herself as a businesswoman in Kalighat's red-light area. On the contrary, she imagined herself as the owner of sari production house – a trade she learned during her years living at Jibon's shelter home. Like the many other young women growing up in Kalighat's red-light area, Amrita spent a portion of her teenage years in Jibon's shelter home as child. In 1991, as an 11 year old, she was among the first cohort of girls to move to Jibon's shelter home on the fringes of the city. Unlike Neela or Tara who joined Jibon after it established strong relationships with government schools, Amrita enrolled in Jibon during a time when formal education programs were still experimental within the organisation. Amrita dropped out of school in Class 5 and was encouraged to take part in numerous pilot courses training in "*haater kaaf*" or manual including sewing, embroidery, but mostly sari block printing. Amrita was one of the first women in Jibon's home to start working as sari maker.

When Amrita was 15 years old, her mother insisted she get married. Amrita's mother wanted to see her daughter secure, safe, and settled into a home and family. Jibon was not keen on an early marriage for Amrita, but in the end Amrita fulfilled her mother's wishes. The marriage however did not last. Unlike in Tara's experience, marriage did not bring security and stability to Amrita's life. "There is not point in getting into that past," she explained to me over biscuits and tea in her bedroom, "but it [my marriage] was full of problems." A few years later Amrita divorced her husband and returned to Jibon where she took a job as both a sari-maker and sari-maker trainer. She was earning Rs. 1500 (£28) a month. According to Amrita, she

returned to Jibon she was determined to improve and expand her skills as a sari-maker. “My hands lost practice and I decided to get them running again for speed and skill.” Amrita opted in for a special sari-making training course with the hopes of one day starting her own sari-making business. In 2002 however, when Amrita’s mother died, her career path took a turn in a completely different direction. “I stopped working (as a sari-maker),” said Amrita flatly.

Because I only made Rs. 1500. I wouldn’t be able to get anywhere with that. So I took over the business. I had to take care of my little brother, he studied in a hostel, and there were so many other expenses. In Rs.1500 how could I manage our eating, living, studies? I wouldn’t be able to do it.

Amrita moved back to her mother’s home in Kalighat and started managing the room rental business. When word got around in the shelter home that Amrita was now managing her mother’s business, some staff members and old friends disparagingly started calling Amrita a “madam” – a term often associated with authoritarian brothel owners. Amrita does not consider herself a madam. She is, in her view, a businesswoman.

As a self identified business woman, Amrita elaborated the skill and tact her business demands, especially when dealing with customers, negotiating with sex workers, and also mentoring sex workers about safe sex practices and financial saving strategies. Amrita explained, how she “has to use her brains” (*maatha lagate hobe*) in order to cultivate and maintain relationships with both sex workers and their male clients. Over the years as a businesswoman in the sex economy, Amrita has also been very strategic about building a savings for her and her brother’s future. She explained: “Where I am today, the way I’ve made my life today and my business - it’s because I use my brains– I keep thinking about how to run my business, how to save money, how to hold on to things.”

Over the years, Amrita has built an impressive savings for herself. A few years ago she was able to purchase some land in a suburb of Kolkata, where she built a home for her brother and herself. For the initial down payment she approached the DMSC sex worker union’s cooperative bank for a loan. This bank – known as the Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Bank – offers low interest rates to sex workers and their families. Amrita paid off her loan in two years

and now is an owner of a new home in the peripheries of the city. “Nobody has done what I did. And I didn’t ruin myself. People might say, you did all this over *there* (the red-light area). I did do it all over here, but I didn’t ruin myself!” she explained.

When Amrita says she did not “ruin herself”, she is referring to her achievement of economic success without practicing sex work herself. Indeed, even though Amrita’s economic path is linked to the sex work economy, for her, it is different and more respectable than practicing sex work.

You know what I learned at Jibon? Not to be like my mother [be a sex worker]. [They encouraged us] to go out and work, make a position for ourselves in the world outside. I have kept both of these things to heart. First, my income at Jibon was really low – I hardly got anything. But I didn’t become like my mother – not at all!

I’ve lived up to Jibon – I didn’t sell myself [practice sex work]. But if someone wants my room, wants space, why am I to blame? This is my business. And as for making a position for myself, to go out and be with respectable society [*bhadro samaj*], I did that, with a lot of hard work, I made myself a home, in a respectable way [*bhadro bhabe*], in a good way [*bhalo bhabe*], where I am able to live with good people, where no one knows anything about all of this [room rental business].

In our interview, it appeared that Amrita did not perceive any contradictions between the values she learned at Jibon and her lifestyle today. Economically, she feels her life aligns with Jibon’s goals of deterring young people from second-generation sex work. Socially, Amrita’s new home is a step closer to Jibon’s aspiration for youth to integrate into communities beyond red-light areas. Her new home is located in a semi-urban neighbourhood of the city, far from the congested alleys and business bustle of Kalighat red-light area. It is among *bhadro* (respectable) society. Even though Amrita spends most of her days and nights in Kalighat to manage her business, her brother and his wife reside in their new home far from the red light area, as per Amrita instructions: “I want him to be far from this universe, I want him to live in a good way (*bhalo bhabe*). I want him to sleep peacefully, day and night not surrounded with curse and cussing. I want him to have what I did not have....” While Amrita desires to give her brother a “*bhalo*” life, she does not look down on her own life and universe.

I am proud of Kalighat. I am doing my business here. Even if I didn’t have my business, I don’t look down at Kalighat (*kharap choke dekhi na*). I’ve learned that at Jibon – I would never hate Kalighat. But Jibon also taught me that there is a universe outside of this universe. With an education, with work skills, you can go out in the world and be among five different kinds of people. With ‘standard’, *bhadro* (respectable), people

– you can be near them, be with them. Maybe I was not able to do this for myself, but for my brother, my family, I am trying to make that happen.

Among my research community, Amrita was the only young woman running a room rental service in the sex economy. There were many other young men and women I came to hear of who once grew up with Jibon and experimented with different careers from taxi driving to NGO social work, but eventually pursued room rental or brothel-keeping businesses because of their economic rewards. These young people, like Amrita, carried on the businesses of their mothers.

A glimpse into Amrita's life trajectory raises critical questions for notions of success and respectability in young people post-NGO. First of all, Amrita's case draws attention to how young people appropriate the political and moral positions and values of development NGOs. As discussed earlier, Jibon takes a moral and political stance against sex work economies. Amrita, however, participates in the sex economy without feeling morally compromised because she is not directly practicing sex work herself – “she did not sell herself” (*nijer ke bikri kori ni*). For her, the morals she imbibed from Jibon frowned upon sex work, not wider sex economies. From Amrita's point of view, she has maintained her integrity as a young woman who grew up with Jibon because she avoided the sex profession, even if some staff members and peers at Jibon call her “madam.”

Secondly, Amrita considers herself to be successful economically as well as socially. Economically she achieved stability unlike other young woman of her generation. Amrita repeatedly reiterated her sense of exception in our interview: “You won't find anyone in Kalighat who kept her self *bhala* (*nijerke bhala theke*), did a business, and made her own home.” Amrita certainly had the rare opportunity to inherit and manage her deceased mother's business, but she believes her success is not just about her business alone; it is also connected to her strategic ability to make and save money: “Someone might say, I didn't have the same opportunity as you, but even if they did, would they do [what I did]? No one, they wouldn't be able.” Further, along

with economic success, Amrita also feels she has attained social mobility through building a home for her family outside of the red-light area in *bhadro samaj* (respectable society). Respectability is not a given, but it is something she earns and maintains through building a life for her brother beyond the red-light area and into the “mainstream.”

Amrita’s path to respectability or *bhadro samaj* resembles the strategies of sex workers in Kalighat who forsake their present for the futures of younger generations. Just as her mother and other sex worker mothers actively sent their daughters to far-away shelter homes for the promised respectability of their daughters, Amrita keeps her young brother at bay from the red-light area in a universe that is *bhadro* and *bhalo*. Amrita’s decision to live and work in the red-light area while distancing her younger brother from the “curse and cussing” (*gaala gaali*) of Kalighat is arguably a personal sacrifice for the sake of bettering her brother’s life. At the same time though, Amrita expresses moral integrity in relation to her daily work and business.

Thirdly, Amrita’s case effectively illustrates the different ways young people access *bhadro* and respectable mainstreams. For many young people, like Abir and Protima, social respectability is deeply rooted in the nature of their employment. For Amrita respectability is not linked to her work but to her economic achievement through work. With her wealth she is able to purchase respectability by asserting herself and her young brother in respectable neighbourhoods. Unlike young people who are striving to participate in normative economies in search of respectability, Amrita participates in the sex economy in order to create middle class success in spaces beyond the red-light area.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated the different ways post-NGO youth strive to stand on their own feet through work and employment. I have explored which paths of employment are legitimated and why, and how a notion of economic independence intersects with gendered notions of respectability. Through the detailed employment histories of Protima, Abir, Tara,

Neela, and Amrita, I highlight key experiences of post-NGO young people's social navigations of unequal opportunities, dynamic aspirations, and judicious opportunism in the city. I also gestured at the gendered nature of work and employment opportunities available to young women and men and intersections with notions of respectability. For post-NGO youth, work and employment are not only imagined as a source of income for economic independence but also as a source of respect. It is emblematic of their social (im)mobility as post-NGO youth moving from red-light areas into "mainstream" and respectable social lives beyond the social economies of red-light areas. The opportunities of going *beyond* red-light areas also emphasise the spatiality of respectability (McDowell 2007). Respectability therefore is not only achieved through social mobility but also sometimes through spatial mobility into new homes, neighbourhoods, and communities, which is especially apparent in Tara and Amrita's case.

As I have demonstrated through the five vignettes, the successful movement to respectability is situated, partial, and contingent. Protima might have avoided the fate of becoming a sex worker, yet she experiences toil and precarity as a domestic worker. For her, the work of domestic labour is neither economically nor socially promising; it is not "good work" even though it is acceptable work for NGOs. Abir is socially successful in his own eyes as a social worker, but economically finds himself on precarious grounds. His work grants him cultural distinction, but it does not offer economic independence. Tara, on the other hand, feels both economically and socially fulfilled but her social success is questionable within feminist narratives of women's empowerment and her economic security is dependent upon her husband's success. Similarly, Amrita's path may not be legitimated by NGO approval, but she expresses integrity, even though she might encounter hidden moments of anxiety. For Amrita, her success is less about the meaning of her waged work and more about the economic power her work produces, allowing her to build a home outside the red light area. Finally in Neela's case, there is rare convergence of social, moral, and economic success. Her legible success makes her a selling case study, which can further legitimate the project of NGOs.

Through these different examples, I have demonstrated the role NGOs play in shaping aspirations and meanings of economic and social respectability. NGOs certainly offer young people economic and cultural tools to navigate a world beyond red-light area economies and cultures, but these tools are entangled in wider class and gender inequalities in Kolkata. In their aim to protect young people from involvement in sex work economies, NGOs guide young people towards other precarious, and sometimes even exploitative, economies of work *normalised* for the poor. In doing so, NGOs support the moral transformation of youth communities in red-light areas, but also reproduce class and gender inequalities. This is particularly apparent in Abir and Protima's narratives. However, as the stories of Tara, Amrita, and Neela demonstrate, young people as social agents manoeuvre and appropriate resources, opportunities, and values of NGOs to find creative ways to stand up on their own. Some young people, like Amrita, even find pride in her their work as they challenge static notions of respectability and success. Young people's manoeuvres and meanings of standing up on their own are organised by their habitus, that is, their accumulated resources, dispositions, and aspirations as young people growing up in red-light areas, with NGOs, and in wider cultures of metropolitan Kolkata.

The terrains of waged work are not the only grounds in which young people negotiate social respectability and mobility. Another significant arena in which young people rework and make meaning of their class and gendered positions is through everyday cultural production in the world-class aspiring city. In the next chapter, I examine young people's – particularly young women's – cultural practices of comportment, consumption, and leisure in their neighbourhood and the wider city to examine how young women navigate regimes of class as well as gender as they strive for social mobility.

CHAPTER SIX

Being NGO Girls: Class, Consumption, and Mobility in the City

6.1 Introduction

Drishti and Neela were sitting against floor pillows in my flat snacking on a bowl of instant maggi noodles. Both of them had returned from a long day at work and were sharing office stories. Drishti recounted an incident. Last week at her NGO office, everyone was making plans to watch a film together. Different suggestions circulated round the room from art house Bengali films to the latest Bollywood releases. Drishti offered a suggestion to her colleagues: a new Bengali commercial film called *100% Love* – a kitsch, romantic comedy popular among “matinee-crowds” – a euphemism for the ostensibly less cultured of the city. Apparently, Drishti’s boss and long-term mentor Malika was not impressed with Drishti’s suggestion. “Can’t you try to change your taste, Drishti?” asked Malika. Annoyed with Malika’s remark, Drishti paused and then responded cleverly: “How is it possible for me to change my taste, Aunty? My tastes change according to mood and moment. That’s why I watch all kinds of films – I can’t just have one kind of taste. Can any of us? Not possible for me!” she said. Delivering her punch line, Neela and Drishti burst out into laughter. “Good for you!” Neela affirmed. And I echoed the comment, “Good for you.”

This chapter is about the cultural and aesthetic role NGOs play in shaping young women’s gendered and classed subjectivities from Kolkata’s red-light areas. It is also about subaltern young women’s agency in mobilising, rejecting, and appropriating NGO-inspired gender and class narratives. Drishti’s comment on her inability to maintain an exclusive taste elucidates the plural desires and cultural practices beyond those promoted by NGOs. Cultural practices and performances reveal and constitute a gendered habitus – socially learned dispositions, often times enacted unconsciously, constructed by past experiences while re-constructed by future experiences (Bourdieu 1977). NGOs operating in red-light areas are

invested in taming and cultivating the gendered habitus of young women by promoting new femininities that promise social mobility. Malika's concern over Drishti's subaltern taste is an example par excellence. However, young people's gendered habitus post-NGO, like Drishti's, are affected and embedded within a range of co-existing, sometimes contradictory, cultural milieus including slum community lifestyles, internationally funded NGO aesthetics, as well as increasingly visible youthful 'new' middle class cultures of world-class aspiring Kolkata. Young women coming of age with NGOs in red-light areas are surrounded by a diverse set of social forces affecting their subjectivities, including schools, families, neighbourhoods, activist mentors, as well as alluring malls, food courts, and multiplexes. Growing up, these young women deploy various cultural resources for their own youthful gendered embodiment and cultural practice, including gender-appropriate narratives promoted by NGOs.

Many scholars including the Birmingham School theorists (Willis [1977] 1981, Hall and Jefferson [1976] 2012) as well as contemporary youth scholars (Maira 2002, Jeffrey 2010) examine young people's cultural practices and embodiment as a useful optic to interpret young people's resistance to and reproduction of class. Inspired by this rich body of scholarship, in this chapter, I examine young women's post-NGO gendered cultural practices and embodiment as they navigate gendered class regimes in the world-class aspiring city.

The world-class aspiring city is deeply embroiled in structural class inequalities. Scholars argue that the world-class city is rendered through 'accumulation by dispossession' with mass evictions of the urban poor on hand and proliferation of elite spaces and cultures on another (Harvey 2003, Doshi 2013). At the same time, several scholars observe how the world-class city troubles the notion of middle class hegemony and socio-spatial segregation between the rich and the poor as class cultural markers destabilise and mass consumption proliferates (Baviskar and Ray 2011). In line with this scholarship I examine how young women both 'identify and dis-identify' (Skeggs 1997) with the middle class and 'oppose and take up the vision' (Ghertner 2011: 281) of the world-class city through their gendered embodiment and cultural practices in the city.

In this chapter, I pay attention to how young women selectively mobilise NGO-inspired gender narratives to their advantage as they navigate gender and class norms through the everyday. I argue that young women selectively and strategically embrace and reject aspects of NGO and middle class femininities as well as both dis-identify and take pleasure in urban subaltern femininities. In doing so, post-NGO women often times occupy an ambivalent and liminal subject position through which they traverse subaltern and middle class cultural boundaries in particular times and spaces.

Yet, not all post-NGO women are successful in deploying NGO femininities to their benefit. Some young women are simply too poor economically and culturally to access, let alone leverage NGO inspired gender narratives towards their gain. For these young women, poverty and its intersections with marginalised social identities of alternative sexualities, (dis)abilities, caste, or social experiences such as HIV/AIDS, illness, troubled histories of abuse, or lack of 'respectable' employment, restrain young women's ability to harness NGO cultural resources. For some post-NGO young women, NGO femininities serve as a cultural resource to subvert unequal class and gender regimes. However, in the case of women whose lives remain bounded by multiple marginalised social relations, NGO femininities sometimes hinder their efforts to improve everyday life.

My discussion of the embodiment of femininities draws from Judith Butler's theorisation of gender not as an essentialised identity, but as repeated stylisations, which are entrenched in regimes of power, and more specifically in the case of my discussion, regimes of class (Butler 1990). Echoing my discussion in Chapter Two, for Butler, subjectivities are performative (Butler 1990, 1993). They are the effect of social structures, regulatory discourses, and socially learned durable dispositions (Bettie 2003). Subjectivities of class and gender, for example, are the repeated, unconscious display of an individual's habitus. Alongside performativity, I also look at the performance of class and gender. Like several scholars, by performance I mean the agential and conscious attempt to try on, play, and perform practices, roles, and scripts (Goffman 1959).

Following Julie Bettie in her study of working class Latina students in a California public school, the twin concepts of performance and performativity, but with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, allow me to examine the fluidity and fixity of young women's cultural embodiment and practice in terms of class (Bettie 2003).

I focus only on women in this chapter because of the exceptional emphasis by NGOs on development for the girl child in red-light areas between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, a period of time when young women in my research community were coming of age. NGOs in red-light areas also serve boys and young men through community based programmes. It was only after the mid-2000s though that many NGOs started explicitly focusing on the young men and the issue of masculinities. However, the discursive emphasis on women and girl children continues to remain significant with greater financial resources.

This chapter is based on two focus group discussions on the themes of class and style with nine young people – women and men – from three different red-light areas: Kalighat, Bow Bazaar, and Tollygunge. These focus group discussions, although mixed gendered, highlighted key themes related to gendered youth consumptions culture. In addition, I draw heavily from interviews, hangouts, and observations with three young women named Rinky, Uma, and Jhimli. These three women were key participants and fellow interpreters in my research. I draw on extended examples from Rinky and Uma to illustrate how NGO gender narratives are mobilised for cross-class embodiment and cultural practice. Then, I turn towards a discussion of the limitations NGO femininities illustrated by the case of Jhimli. In the section immediately following, I first provide an overview of aspirational modern urban Indian femininities constructing the cultural landscapes of women like Rinky, Uma, and Jhimli. These femininities include the *bhadramahila*, the liberal Indian woman, and the post-liberalisation woman. I also argue that there is a fourth form of contemporary urban femininity, the NGO woman. I discuss these four femininities as each is constructed with the subaltern woman as their 'other.' (Skeggs 1997)

6.2 Urban Indian Femininities

Urban cultural landscapes, including red-light areas, are saturated with images of modern Indian femininities that have their roots in a colonial and nationalist past. In the wake of the nationalist movement of the 19th century, a new figure of the Indian woman emerged in nationalist discourse: the *bhadramahila*, a Bengali prototype of the respectable woman. Partha Chatterjee argues that the *bhadramahila* was not only distinct from the western *memsahib*, but also from the common or subaltern Indian woman (Chatterjee 1998). While the urban subaltern woman (the domestic worker, day labourer, sex worker) is loud, vulgar, confrontational, promiscuous and thus in need of reform, the new respectable Indian woman is culturally refined, moral, modest, educated, without compromising her priorities at home, in other words without becoming a *memsahib*. This bourgeois respectable Indian woman according to Chatterjee served as the site for the cultivation of modern nationalist culture. Of course, the *bhadramahila* was not the only image of a modern Indian woman in the 19th century. The era of pre-independence also saw the emergence of what scholars refer to as the 'the modern girl,' a figure emerging in early Indian cinema of the 1920s who embodied and practiced a cosmopolitan life of romance, pleasure, and rebellion sometimes as a wife, college student, or a single working woman (Ramamurthy 2008). Contrary to the *bhadramahila*, the modern girl did not reject but appropriated western aesthetics and values. By the late 1930s, during the height of the nationalist movement, the modern girl was recast into more respectable versions of modern Indian womanhood, more palatable to nationalism, and in many ways serving as the precursor to liberalising India's cosmopolitan but respectable femininity (Ramamurthy 2008).

Decades after independence, with the rise of liberalisation in the 1990s and the opening of Indian markets on a global stage, liberal avatars of Indian femininity gained symbolic traction with the western and subaltern women as foils once again. Entrepreneurial, empowered, ambitious, but embedded in tradition and culture, this liberal Indian femininity appears across

cultural urban landscapes, such as television and advertisement (Rajan 1993, Munshi, 1998, Radhakrishnan 2009); beauty pageants (Oza 2001, Parameswaran 2004), popular magazines (Thapan 2004), and literature (Daya 2009). This femininity is also distinct from the *bhadramahila* of generations past. Unlike the *bhadramahila*, the liberal Indian woman feels less anxiety about modesty; she is at ease with her body in public. She can wear jeans, skirts, and tank tops without becoming western. In contrast to the marginalised “modern girl” of the 1920s, the liberal woman is seamlessly Indian and comfortably and desirably global. Smita Radhakrishnan (2009), for example, in her study of IT professionals in Bangalore and Mumbai, describes a new respectable femininity comprising a balance between freedom and boundedness, global orientation and national belonging, individual aspiration and family concern, empowerment and deference.

Notions of middle class respectable femininity are not static of course; they change across generations, space, class, and other social divisions. Nor are they monolithic. Multiple forms of respectable femininity co-exist with varied inflections of difference. The era of post-liberalisation presents multiple modulations of respectable femininity. This multiplicity is apparent in Hindi cinema, a powerful cultural medium circulating and unifying representations of post-liberalisation respectable femininities, reaching women like Rinky, Uma, and Jhimli. In the past five years, along with featuring the common trope of the liberal Indian woman, a more rebellious inflection of the post-liberalisation Indian woman is emerging to a greater degree in Hindi cinema, breaking dominant conventions paradigmatic to the chaste, family-oriented, modest Indian female protagonist of Hindi Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. In recent films like *Break ke Baad*, (2010) *Ladies vs. Ricky Bahl* (2011), and *Mere Brother ki Dulhan* (2011), a new generation of female film actors or ‘heroines’ such as Deepika Padukone, Anushka Sharma, and Katrina Kaif regularly play characters of middle class, youthful urban women who frequent bars, smoke cigarettes and initiate courtship, kisses, or break-ups without the burden of immorality. While complicit with hetero-patriarchies in significant ways, the post-liberalisation heroine successfully challenges types of consumption previously deemed exclusively masculine. Through

new, albeit dubious progressive cultural practices, the post-liberalisation young woman performs an ostensibly partial empowered subjectivity, eventually always brought back to the fold.

Defiance of gender inequality is not a new aspect of urban Indian femininity. A patriarchy-defying image of the Indian woman has long been a part of the modern imagination. Pre-independent India iconicised patriot women as sacrificing, spiritual, and non-violent patriots deeply invested in anti-colonial struggle (Kumar 1993). Further, in the late 1960-70s with the consolidation and increasing visibility of women's activism, women from different sections of the Far Left in India mobilised around explicitly women's issues (Kumar 1993). These Leftist activists protested dowry murders and police rapes; they unionised women workers and slum dwellers. They practiced their activism through public campaigns, street theatre, and demonstrations. By 1979-80, the fervent campaigns against dowry murders in Delhi inaugurated a women's movement (Kumar 1989). It also circulated representations of the Leftist Indian woman. Urban educated, middle-class, feisty and articulate, and in some cases feminist, the Leftist woman politically mobilised against the state to demand justice for women, including for her subaltern sisters and daughters.

NGO Femininities

Within this constellation of resonant middle-class feminine tropes, from *bhadramahila*, liberal Indian woman, to Leftist Indian woman, I found that NGOs also play a competitive role in producing new youth femininities especially in red-light areas. From the 1990s, the flow of international funding encouraged NGOs, mostly operated by middle-class women, to develop an agenda of protecting and developing the "the girl child." In effect, this mobilised the active project of reforming future subaltern femininities – again, constructed as victimised, unprotected, uneducated, or aggressive and promiscuous – and promoted instead 'empowered,' independent new NGO inspired femininities. Like other tropes of respectable femininities, NGO femininities are also constructed against the subaltern woman. NGO femininities though

are distinct because they are targeted precisely at the subaltern woman and rendered as an aspirational femininity attainable through development.

In Boro Gali, the recruitment of girls – particularly daughters of sex-workers – into long-term institutional care homes beginning in 1993 epitomises the development project of girl protection by physically removing girls from subaltern cultures and economies during their childhood. Further, community-based workshops and training on women's rights and violence against women contribute to the discursive project of constructing new NGO inspired femininities for subaltern women: femininities that are economically independent and rights-conscious while embodying a morality and aesthetic distinct from the subaltern other. However, just as there are multiple NGOs, there are different shades of NGO femininities shaped by political and moral orientations of each NGO. The varied inflections of NGO femininities are unified through a shared commitment to anti-violence and economic empowerment, but diverge most visibly on issues of sexuality and heteronormativity.

The formative role of NGOs in affecting subaltern femininities is expressed by young women in my research community. Thirteen out of 20 young women in my research community explicitly expressed in interviews that NGOs shaped their habitus – altering their ways of dressing, speaking, eating, thinking, and behaving in the world. In particular, young women attributed their changing ideas and embodiment of femininity to NGO discourses on women's rights, violence against women, and women's autonomy, which challenge normative constructions of subaltern femininities in metropolitan India. Young women from *bastis* like *Boro Gali* who grew up with NGOs often times called themselves “NGO *meye*, or NGO girls”. This self-identification suggests a differentiation from neighbours and sisters who did not grow up with NGOs. The difference between NGO girls and the *other* girl is clearly and effectively illustrated through conversations and interviews with Rinky and Uma – two friends who grew up in *Boro Gali* attending Adhikar and Jibon and now working for Adhikar as NGO fieldworkers. In this next section, I present the stories of Rinky and Uma as examples to highlight some of the

experiences of the nine out of 13 women who grew up with NGOs and strongly attribute their sense of self with and against NGOs.

6.3 Being an NGO Meye/Girl

Since 2007, Rinky (26) and Uma (25) have been working at Adhikar managing drop-in centres for a new generation of children and youth in *bastis* and red-light areas in Khidderpore as well as in their own neighbourhood in Kalighat's red-light area. Both Uma and Rinky were among the first generation of young people who formed Adhikar's core youth group in 1999. They were in their pre-teens then and now are in their mid-20s. Their role as NGO workers and former NGO youth members plays a strong role in their sense of self and expression of self. Their identity as NGO *meye* is not just about a job or an income, it is about an affective orientation to the world, particularly as young women. For both of them, being an NGO *meye* is entangled in a consciousness of gender equality and women's rights, which shapes their social relations with friends and romantic partners as well as influences their clothing and daily mobility. One afternoon, during an interview at Adhikar's centre in *Boro Gali*, a small, cool room with chalky pink walls, Rinky explained the formative effect of NGOs on women like her:

In some way, coming into the NGO life means creating a kind of power. For some, this power comes later, maybe by the time it emerges, they leave the NGO. And for others, it happens really fast. Somewhere, a touch is left behind [from the NGO], that 'I have to do this.' Or, as a girl, 'I *can* do this!'

Rinky, of course, was speaking from personal experience. Women's rights play an important role in her embodiment and expression as a woman not just in spaces of community activism but in her everyday life – at home, among friends, and especially with her boyfriend, soon-to-be-husband. Three years ago Rinky, an upper caste Bengali Hindu, fell in love with a young Muslim man – Kabir – from a suburb of Kolkata, far from the world of NGOs. His lack of participation in an NGO programme mattered to Rinky. As she said, "He hasn't mixed with NGOs or these type of things." By "these type of things" Rinky was referring to a sensitive

awareness on gender, rights, and equality. In our interview, Rinky explained how her NGO upbringing affected her relationship with Kabir:

When I first started falling in love with Kabir, he would always say: After the wedding, I won't let you work. You'll have to follow our religion [Islam]...you'll have to learn Arabic, you'll have to wear *churidar*, forget saris, just *churidar* all time. I always use to think to myself why? Why should I do everything all the time? I had to make him understand, make him change, so that now he agrees with the decisions I make. Today he knows how important it is for a girl to work. Not just for income, but how important it is for a girl to build her *abhigata* [experience] by working outside. I feel like every girl has to face this in her world.... When I begin to feel that somebody is restraining my independence, I'm going to have to make him understand. And if I can't, then I will have to take a step because I'm not anybody's *chakor* [servant] who is going to follow whatever they say.

According to Rinky, young women who participated in NGOs like Adhikar, even for a short period of time, are more likely than other young women to stand up and struggle against gender injustice, just as she does. "Take Tina for example," said Rinky, referring to a neighbour of hers. Tina grew up next door to Rinky and attended NGOs for a number of years. "She didn't stick around at NGOs too long, but she sure changed her husband." A few years ago, Tina had married and moved out of Kalighat, but everyone was worried about her. Rinky explained, "The way her husband, her mother in-law tortured her! They wouldn't let her work, they wouldn't let her visit Kalighat. Everybody thought Tina wouldn't stick around with him much longer, but she changed him. She successfully changed him." Based on Tina's struggle, Rinky reflected more broadly on the impact of NGOs on femininities:

In the beginning, it's possible that [girls and women] who are in NGOs have a hard time accepting the fact we have rights as women. It's possible that in the beginning, that they can't accept these rights so easily. And when they do accept it, then they aren't able to forget it.

In Rinky's eyes, young women who grew up with NGOs versus '*jara NGO te jai ni*?' (those who are not in NGOS) – respond to gender-based discrimination differently. She believed post-NGO women were more likely to challenge gender-based discrimination compared to other non-NGO subaltern women or even "normal" women, that is, women who did not live in red light areas. In her eyes, non-NGO women and normal women are more likely to accept gender discrimination as a way of life whether in the realms of domestic relationships or

everyday embodiment. Rinky's cousin sister who lives far from the red-light area and NGOs is a useful comparative case:

When I think about my own sister – my uncle's daughter – I look at her and think where is she and where are the girls at Adhikar? What a difference! For my sister it's impossible to think about wearing jeans. Her mother forbids it. 'No, you can't wear jeans.' All this fuss! ...For them wearing jeans is a bad thing...For me the fact is, there is no difference in wearing jeans. But others think, if you wear jeans, boys will look at you more. For us, if boys are looking, they'll look if you're wearing *churidar* or if you're wearing sari... it doesn't matter if you are wearing jeans.

Unlike her cousin, Rinky does wear jeans. She takes pride in wearing all kinds of clothes. As she explained to me, sometimes she dons jeans for weeks on end, sometimes *churidar*. Along with an eclectic fashion sense, Rinky also has a diverse friendship circle, including boys, girls, and non-gender conforming people. Her cousin sister however faces restrictions from her family in forming friendship groups, especially when it comes to friendship with the opposite sex. Rinky recounted a conversation with her cousin: "Once I took my sister aside and asked, do you have any friends? She said 'Yeah, many.' 'Boy friends?' I asked. She said, 'No. Baba, said, if I have boy friends I'll have to get married.' As if you can't be friends with a boy!" The difference between Rinky and her cousin is acute. "In my own home, I feel like I've moved so far ahead, whereas my sister is held back."

Neighbours and community members in Boro Gali also observe the difference between NGO girls and non-NGO girls. Rinky and Uma occasionally come across whispers of disapproval from neighbours or even family members for being NGO girls. Rinky explained:

I've heard from many people in the *para* who didn't go to NGOs talk about us and say, 'Look at them, look at what they are doing!' Suppose during *Dol* (Holi or Festival of Colours), we don't have our *aurna* (scarves) on, they say, look at those grown up girls – what are they doing?' As if once we grow up, we can't do anything. As if we can't jump, can't do anything, as if it's a matter of *lajja*, shame."

In addition, Rinky and Uma's mobility also does not conform to community norms of desirable femininities, as their work schedules are unconventional. Often times, Rinky as well as Uma travel at odd hours, sometimes leaving their homes at dawn to reach a suburban field site and coming home late at night after staffing a drop-in centre. Uma came to hear of snide

remarks by elders and peers regarding her constant *jaawa-aasha* or “coming and going”. In our conversation, Uma mimicked common gossip about NGO *meye*:

[She’s] in an NGO? They do it all – they drink, they do it [have sex], too. They are always going out - they must be up to something! ...Someone came to my mother and told her – why do you let her go out all the time?... I told Ma, ‘Look, you know very well that I am not doing anything wrong.’

Uma and Rinky are sometimes rumoured to be too free, mobile, and confident. Seven of the 18 women in my research community continue to live in red-light areas and also work as NGO workers in the city. Like Uma and Rinky, these women, to varying degrees, are considered to be more assertive and modern, sometimes compromising neighbourhood constructions of respectable femininity. Their liberal cultural practices of wearing jeans, dressing sans scarves, travelling at odd hours vis-à-vis a discourse of women’s rights is in contradiction to Boro Gali’s local constructions of respectable femininities.

Even though Boro Gali – a red-light area – is a space inscribed as ‘other’ in comparison with ‘respectable spaces’, there are nevertheless local markers of respectability. For example, sex workers in Boro Gali never wear jeans, skirts, or any form of western clothing. All sex workers solicit in saris or in some cases, *churidar*. Further, while alcohol consumption is a common sight and practice in Boro Gali, many sex-worker-mothers take pride in the knowledge, or more accurately, the assumption that their daughters do not drink alcohol. Other red-light areas in the city do not abide by these conventions, but have their own set of localised conventions of respectability. Interestingly, many sex workers desire that their daughters practice the conventions of the *bhadramahila* of their own generation: chaste, sexually modest, and respectable in order to ‘disidentify and dissimulate’ from their fallen status as women (Skeggs 1997: 74). For instance, when Jibon started its children’s protection programme in Kalighat in 1993, according to the director, some sex workers advised the founding member to focus on children instead of women. In an interview with me, the director of Jibon recounted the early advice from sex workers: “[They said] the biggest problem is that we don’t want our children to get into

prostitution. But we can't do anything about it. If you want to help us, you can do that. Our girl children are particularly vulnerable." In other words, according to Jibon, sex workers can no longer be saved, but their daughters certainly can through the cultivation of new economic opportunities and new respectable femininities.

In this section above, I have demonstrated how NGOs clearly enable new femininities for younger women in living from red light areas. Through a discourse on women's rights Rinky and Uma express a confident autonomy towards determining their social relations, clothing and comportment, and mobility. Yet performances of these femininities are of questionable respectability in Kalighat. Young women like Rinky and Uma are highly aware of the power and liabilities of NGO femininities. In the following section, I show how Rinky and Uma strategically perform an NGO femininity in different contexts and situations to navigate the gender norms of the neighbourhood.

Performing the "NGO Life"

Being an NGO *meye* is a calculated gender performance for Rinky and Uma and other young women who continue to live or regularly visit red-light areas. Eleven women in my research community continue to physically live or participate in red-light area lifeworlds today. Each of these women performs NGO identities to different degrees, some more strongly than others. Uma and Rinky serve as illustrative cases for a robust mobilisation of NGO femininities. The two of them reflexively and strategically evoke and deploy NGO femininity for their navigation of class and gender norms. Yet, Uma and Rinky are also selective and partial in their embodiment of NGO subjectivity. They strategically deploy aspects of NGO women's identity when useful, while rejecting aspects of NGO subjectivities that are less advantageous and desirable. This is especially apparent in terms of Uma and Rinky's fashion and style.

Uma and Rinky for example, often talk about how they enjoy “dressing like a social worker.” According to Rinky, at the heart of social worker fashion lies simplicity that serves to conceal any wealth and move through impoverished communities. At the same time though, this simplicity is of a particular aesthetic, which I suggest, reveals wealth, class, and respectability. Uma and Rinky describe ‘social worker *saaj*’ or social worker fashion as an ensemble often adorned by their middle-class mentors, constituting short *kurtis*, *patiyala shalwars*, large *jholas*, earrings of clay or wood – ‘ones you would find at an *adivasi* (indigenous) artisan market in Shantiniketan’ – and usually no *aurana* (scarves) on the chest. More broadly, social worker *saaj* is identifiable through the aesthetic of hand woven textiles and indigenous prints on contemporary designs. In Uma’s words, social worker fashion has a “matte finish.” This attire is often featured in upper-middle class stores such as Fab India, Anokhi, or in the “ethnic wear” sections of larger department stores in Indian cities. Uma and Rinky never shop at such stores, where the prices are beyond their means. They improvise similar styles from footpath bargain markets of the city. They take pride in their ability to assemble outfits at strikingly affordable prices. Sometimes, when Uma would see me in a new *kurti* she would ask about the price and disapprove of my departmental store purchase – “You could’ve found the same thing in Gariahat Market! Come with me next time!”

Highly aware of the power in embodying an NGO *me ye* performance, Rinky and Uma strategically performed their subjectivity as NGO *me ye* through social work fashion but also through speech acts (Austin, 1975). Uma and Rinky actively called themselves “NGO *me ye*” (NGO Girls) or described their daily lives as “the NGO life.” During several occasions, Uma and Rinky attributed the unconventionality of their lifestyle, particularly their mobility, dress, or cultural practices, to their “NGO life.” For instance, during debates on gender norms with friends, peers, and neighbours, Uma and Rinky invoked their NGO femininity or their NGO life to navigate restrictive norms. Gender norms are a hot topic of discussion among Rinky and Uma’s circle of friends. Inevitably, conversations turn to topics such as pre-marital sex, clothing

and fashion, sexual harassment, alcohol and cigarettes – and how these practices should or should not be different for men and women. In my interview, Rinky enthusiastically explained:

For example, a boy says, as girls you should do this or that! Then we debate with him about gender. You guys can do this, and we can't? That's for you and it isn't for us!? ...Now, at first we try to explain that if something is not bad (*keharap*) for girls, then it's the case for both boys and girls. And if they say, it's just meant [to be bad] for girls, we tell them – no. This happens a lot. Many times, we explain things over and over again, but some boys just don't get it. And they give us a big lecture - don't do this, don't do that. Then, we give up and just say, *Arre yaar, Amra NGO Life!* (We are the NGO life!)

This proclamation – “We are the NGO life!” points to Uma and Rinky’s reflexivity in performing the NGO *meye* femininity or living the NGO life. It also serves as a trump card that Uma and Rinky play when struggling to assert their entitlement to particular cultural practices. During gender debates, Uma and Rinky are not always successful in challenging the logic of unequal gender norms for men and women. When their efforts in advocating their pro-women position appear ineffective, Rinky and Uma resort to emphasising their exception from other young women because they are, after all, NGO *meye*, NGO girls. Rinky explained: “In the end, if they [the boys] don’t accept what we’re saying, then we just say, we work at an NGO, we can do whatever we want. We NGO *meye*, girls, are really *bindaas* (cool and carefree).”

Aware that their gender performance challenges conventional forms of femininity in *bastis* as well as the middle class, Uma and Rinky self-reflexively assert their NGO privilege as a licence for their arguably liberal ways of being. Rinky, however, emphasized: “We only do that as last [resort]. But we do say it a lot: We’re NGO life!” she said, bursting into laughter. In many instances Rinky and Uma’s male peers get frustrated and also give up: “Your aunty smokes cigarettes, why don’t you learn the same [the boys say.] We say, we certainly will! Aunty is an NGO person, we’re NGO people too. We definitely will!” Rinky and Uma may suggest mimicry of their aunty in front of their male peers, in practice though, they astutely select and appropriate some cultural practices of the NGO life over others.

Rinky and Uma are critical of some aspects of “the NGO life.” On a number of occasions, Uma would regularly warn Rinky: “Don’t get too deep into the NGO life, or else it’s trouble in life.” The trouble with NGO life refers to many things: expensive taste without

affordable alternatives, high expectations of gender equality, depression and “thinking too much.” This last description is one I will elaborate upon and is connected to the emotional responses NGOs promote towards subaltern hardship. Uma feels that middle-class NGO workers too often cast subaltern everyday hardships as “issues” and leads young people to “think too much” about hardship that is a part of everyday life, which just leads to more “depression.” Further, NGOs inevitably resort to professional interventions such as counselling, therapy, and treatment. These interventions are often unattainable and usually unsustainable. Further they also discredit and dis-empower subaltern communities from their own strategies of resilience and reworking hardship (Katz 2004).

Rinky and Uma elaborated upon their analysis through an example. A few years ago, Rinky was struggling with a number of crises – verbal abuse from her father, an unfaithful boyfriend, and the loss of an intimate friend. Rinky was devastated and longed for counselling. Due to a lack of funds in Adhikar, counselling services were not available, which in retrospect, according to Rinky, left her even more depressed. Concerned about Rinky’s dependence on counselling, Uma reminded Rinky of her internal strength beyond NGO sponsored mental health interventions. Rinky reflected on Uma’s advice:

We live in this neighbourhood. Since childhood we’ve been beat quite a bit – not me – but friends of mine. We’ve heard a lot bad cussing – you’re in the [sex] profession, you slept with that boy! Back then we wouldn’t think twice about what was being said to us. We would laugh and run off! Now, we’re like – upon hearing anything – “My *Baba* said this to me!” (in a whining voice) – we think too much about this. It’s fine *jaar*, he said something, he will say it. Let it go, let him say what he wants. We’ll forget about it. ...Just like when we were kids we would think, ‘So what!’ we should think the same now.

According to Uma, everyday occurrences such as a fight in the family are often over-determined by the NGO gaze as issues such as child abuse or domestic violence. In an interview, Uma reflected on her counselling experiences with suspicion:

[After counselling] I used to become so weak, my mind would feel so heavy. I used to think, my *Ma* and *didi* are fine. They aren’t educated. They’ve been beat, yelled at, but all this counselling or this ‘somebody is torturing me’ – they don’t think about all this...

Getting to deep in the NGO life is going to be a problem... The NGO life means counselling, overthinking every small thing, it means depression.

While Rinky and Uma are able to appreciate the utility of a rights-based discourse to interpret their life choices, they also reject NGO discourses on mental health counselling to cope with everyday struggle. They mobilise particular NGO discourses and cultural practices to negotiate gender and class regimes, but at the same time, they are equally wary of cultural practices of the NGO life. The expression “Don’t get too deep into the NGO life,” is now a playful way for Rinky and Uma to caution each other from aspiring blindly to the NGO life, a lifestyle that is not sustainable in their *habitus*. Like other young women who grew up and are working with NGOs, Rinky and Uma adopt and appropriate particular middle-class NGO practices, performances, and affective orientations to different degrees for their own negotiation of gender and class, while renouncing other practices deemed less useful. They perform in Goffman’s sense of performance, as actors aware of their audience and reflexive of their enactment.

Through a focused discussion about Rinky and Uma – two women who mobilise NGO femininities more strongly and frequently than others – I illustrated examples of the multiple ways in which post-NGO young women selectively take on new cultural practices and femininities to navigate their mobility in and around their neighbourhood and community. In the next section, I examine how young women post-NGO appropriate and re-work their NGO inspired femininities in middle-class spaces, with a close look at young women’s participation in cultures of the world-class city.

6.4 World-Class City Cultures and Spaces

Shopping malls, coffee shops, FM radio, multiplexes, Facebook, smart phones, spoken English, tattoos, and food courts are increasingly becoming a part of visible youth cultures in Kolkata. The motifs of world-class city are burgeoning in Kolkata over the last decade. In 2001, the Left Front government of West Bengal, once popular for its agrarian reform policies, was reincarnated as an entrepreneurial ‘new’ communist government aiming to attract private sector investment for urban development (Basu 2007, Roy 2007). Since then, Kolkata’s landscape is

experiencing an urban revival with the construction of new fly overs, gated housing plazas, amusement parks, and multi-storey shopping complexes marking the city as a space of leisure and consumption in the new economy.

Malls and multiplexes are symbolic representations of new middle class spaces and the world-class city in metropolitan India. While these new nodes of modernity represent cultures of entertainment, leisure, and consumption, they also represent social and economic exclusion (Fernandes 2004, Fernandes 2006). Targeting upwardly mobile citizens with disposable income, especially young people, malls and multiplexes are part of a continuum that Leela Fernandes describes as ‘socio-spatial segregation’ of the middle class and subaltern (2004). With security guards monitoring and profiling the entry of every customer, cinema tickets priced at triple the cost of independent cinema halls, and internationally competitive retail prices, malls and multiplexes are social enclaves for consumer-citizens who can afford entry and participation, spatially reinforcing processes of class exclusion (Voyce 2007, Athique 2009).

Despite attempts at exclusion, the spaces of the new economy are frequently visited or quietly encroached upon by subaltern communities (Bayat 2000). On a Sunday afternoon, Forum Mall and other malls across the city for example are crowded with people who do not ostensibly belong there. Women dressed in “gorgeous” sparkling saris and glittery synthetic *churidars* gently encourage each other to brave moving escalators, clasping the moving handrails. Their slippage in performance reinforces their subaltern non-belonging. Similarly, the visible presence of young men in tight, stone-washed jeans and fake-trade labelled Adidas t-shirts snapping photographs from their unbranded “China” smart phones in front of brand-named stores re-produces their subalternity.

The forty young people in my research expressed varied interest towards new economy spaces, particularly malls and multiplexes. Granted, desire and interest depended greatly on the company of friends and the whim of the moment. Only seven people, like Neela, expressed entitlement and comfort in a mall, although they may have sought to keep their anxieties private.

Seventeen of my participants never expressed desire to visit a multiplex or a mall. One participant's practice and preferences are unknown to me. Five expressed ambivalence, mostly going to the multiplexes because of peer pressure. Drishti, for example would never opt to go to the multiplex if it was not for Neela's insistence. The multiplex was beyond Drishti's financial means. She articulated a narrative of disinterest: "I have no desire to go to any *boro*, big place because what I get there I can get [for a better price] here." Eleven young people conveyed interest and sometimes comfort in going to the multiplex. Rinky was among them. Rinky occasionally frequented the multiplex, mall, and its adjoining food court. She coincided her visits with the work shifts of her friends who worked behind the food court counters and could offer her discounts. Constraints such as income restricted many young people's access to malls and multiplexes. Young people like Neela have greater financial resources and therefore more choices. Drishti and many others, on the other hand, were less affluent and did not even broach interest or desire to go to a mall or multiplex. People like Rinky developed creative strategies for balancing their attraction to these spaces and the limitations placed on them by their small budgets.

In the following discussion, I return to Rinky – a young woman who represents young people who desire to frequent malls, but who, unlike Neela, also needs to deploy innovative strategies in accessing malls. Through an examination of Rinky's participation in mall and multiplex cultures, I demonstrate how subaltern young people like Rinky are able to travel across class terrains through selectively appropriating middle class practices while also holding on to particular subaltern class practices in public space. This discussion parallels that of the practices of embodiment and fashion in the earlier section of this chapter.

Going to the Movies

Rinky loves going to films – it is one of her favourite pass times. With pride she counts off the number of cinema halls she has frequented, whether a multiplex, or its precursor, the single

screen cinema hall. Before I elaborate Rinky's movie-going practices, I will explain the difference between multiplexes and single screen cinema halls. Before the establishment of multiplexes, single screen cinema halls were the popular cinema houses for audiences. Historically, single screen cinema halls were stratified along class lines with upper balcony seats being most expensive and front gallery seats being the least. Middle classes, families, and women purchased balcony seats, while working class audiences, especially men, were the conventional customers of gallery seats. In more recent times, the single screen cinema hall is less stratified internally, although this varies by regions and cities. In Kolkata, the class differences between tiered seating are less distinct than elsewhere, although the tiered pricing remains. The difference between a single screen cinema hall and multiplex is more significant. Single-screen cinema hall prices are usually half the price of cinema tickets at multiplex movie theatres. Unlike multiplex movie theatres, which target upwardly mobile middle-classes, single screen cinemas serve a wider class-range of audiences members, especially the lower and subaltern classes.

In the mid-2000s, when a foreign volunteer at Adhikar decided to treat youth members to the movies as a farewell gift before returning to her home in England, Rinky and other NGO youth were ecstatic. The volunteer decided to take the youth from Adhikar to a watch a Hindi film at the trendy multiplex INOX located in an upscale location of town at Forum Shopping Mall. The director of Adhikar, however, was reluctant to take young people from Kalighat to an affluent multiplex, as Rinky and her friend Raju, a former youth member, told me one afternoon over lunch. The director of Adhikar had never explained her hesitation, but Rinky suspected class-based reservations: "She thinks we've never been to INOX!" Raju, her friend and peer in his mid-twenties who was part of this conversation, added: "She probably thought we would act very *kaijra* (trashy), but we were really *bhadro* (well mannered) when we went. They think we don't have the *aukaad* (status)." Rinky continued: "She just thinks we're not use to such places. If she only knew that I go there all the time with my boyfriend. I am sure I've been to more cinemas than she ever has - INOX, Fame, you name it."

Rinky certainly is a regular audience member at INOX and other multiplex chains of the city catching the latest film releases. However, Rinky is strategic in her film viewing practice. Unlike most of the audience, Rinky never pays for the Rs.300 and higher ticketed prices. Instead, she and her boyfriend Kabir regularly go to the early-bird, 9am discounted morning shows for Rs.90, just Rs.10 more than the cost of show at a neighbourhood-based single screen cinema hall. The Rs.10 difference gives Rinky significant access not just to plush seats and quality stereo sound, but also to claims of membership as a multiplex film-viewing audience, which is a 'lifestyle statement' of the new middle class (Athique 2009). Rinky is not ashamed of her discounted-route to attending the cinema; rather she interprets her practice as savvy. Through this strategy, Rinky enjoys a middle-class film viewing in the company of her boyfriend.

Indeed, while Rinky and Kabir are regular attendees at INOX cinemas, they also are enthusiastic patrons at single screen cinema halls associated with less affluent communities. Rinky and Kabir particularly choose the single screen cinema hall over the multiplex when they are attending a "first day-first show" of a film. First day-first shows – typically held at noon – are the first shows of new films releases of mega Bollywood stars. This phenomenon is exclusive to single-screen cinema halls and embedded within subaltern masculine cultures. Generally single-screen cinema hall audience members are known to be more interactive in their film viewing experience, cat-calling, whistling, applauding, and dancing during song sequences – behaviours tacitly unacceptable at multiplexes. First day-first shows audience members – most of whom are men – are often so exuberant and raucous that it is difficult to follow the dialogues in the films. First day first shows of films featuring mega stars like Salman Khan – Rinky's favourite hero – are especially known for interactive audiences.

Rinky is an unapologetic and proud fan of Salman Khan. She religiously goes to the first day-first show film releases at a single screen cinema hall Navina in the Muslim-dominated neighbourhood of Anwar Shah Road. Salman Khan, known for his aggressive masculinity, exaggerated swagger, swinging torso, and campy cinema, is notably popular among subaltern

communities, including young people in the *bastis* of Kalighat. Often dismissed by film critics as the icon of the ‘lumpen proletariat’ or a ‘B- C- centre hero,’ Salman Khan is an actor of the masses (Joshi, 2010). Every Eid, Salman Khan is known to release a blockbuster for the year, and for the past three years Rinky has been at the frontlines of first-day first show audiences.



Figure 5: First day, first show celebration at Navina cinema hall (2012) Photo: Sahar Romani

On Eid, in August 2012, when Salman Khan’s new film *Ek tha Tiger* (“There was a Tiger”) was being released, Rinky arranged a massive viewing at Navina with 10 friends, including me and my partner. Dressed in jeans, a bright fuchsia skin hugging t-shirt and large earring hoops, Rinky ran up the stairs of Navina Cinema Hall to our seats yelling, “Salman! *Meri Jaan*, my beloved!” Rinky and her friends were certainly not the only vociferous ones; the entire cinema hall – again, mostly young men – was euphorically dancing in anticipation of the film to start. Through the course of the two and a half hour film, everyone unabashedly cheered, yelled, and hollered through dance scenes and action sequences. We were sitting in the front row of the

balcony and Uma and Rinky's voices were among the most conspicuous, echoing through the high ceilings of the cinema hall.

Rinky's effusive desire for the Salman Khan, the proletariat hero, and her consistent boisterous participation in first-day, first show films at the humble Navina Cinema demonstrates her flexible navigation of gender and class normative regimes in public space. While Rinky's active participation in first-day, first show cinema is a celebration of subaltern first-day, first-show spectatorship, it is also an interruption and appropriation of the dominant subaltern masculinity of the space. Unlike a few women present in the hall, including me, Rinky did not passively sit back and appreciate the film and the entertaining crowds. Instead, she asserted herself as an active participant in creating first-day, first show phenomenon through an unconventional femininity. Rinky was aware of her assertion of a different femininity in the space of the cinema hall. After the film, Rinky was overjoyed and reflected on a comparable first-day, first show from the previous year: "Sahar, you should've been there too! Me, Uma, and Monu - we lost our voices by the end of the film. Boys in the crowd must have never seen girls like us!"

It is likely that men in the crowd had not seen women like Rinky, Uma, and their friend Monu before in the space of the cinema hall - young women who comfortably asserted their presence as equally loud and raucous participants. Their behaviour and practice can certainly be read as typical of the subaltern woman, under a middle class gaze, who is known to transgress the boundaries of feminine respectability whether of the *bhadramahila* or liberal Indian woman. However, I suggest that Rinky and her friends' interpret their bold and effervescent embodiment not just as subaltern or "*kaijra*" (trashy) but also as an assertion of their empowered self. It is important to remember Rinky and Uma's animated and daring femininity is entangled with a new NGO inspired femininity – empowered and political – through which women assert themselves in public space with awareness that their conduct and embodiment is not lewd or immoral, but rather reflects their NGO inflected values of *adbikar*, rights, and *samman*, equality.

Women have the right to holler through Salman Khan films just as much as men do. Active participation as first-day, first-show audiences as Salman Khan fans is not a performance but a performative expression of an internalised sense of equality. It is an expression of what feels natural and right to these young women because and in spite their NGO inflected habitus.

Occasions at the cinema halls also shed light on conscious performances of class across urban space. In once instance, Rinky can participate in subaltern first-day, first show culture. In another instance, she can participate in quiet and ostensibly ‘civilised’ film-viewing experiences at a world-class multiplex with her boyfriend. Sometimes, however, Rinky also experiences a slippage in world-class, middle class spaces. For instance, one morning at INOX as Rinky and Kabir were standing in the foyer of the multiplex, she came across a life-sized poster of Salman Khan. Thrilled at the sight of her favourite film star’s image, she effusively started blowing kisses at the poster. A few women at the multiplex were watching her in disbelief. Rinky recounted the incident in laughter, explaining, how sometimes, no matter where she was, she could not restrain her star-struck feelings for Salman Khan.

Despite occasional slippages, which Rinky seems to comfortably find humour in, Rinky typically appropriately comports herself across differently class inflected spaces, knowing how to act where. For instance, Rinky was insistent that *Ek tha Tiger* was a film for single screen cinema hall. When Rinky heard that I was eager to attend *Ek tha Tiger* first day-first show she verified whether I was willing to go to Navina Cinema Hall and not a multiplex like INOX: “It won’t be fun (*mazza*) there [at INOX]!,” she explained, because the INOX crowd is too *bhadro* (civilised) of an audience, poking fun at middle class propriety. As Rinky and other young people have explained sometimes, to have fun, it is important to be *kaijra* – trashy. Like Rinky, many other young people, including Neela, also enjoyed going to the single screen cinema hall instead of the multiplex. No doubt, Neela preferred the comfortable seats and superior sound quality of the multiplex, but as her friend Dheeraj mocked, it was only at the single screen cinema hall where Neela takes the liberty to rest her feet up against the seat in front. Such behaviour would be very

abhadro (ill mannered) in the multiplex. For young people post-NGO there are clear spaces and moments to perform a *bhadro* disposition and *kaijra* disposition, which I delineate in the following section.

Bhadro and Kaijra

Young people often use the terms *bhadro* (respectable, well-mannered) and *kaijra* (trashy) to describe class distinction of activities, behaviours, and practices. *Bhadro* – associated with *bhadralok/bhadromahila* again refers to bourgeois respectability. As I discussed in the previous chapter, *bhadralok* in contemporary times are associated with a set of dispositions towards culture, education, as well as modernity. *Kaijra* on the other hand, is a derogatory term used to describe combination of trashiness but also mischief. To be called *kaijra* by someone of a higher class is certainly deemed an offense. While it is used as term of denigration, it is also used in a non-pejorative sense among peers and friends of a shared class, such as friends in my research community. Youth commonly referred to their behaviours as *kaijra* with a sense of celebration. “*Amra to kaijra!* We are trashy!” exclaimed Neela when she and Drishti spontaneously decided to disrupt a flash mob and join in, improvising their way through the performance. Or, during a late-night meal in South Kolkata, a group of five post-NGO young people fooled around the streets “doing *kajrami*” being trashy, loud, boisterous in a *bhadro* neighbourhood. They took pride in their disruptive behaviour and called themselves a “*kaijra* party.”

Many young people post-NGO embody and express multiple tastes and diverse cultural practices – sometimes *kaijra*, *bhadro*, modern – blurring the borders between them. As I discussed in the section above, Rinky travels between encroaching new middle class spaces of the multiplex to relishing *kaijra* practices at rowdy Navina, with an occasional slippage. Through her fluid performance she negotiates her femininity across space and in turn challenges socio-spatial segregation, emerging as a cosmopolitan subaltern (Gidwani 2006, Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008).

Similarly, Drishti, who I introduced through the opening vignette of this chapter, weaves cultural practices associated with different class meanings. Drishti is a *gutka* (tobacco)-chewing young woman, a cultural practice unequivocally associated with subaltern communities, and yet dresses in cotton *kurtas* and crisp *taant* saris associated with the Bengali middle classes. Through fluid cultural practices, Drishti moves across classes. Furthermore, Drishti identifies as both middle class and lower class, although she conceptualises her mobility temporally instead of spatially. She identifies as “middle class” during the beginning of the month when her monthly pay cheque feels abundant. During those first ten days of the month, Drishti is full of greater possibility towards leisure and fun. She is able buy her friends’ gifts or shop for her daughter at a budget-friendly department store. Near the end of the month though, Drishti identifies as “low class” when making ends meet was a daily exercise. Her flexible class identity, however, is determined and limited by her pay cheque, not her own volition.

It is important not to romanticise class mobility through the embodiment of new femininities or cross-class cultural practices. Indeed, over the duration of a month, Drishti is able to move across classes, but essentially her vanishing income by the end of the month points to her economic struggles and fixes her position as lower class. Young people’s juxtaposition of subaltern cultural practices with middle class cultural practices signals their multifarious tastes and desires post-NGO. It reveals their creative strategies of appropriating norms across classes in particular spaces, while also signalling the limitations of their habitus in a larger world. Young people’s appropriation of middle class practices is often momentary and contained. In other cases, their transgressions into middle-class cultures are unintentional and driven by subaltern necessities rather than aspirations. Protima, for example, is a regular monthly shopper at the newly established hypermarket chain called Spencer’s in the affluent neighbourhood of Hindustan Park – an establishment for the new middle classes. Once a month Protima overloads a shopping cart with household rations of rice, lentils, and soap. For Protima, shopping at Spencer’s is not a lifestyle statement as it is with most middle-class shoppers, but a judicious

shopper's strategy. She jumps at the two-for-one offers, not to partake in modernity, but to make ends meet. Middle class shoppers are known to go to Spencer's for foreign branded products and the luxury of one-stop-shop purchases. Protima, on the other hand, simply follows the trail for the best deal, whether it is at Spencer's or an open-air market in Khidderpore. Her participation in an ostensible middle class cultural practice does not reflect, nor promise, any cultural mobility between classes. For her, going to Spencer's remains a subaltern practice of frugality and budgetary wisdom. It is a practice emerging from the fixities of her subaltern class.

Further, young people's class fluidity or agency varies to different degrees determined by the various and shifting fixities or structures such as income, gender, sexuality, sickness, and other contingent axes of difference in young people's lifeworlds. For some young people like Neela, Rinky, and Drishti, cultural practices are fluid primarily because of their income. Their respectable office jobs or exceptional self-confidence enables them to act as cultural bricoleurs. More commonly through, access to diverse cultural practices and their meanings are sparse. Jhimli serves as good example to examine the limitations to reworking gender mobility through NGO feminine embodiment.

6.5 Bounded Mobility

While some young people transform subaltern limitations into virtues through creative and affirming practice, just as Rinky interprets her discounted INOX film viewings as consumer smartness or Drishti expresses disinterest in going to *boro* (big) or affluent places, others do not or simply cannot. Some young people are simply too poor – economically and socially – to access or encroach on, let alone make meaning from, new femininities and cultural practices. Poverty coupled with contingent, diverse social characteristics such as alternative sexuality, (dis)ability, illness, troubled histories of abuse, and addictions often constrain young people's agency to rework their habitus. These young people are arguably the subaltern of subaltern post-NGO youth. Unlike their more 'successful' peers, in most cases, they are not employed in

precarious but respectable jobs in the new economies of NGOs or service sectors, but in precarious jobs of the old economy of manual labour, domestic work, and in some cases, sex work. For these young people, the boundaries between subaltern and middle class cultures are not porous but are instead impenetrable, despite the variety of new cultural performance and practice that is on offer to young people in NGOs and in urban India at large.

The story of Jhimli, a 28-year-old woman, illustrates the limitations of NGO femininities in the face of various contingent and structural constraints. For Jhimli, NGO femininity is an inhibiting resource. With a history of sexual abuse, thwarted education, and employment skills that limit her to manual labour, Jhimli cannot afford to perform multiple femininities; she has neither the time nor the economic resources. Jhimli spent a significant part of her life in an NGO shelter home for children from red-light areas. When Jhimli was eight years old, she was removed from her childhood home in Sonagachi's red-light area after a close family member was convicted for child sexual abuse. Jhimli spent a few years in government custody and eventually transitioned to the NGO operated residence in her early teens. At the shelter home, like many other young women, Jhimli came of age participating in on-going trainings about women's rights and empowerment. She also partook in informal education and vocational training to open up horizons for a sustainable, respectable, and economically sustainable independent future.

When I reunited with Jhimli between 2011-2012, she was first working as a caretaker for the elderly in middle class homes and then as a cook for a Christian women's NGO. Both jobs were physically demanding and low-paying. Unlike Rinky and Uma, Jhimli appeared frustrated with her everyday life circumstances and sometimes she blamed her upbringing at the NGO shelter home. "In some ways [being at an NGO] has been good (*bhalo*), but in other ways I think, I didn't get what I wanted." Jhimli mostly desires economic security but has hardly been economically stable. Through her years in NGO care, Jhimli jumped from one vocational training to another – sari-making to barista training to tailoring – all of which proved economically bleak, even if they are considered socially respectable. Now, as a cook and

caretaker, Jhimli struggles financially, working long hours with an income barely meeting her everyday needs.

Jhimli's economic struggles deeply shape her mobility in other spheres of her social life and domestic life. During our interview, one of Jhimli's primary concerns was her status as a single woman and her unsuccessful search for a suitable partner.

The problem, Sahar, is that I work all the time. And the place I work, you have to be very simple. You see the way I am today, imagine, I'm like this all day. No *kajal*, no lipstick, no nothing. Very simple. And what do men like? ... Someone who is tip-top, who has style, who is a bit dressed up, who has some glamour. But I don't have money for glamour. For glamour, I have to buy expensive lotion, face cream. I need to have money for a facial. I need to have money to get my hair done, to wear a perfume that someone will notice. I don't have the money for glamour. The little salary I get, goes straight to my rent, my transport, and my food. That's it.

Jhimli essentially does not have the resources to perform a youthful femininity to her advantage, nor does she question the glamour and femininity she imagines men find desirable. For Jhimli, her economic constraints along with the daily performativity as a cook at an NGO produces a subjectivity that she considers unattractive for romantic pursuits. Jhimli's workplace specifically upholds a strict dress code for staff members, which Jhimli describes as '*sadharan*,' simple or common. Jhimli feels her embodiment at work also influences her gender performance in other public spaces, particularly because she cannot afford to perform new femininities for different spaces.

In addition, the discourses around women's rights and violence against women with whom Jhimli grew up make her hesitate in romantic pursuits.

And then these days, if a boy even looks at me, I think twice and thrice – why is he looking at me? Instead of feeling anything, I begin thinking. That's how I've been trained now. I've been taught both ... to be strong, to be firm, to be independent, so I don't trust men that easily.

For Jhimli, NGO-inspired femininities emphasise a constant vigilance for the sake of self-protection and empowerment. This vigilance also compromises her ability to pursue pleasure and spontaneity, which are practices she associates with a youthfulness she feels she missed.

...For all these years, I've heard so much about exploitation of women (*nari uthachar*), trafficking of women (*nari paachar*), feminism (*naribadi*)...chanting 'women, women, women' –I've become a woman. I'm 28 now. Where did my youth go? I am 28 and I turning into an old woman.

...My nature is not like other girls. My nature is like those other women, like those staff in NGOs, living in discipline, if I think about doing something wrong – well not wrong – but if I think about doing something that will give me pleasure, then I will think if I do this, I might encounter trouble for the sake of pleasure.

Jhimli interprets her NGO upbringing and socialisation as an impediment to achieving personal, romantic fulfilment. Her politicisation around issues of violence against women makes her cautious to an unhelpful degree. Unlike Jhimli, many of her friends who also grew up in Jibon's shelter home are finding romantic partners, marrying, and building families. However, as Jhimli sees it, her politicised NGO femininity along with her poverty compromises her mobility in social and romantic spheres of her life.

Jhimli cannot rework her femininity with the same fluidity as Rinky and Uma. First, for Jhimli, NGO femininity is not a cultural resource that offers mobility across norms. Rather, it stresses vigilance and 'discipline' hindering her participation in social norms such as romantic partnership. It also does not give her the confidence to challenge the mainstream tropes of attractive femininity. Second, scarcity of income and time constricts her access and ability to perform new cultural practices and alternative femininities. Five other women in my research community share experiences of social immobility similar to Jhimli. Their fixities are different than Jhimli's. For some it is poverty coupled with an early marriage, for others it is the combination of illness and poverty. For Jhimli, performance fails as a path for social mobility. Instead 'the other side of performance' (Bettie 2003: 192), becomes visible, her performativity of her subaltern class position, revealing a durable subaltern habitus.

6.6 Conclusion

NGOs can offer useful gender narratives for some subaltern young women in world-class aspiring cities such as Kolkata. Unlike common typologies such as the *bhadramahila* or new liberal Indian woman, the generative embodiment of NGO femininities troubles the neat boundaries and correlations of class and respectability. NGO femininities might be constructed to save, protect, and empower subaltern young women. Post-NGO young women though creatively

appropriate and mobilise these femininities, in tandem with other cross-class gender narratives, towards their own ends. For many “new subaltern” (Spivak 1999) young women like Rinky and Uma, NGO femininities are a cultural resource, sometimes performed and sometimes unconsciously performative. Embodiment of these femininities contributes to their renegotiation of normative regimes of class and gender in their neighbourhoods and in the world-class city. By coming of age with NGOs, young women like Rinky and Uma, effectively appropriate both new middle class, NGO cultures, and subaltern cultures and in turn contest socio-spatial segregation on the basis of class as well as gender in world-class aspiring cities. They temporarily unsettle the boundaries between ‘subaltern’ and ‘middle class’ as they participate in world-class amenities through creative strategy. At the same time, they also reject world-class urban life as they embrace subaltern forms of urban living, from chewing tobacco to doing “*kaijrami*.” This however is not universal. For women like Jhimli who are entrenched in poverty coupled with other social disadvantages, NGO femininities can fail as a resource for mobility. As I illustrated through Jhimli’s narrative, the internalised NGO discourse on modern notions of rights and equality sometimes obstructs if not aggravates women’s ability to navigate their subaltern cultural landscapes effectively.

Using the concept of habitus calls attention to the way in which multiple structures determining and shaping post-NGO cross-class (im)mobility are embodied and thus to an extent unconscious and beyond the reach of intentional performance. Income is a fundamental structuring factor. Financial status coupled with contingent social characteristics and histories such as (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, or family history converge either as resources or fixities in young people’s lives enabling or constraining their agency towards self-making and social mobility in the city.

An analysis of femininities and cultural practice is a rich lens to understand how young people post-NGO rework and make meaning of their gendered class positions in context of rapidly changing metropolitan centres like Kolkata. New gender and cultural performances offer

a situated, generative, and immediate way to disrupt normative class and gender inequalities. NGOs may not alter or transform the structural constraints in young people's lives, but they sometimes offer resources and discourses for young women to personally renegotiate regimes of inequality in the everyday across the city. Insight into young women's cultural practices raises questions about young men and the production of multiple masculinities, a question to be addressed through further ethnographic research. In the next chapter, I take a step further and examine young women as well as young men's more direct political practices of improving everyday lives as well as challenging daily regimes of inequality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NGOising Politics? Everyday Injustices and Politics of Making Change

7.1 Introduction

We decided to meet at the Maidan, Kolkata's largest urban park; a vast stretch of field that serves as a site of leisure for people across classes, ethnicities, and ages in the city. Ratan (21) and Manoj (24), young men who lived and worked in the Kalighat fish bazaar, scaling, cutting, and selling fish since they were children, often walked to the Maidan for a welcome break of fresh air. Neither of them ever attended formal school growing up, but they did regularly attend Adhikar's drop-in centre. Now as young men in their 20s, Adhikar was a part of their past but continued to inform their present. Sitting on a bench sharing paper plates of *bhel puri*, I asked Ratan and Manoj what they learned from their years with Adhikar. Ratan quickly answered: "*Protibad kora*," "To protest." Manoj added, "*Kar kache ki protibad kora, sheyta peyechi, boojechi*." "What to protest and with whom – that's what we took, what we came to understand."

Several young people participating in my research described "*protibad*" as one of the fundamental lessons they learned during their childhood or adolescence with NGOs. The term, *protibad*, literally protest, signifies the act of taking a stand through words and action against instances perceived as a wrong-doing or an injustice. Young people in my research community use it to describe everyday actions of objection and remonstrance, such as speaking up against an abusive parent, leaving a violent marriage, or reprimanding a stranger for beating a dog on the street. It is also used to define formalised forms of protest including filing a police complaint, marching in a rally, signing a petition, or attending a vigil. In a focus group discussion on politics and social change, a youth participant explained: "Protibad is not just about marching in front of parliament and saying '*Halla bol*' (Raise your voice)." I can stay at home [and protest]. If there is domestic violence, if my husband beats me – I can stand up to that. That's also protest!"

Growing up in urban poverty and stigmatised localities such as the red-light area, young people frequently face everyday manifestations of inequality. Poor education, workplace exploitation, inadequate healthcare, violence, sexual harassment, and substandard housing are a part of young people's daily lives. In spite of NGO interventions, young people and their communities continue to encounter constrained economic and social living conditions with bleak promises for improving their everyday lives. In previous chapters, I examined young people's navigation of inequalities through their appropriation of social meanings of respect and respectability. I also analysed young people's stylistic performances, embodiment, and creative cultural practices that circumvent economic boundaries across urban space. Beyond cultural practices that sometimes can serve political ends, in this chapter I examine young people's direct political practices of challenging injustice and improving their everyday lives.

Several young people like Ratan claim that NGOs such as Adhikar cultivate a consciousness and practice of *protibad*, a practice of remonstrance and opposition against injustice. However, over the course of my fieldwork, I observed several instances when young people post-NGO did not practice *protibad*; they did not protest, nor did they resist. For instance, when Neela complained that she was overworked and taken for granted by her supervisor, she considered quitting or applying for a new job, but not *protibad*. Similarly, when Raju was suffering with jaundice and could not afford hospital treatment, *protibad* was not the choice of action. Why do young people directly challenge some injustices and not others? According to Manoj, young people learn when, where, and with whom they should deploy particular modes of political action – *protibad* or otherwise. Over the course of fieldwork, it became clear that the practice of *protibad* was a conditional practice, primarily emerging under particular configurations of injustice, such as gender-based violence and child exploitation, which are mostly promoted and politicised by NGOs.

“Gender” (a term used typically used in NGOs to refer to “women”) and children occupy a central place in the development assemblage in Kolkata’s red-light areas, influenced and shaped by international development agendas. Global development institutions such as the United Nations and World Bank have long promoted women’s empowerment and children’s protection, dedicating decades, fortnights, and days to these subalterns. The UN, for instance, declared 1975-1985 as the decade for women. Several transnational development agencies and community based NGOs also mark November 25-December 10th as the international fortnight of observance of violence against women and celebrate March 8th as international women’s day. Children have their own institutionalised days of observance, such as the UN-inspired Universal Children’s Day on November 20. The globalising priority to underscore women and children’s protection and empowerment within the global public conscience supports Spivak’s theorisation of new forms of subalternity. Today, the subaltern, she claims, is ‘no longer cut from the lines of access to the centre.’ (Spivak 2009, Nagar 2006:147). The subaltern in Spivak’s case, the third world woman, is not on the margins but in the centre of development’s imagination. It is important to keep in mind however, as Richa Nagar (2006: 147) observes, select injustices against subaltern women and children have come front and centre such as violence against women and HIV/AIDS, while over-shadowing others, such as wage inequality or poor sanitation. Furthermore, select development interventions to support subalterns are inscribed as best practices such as vocational training instead of forms of empowerment, such as unionisation (2006:147). Nagar and other scholars argue that NGOisation – the domination and professionalisation of particular idioms and interventions of women and children’s issues – primarily serves global capital and in turn compromises a more radical possibility towards development and social change (Kamat 2003b, Roy 2011). I approach the effects of NGOisation from a different vantage point. I assess how NGO politicisation of gender-based violence and child exploitation shapes young people’s recognition of and actions against everyday injustice. I

also draw attention to the ways youth partake in alternative political practices to improve their lives amidst everyday inequalities.

Young people in my research community, like Ratan and Manoj, described *protibad* as an NGO-inspired act of remonstrance, potentially against all kinds of unfair treatment from “eve-teasing” (a euphemism for street-based sexual harassment) and police violence to unfair employment conditions. Over the course of fieldwork though, young people’s narrations and practice of enacting *protibad* only arose under instances of gender violence or child exploitation. Furthermore, in light of other injustices, *protibad* was rarely invoked. This is not to say that young people appeared docile in the face of other injustices. Instead young people mobilised other creative political strategies and tactics to address unjust encounters and improve everyday situations, such as a politics of resourcefulness – a creative manoeuvring of available resources towards a desired end. In this chapter, I examine young people’s political practices – of *protibad* as well as of resourcefulness – as they address inequality and improve their everyday lives. I pay attention to the spaces and conditions that instigate and support *protibad*, as well as the conditions and spaces that prevent *protibad* and inspire a politics of resourcefulness. I argue young people engage in *protibad* for mostly NGO promoted gender-based issues as a mode of politics when they inhabit positions of power, often NGO-backed power. However, in conditions when young people consider themselves powerless, they turn to a politics of resourcefulness.

The ethnographic material of this chapter draws heavily on three focus group discussions with 15 young people but the arguments are informed by interviews with all the participants, in which they described their understanding and experiences of remonstrance and resourcefulness. I open this chapter with a survey of the rich political traditions in Kolkata, including social movements, party politics, and NGO activism, with attention to young people’s relationships to these political practices. Then, I examine *protibad* as one chosen mode of political and social action by post-NGO youth and investigate the conditions when youth deem

it effective as well as conditions when it is rendered ineffective, sometimes even inaccessible.

Finally, in light of the occasional failure of protibad politics, I elaborate modes of politics beyond protibad, a politics of resourcefulness as a tactic that young people employ in the absence of power.

7.2 Political Traditions in Young People's Lives: Social Movements, Parties, and NGOs

West Bengal has a rich history of mass movements and grassroots mobilisation. Yet in spite of the region's inclination towards social movements, young people post-NGO are rarely engaged in movement-based politics. Their disengagement is even more striking in light of the hyper-visible emergence of large-scale, generally youth-dominated uprisings across the global stage since 2010. Since 2010, after the suicide of a young man in Tunisia protesting against unemployment and poverty, political upheaval spread across the country and eventually the rest of North Africa and the Middle East. Coined as the Arab Spring, youth in 2011 were at the forefront of significant political transformations, most popularly the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In other parts of the world, youth also began to mobilise against neoliberal politics and economic injustice through the movements such as Occupy, Idle No More, and the Indignados. Some scholars refer to this recent rise of youth dominated politics as Activism 2010+ (Beikart and Fowler 2013, See Special Issue in Development and Change 2013). It is important to note though, since 2014 the wave of spectacle-based youth activism is receding.

Young people in my research community expressed limited awareness towards Activism 2010+. During a focus group discussion with five young people from Kalighat red-light area in July 2012, participants discussed the various models and methodologies to make change in local worlds. At one point, I asked the participants if they knew about the tumultuous events associated with Activism 2010+, such as the revolution in Egypt. They shook their heads no. When I asked the group about Occupy in New York, London, and other cities around the world,

again, young people expressed unfamiliarity but immense interest. Finally, I asked about a movement closer to home. “Have you heard of Anna Hazare?” Yes, they said enthusiastically.

Dipu: That old man!?

Rinky: The guy fasting!?

Bijoy: He’s standing up against black money.

Rinky: What do you call that – he used a word – he was against something....

Sahar: Corruption?

Rinky: Yes, Corruption!

While some participants knew of Anna Hazare and his fasting marathon in 2011 against corruption in New Delhi, they expressed little knowledge of and opinion on his political narrative and ideology. Movements and political actions closer to home however, were more familiar. Kolkata has an animated tradition of social and grassroots movements. The city and state has been a forerunner in the women’s movement (Ray 2000a), labour movements (Fernandes 1994), and the Naxalite Movement (Chakravarti 2009). In more recent times, West Bengal re-emerged on the scene of social movements with the 2007 farmer resistance in the villages of Nandigram and Singur. Further, Kolkata has been an important node for India’s queer movement and the sex worker’s movement (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay 2007), the latter claiming its origins in Kolkata’s red-light areas, the very neighbourhoods of my participants.

In spite of the prevalent culture of mass mobilisation in West Bengal and close proximity to a thriving sex worker’s movement, young people in my research community do not turn to mass political organising to bring about change in their lives and their communities. Several young people are suspicious of the effectiveness of movements and whether they serve community interests. For example, young people expressed suspicion over the collective revolts in Singur, West Bengal. In 2007, the rural town of Singur received international attention as the then CPI-M government granted 997 acres of agricultural land to Tata Motor Companies to build a factory manufacturing the world’s cheapest car, the Nano. Mass protests led by opposing party Trinamool Congress’ leader and several other social activists and intellectuals brought the factory to standstill. In 2008, Tata Motor declared it was pulling out of West Bengal. Young

people, like Rinky, expressed suspicion towards the leaders behind the Singur resistance and questioned whether the movement's opposition was truly in the best interest of the poor, especially in light of the loss of industrial jobs for the residents of Singur. In a focus group discussion, Uma frustratingly explained, "Mamata [the chief minister] came to Singur and messed everything up. She said, a farmer's son will be a farmer! Rinky with similar irritation remarked: "A farmer's child will be a farmer! Why?"

Young people were also distrustful of other social movements, including the sex workers' movement, a Durbar-led mobilisation that was deeply entangled with the lives of my participants' families and neighbourhoods. Several post-NGO youth contested the identity politics steering the movement, especially the politicisation of being "sex workers" or "children of sex workers." They felt mobilisation around their identity as "children of sex workers" made invisible other aspects of their subjectivity. Further, young people did not view the sex worker's movement as a movement per se. Instead they viewed it as a service-provider. Durbar is perceived as just another NGO that offers vocational trainings or art classes or employment through activism. It also offers "protection" during times of crises for sex workers and their family members, if and when the police, male clients, or neighbourhood leaders harass them. This protection, however, is accessed on an as needed basis. Young people engaged with Durbar not as movement organisers, but as recipients of goods and services. Only three participants out of forty participate in the sex worker's movement in a movement-building capacity, for which two of them received salaries. The rest of the post-NGO youth participants view Durbar less as mass movement and more as an organisation, NGO, or "source" to gain individual protection, services, and goods for immediate protection instead of long-term stability. In other words, they expected individual change rather than structural change. The perception of young people in my research is certainly different than other youth from red-light areas who grew up participating in Durbar and its youth wing called Amra Padatik. As scholars have observed, youth growing up

with Durbar engage with it as a social movement bettering the lives of sex workers and their families (Sircar and Dutta 2011, Shah 2013).

Another form of politics vibrant in Kolkata is “party politics.” Party politics, or formal electoral politics, sometimes intersect with movement politics as in the case of the Singur agitations. Like social movement politics, most young people do not actively engage in party politics; however, at the same time, party politics is unavoidable in Kolkata, even for post-NGO youth. Party politics is palpable across the city’s public space. Streets and localities are demarcated across party affiliations through flags, symbols, or graffiti. Political processions and marches are common occurrence. Public institutions, from colleges to informal neighbourhood clubs, are entangled with political parties. Informal neighbourhood clubs or *para clubs*, in particular, are a visible part of neighbourhood political life and serve as key mechanism in recruiting young people, specifically young men, into party politics. These clubs, affiliated with political parties, congregate in a “club *ghar*” (club room) for leisure, camaraderie, and resources such as cable television and carom boards. It is important to note though, as Ananya Roy (2003) describes, informal clubs actually have little political power, but they serve as symbolic spaces for men across ages to develop a semblance of power through political association within the neighbourhood. In everyday life, party affiliation plays a strong role in obtaining social goods, especially for the urban poor, including communities living in red-light areas (Chatterjee 2004). In order to access sanitary water, university admissions, or a government job, the urban poor turn to a party official as a “source” through which they can negotiate and hopefully gain their necessary social goods.



Figure 6: A large poster featuring Trinamool Congress Party leader Mamata Banerjee in Kalighat (2012) Photo: Sahar Romani

In spite of the pervasive presence of party politics in the city and in neighbourhoods, young people I talked to view party politics with disdain. Their disillusionment is not exceptional. Several scholars account for young people's disinterest from formal political processes across the world (Farthing 2010, Bayat 2013, McDowell et al 2014) and in India (Gooptu 2009, Jeffrey 2010). Nandini Gooptu, for example, in her study of industrial decline and urban politics in Kolkata, notes young people's disregard of institutional democratic politics. Political parties and politicians are increasingly deemed unrepresentative and unaccountable. In my research, young people expressed similar distrust towards party politics, nevertheless, they continued to selectively participate in party politics, particularly at a neighbourhood level, usually to obtain goods and resources like ration cards, electricity, or as I discussed in Chapter Four through Protima's story, jobs. Their limited participation in party politics was usually void of ideological commitments and loyalty. Their relations to parties resembles what Partha Chatterjee

calls “political society” – a political practice and culture that is bargain-based and transactional instead of ideological (Chatterjee 2004). The few young people, both men and women, who admitted to politicking or “doing party” (*party kora*) understood their practice as utilitarian and transactional rather than political. Dipu, a 19 year old young man who grew up and lives in Kalighat’s Boro Gali, reluctantly interacted with political parties. His experience is a useful illustration of the transactional and utilitarian relationship with formal parties:

Since childhood, I didn’t like party politics. Seriously. My whole family supported CPI-M because through CPM we were able to live in our home. ...Our whole *baari* [slum tenement] voted for CPM. Now Trinamool has come along, so we give them votes, but before my family – Ma, Baba, everyone voted for CPM. Now they vote for Trinamool because they have more force (*jog*). You have to watch out for your own interests (*nijer sharto*). That’s what every one does.

In spite of Dipu’s dislike of party politics, he visits the party office regularly to cultivate “a source” in anticipation for those crises and moments of need in the future (Simone 2010).

Similar to the way young people render the sex workers’ movement as a social service organisation, political parties are also rendered into a corrupt version of social service organisations that the urban poor negotiate and bargain with to gain basic needs in exchange for votes (Chatterjee 2004). In my research, I observed select young men and women visit party offices or participate in party events for the potential exchange of favours. However, none of my participants joined neighbourhood clubs, which have political associations. Women of course were not allowed to, as neighbourhood clubs are exclusively male spaces. Interestingly though, young men in my research also did not participate in neighbourhood clubs. As a matter of fact, they frowned upon other young men in the neighbourhood involved in clubs and differentiated themselves from the masculinity promoted in clubs, which was offhandedly described as unproductive and aggressive, resembling Roy’s observation of marginalised masculine cultures in the clubs of Kolkata (2003: 115). During fieldwork, I had structured conversations with young men who participated in clubs in Kalighat as well as Khidderpore. None of the young men in clubs participated in NGOs, and if they ever did during their childhood, their participation was brief and rendered insignificant. Over the course of fieldwork, the segregation between young

men in clubs and young men in NGOs became increasingly apparent; however, I was unable to further investigate this divergence between clubs and NGOs and it remains a future direction of research. It is important to note though that many NGOs often times negotiated with clubs to rent space for NGO activities both in Kalighat and Khidderpore. The nature of both young men and women's interaction with political parties in my research points to a limited and instrumental engagement with political parties. It also echoes a broader culture of political society that addresses everyday life struggles through a mode of processes that are mostly utilitarian instead of ideological, individual instead of structural, atomised instead of sustainable.

Another key political force in red-light areas and young people's lives is NGO activism. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation so far, NGOs are a key institution in young people's lives in red-light areas. NGOs play a formative role in young people's social dispositions and cultural practices. As I go on to illustrate, NGOs are also influential in shaping young people's orientation and practice of imagining and enacting social change, particularly in relation to issues relevant to NGO agendas such as violence against women and children's exploitation. The primary NGOs in young people's lives and featured in this ethnography – Jibon, Adhikar, Kala – are shaped by a right-based framework emphasising social and political action against violations related to gender and children. They work with women and children in red-light areas to build individual economic capacity through educational and vocational training in low-paying economies. They also attempt to foster social empowerment through rights-based trainings, generating awareness on sex trafficking, domestic violence, child labour, denial of education, child abuse, and child marriage through workshops, peer education, and community campaigns.

Young people attending Adhikar's drop-in-centres, for example, participated in regular "sessions" where they were educated about patriarchy, rape culture, female infanticide, and eve-teasing. Adhikar in particular mobilised drama as a tool for learning about injustice and political action. Young people participating in Adhikar produced and acted in plays depicting an injustice as well as a response of political action. In one play for example, members enacted various

injustices, such as a domestic worker sexually harassed by her middle-class client, a child labouring at a tea stall, and a girl denied schooling by her family. In the play, the members resolved each of these injustices by performing how a victim can rise up and demand change by protesting in a localised sphere. The domestic servant confided and complained to a mentor. The 'child labourer' found an adult to help him go to school. Jibon also encouraged young people to speak up for women's and children's rights through an ensemble of activities, including various trainings on gender and child exploitation and participation in active campaigns such as the annual, "Ending Violence Against Women's Fortnight" – an annual fourteen day event promoting women's rights that is observed by most women's NGOs in Kolkata. Moreover, participants' regular interaction with middle-class activists on a daily basis, several of whom embodied a passion for women's rights and children's protection, emboldened young women's disposition to protest.



Figure 7: A "Protect the Girl Child" poster at an NGO campaign event, 2012. Photo: Sahar Romani

Through drama, trainings, campaigns, and daily interactions, NGOs attempt to imbue young people's habitus with a sensitivity to children's and women's exploitation and a desire to act against such forms of exploitation in their own life contexts. Kala's website for example, describes its intervention in leadership training and art education as means to "transform young victims of sexual abuse from being a rehabilitative victim" to a "proactive advocate" against violence. Similarly, both Jibon and Adhikar, in very different capacities follow a youth participation model in their programmes encouraging their participants to act as leaders for communities. Young people serve as peer supporters, youth motivators, or working members and partake in a range of activities from reporting incidents of underage sex work in their neighbourhood to counselling young peers through family abuse. Through these activities, young people were encouraged to identify and confront injustices, again mostly related to women and children, in their localities and communities. The ability to stand up against injustice is an outcome NGO administrator desired for youth. Directors of NGOs expressed their aspirations for nurturing young people to develop a civic consciousness. Jibon's director described her hopes for post-NGO youth in an interview with me: "[Young people] should be aware, they should be able to look back and help another child...And try and be helpful to others." Similarly, Adhikar's director hoped that youth from Adhikar would carry a "commitment to challenging injustice – however injustice is determined in their minds."

Several young people in my research community believed young people who grew up or "*manush boiche*" through NGOs embodied a disposition of challenging injustice through protibad. Uma, for example, believed that youth in NGOs are more likely to speak out against injustices such as domestic violence or child labour because they were raised to recognise exploitation and were given tools for remonstrance. She offered a hypothetical example comparing her friend Bijoy, a neighbour and peer from Boro Gali, who participated in an assortment of NGO programmes from Jibon to Durbar, to a girl who did not come of age with NGOs. Uma narrated:

A quiet girl from a *sabdarani* [normal] home doesn't know about children's rights or child labour, say like Bijoy knows. The way he can explain the issue of child labour, she can't. Maybe she feels bad [*koshito lagche*] if she sees a child labourer, but if Bijoy feels bad, he can say something. Maybe someone will silence Bijoy, but what matters is that he will speak up and say, "Why are you doing this?" Maybe the [adult owner] will say, mind your own business! But the point is that Bijoy speaks – he did not just walk by without saying something.

Uma's example suggests that both Bijoy and the "quiet girl from a normal home" both consider child labour as doing harm to children, but Bijoy has the compulsion to speak up against child labour because of his socialisation with NGOs. Similarly, Binod, a young man who came of age with Jibon and now, at 25, works as a programme manager at Durbar, explained: "I believe, every human being has the ability to protest – for some [the ability] is asleep and for some it is alive." For Binod and several others, the ability or consciousness to protest awakened through NGOisation of their habitus. Post-NGO youth in my research described a desire to stand up against injustices in their everyday life, a practice they attributed not to political parties or social movements, but to NGOs. Like Tushar (19) a young man who attended Jibon's drop-in-centre youth group in Bow Bazaar and now makes a living cleaning ATM kiosks, explained: "I learned to protest against those who strike against innocents. We all learned that. Everyone in our group was taught (*shobar modhe dewa*) - stand up against those who strike against the innocent ... I still have this in me."

The instances and occurrences of *protibad* that young people narrated in interviews and conversations, or the *protibad* I witnessed, all related to injustices or issues prominent within NGO agendas of gender violence, and sometimes child rights. They were issues that were, in a sense, NGOised and authorised as violations against women and children. Further, the forms of *protibad* young people described and I observed emerged as activism manifesting in everyday spaces at home, on city buses, along street corners, or on inter-personal scale between friends, family, lovers, and strangers. In the next section, I examine the spaces and conditions young people practice *protibad* as well as the limits of the practice.

7.3 The Politics of Protibad

Protibad is the practice of politics associated with courage, risk, and resistance. Protibad against someone is known to evoke resistance and opposition. In a focus group, Uma explained: “Keep in mind, if you go out and do protibad, there will be resistance.” Bijoy added, “Doing protibad, you’ll never win. You’re going to have to fight that fight continuously.” In spite of the risks of protibad, there were several instances when both young men and women pursued protibad, generally in the face of violence against women and children.

Khokon (22), a young man who attended Adhikar for a number of years and who now makes a living through several odd jobs as a house painter and butcher in Kalighat Bazaar, met me between his jobs one afternoon at Lakhi’s Cha Stall in Kalighat Bazaar. Sitting on a wooden bench, he described how at Adhikar he learned “a great deal” about making change: “Like, if one of our girls is getting harassed by four or five guys, we learned how to help her out. We learned all of this in Adhikar.” In our interview, Khokon went on to describe an incident where he witnessed a girl being harassed on the street and decided to intervene: “Two girls were walking on the street and three to four guys started catcalling. I went up to the girls and said, shall I beat them with my shoes? After I asked, I beat them.”

Similar to Khokon, Rinky also learned to stand up against sexual harassment in public spaces. During our first interview in the summer of 2012 at Adhikar’s drop-in-centre, Rinky recalled how growing up she was a shy and quiet girl. “I was the kind of girl who would never speak up, who would sit in the last row of class...But now I’ve changed. I’m really confident.” Rinky’s confidence is apparent especially through her courage to stand up against public sexual harassment. Rinky described an incident of confronting sexual harassment, when she was escorting a group of Adhikar members in a taxi for a summer camp to the Khidderpore drop-in-centre for work:

... We all got into a taxi together...The taxi wallah was continuously touching a young girl (sitting in the front). He touched her breasts, and kept touching her... I told the taxi driver to stop the car. We were at Khidderpore More (a major crossing). The taxi driver said, “Why should I stop?” I yelled, “Stop the taxi!” He stopped the car. [Getting out] I opened the taxi’s driver’s door and slapped him twice! “What were you

doing?” I asked him. “What did I do?” he asked. He wanted me to spell it out. ... People started to surround us. Inside I was really scared, afraid in case we got into a fight (*baara baari*). But that [taxi wallah] kept asking “What did I do?” I said, “Why did you touch her?” Then the guy said, “Did you see anything?” I said, “The girl is crying, can’t you see?” Once people around heard that the taxi wallah touched a girl, then they grabbed the taxi wallah [yelling], “You’re taking advantage of a young girl?” We left and took another taxi.

Rinky’s courage to confront sexual harassment with physical and verbal action was not rare. Her colleague and friend Uma, had a similar inclinations and experiences. As a matter of fact, she had a reputation among middle-class NGO activists for confronting sexual harassment. On one occasion Uma had struck a man who once tried to harass her at Gariahat Market. NGO administrators would joke, “Beware, Uma is a brown belt” and praised her ability to stand up to sexual harassment.

Drishti was also experienced in confronting gender violence. Along with personal experiences of confronting men engaging in forms of sexual harassment on the streets, she also had experiences speaking out against other forms of gender violence. Drishti recounted an incident from several years ago:

A girl in our *para* (neighbourhood) was raped and she never told any one. Three months later, during a fight, her rape came to be known. A few others and I decided amongst ourselves that something must be done for her! Immediately we made a report to the police station. We also contacted a few NGOs for help, because we were pretty young then, and couldn’t do much on our own. So we stood with her and helped her make a case against (the man).

In the same discussion, Drishti described another occasion of protibad a few years later when she was working as a social worker at Kala. Once, Drishti came to hear that one of her clients was experiencing abuse at her work place as a domestic worker. Drishti decided to make an official complaint to the police. Drishti supported the young woman to leave her job and find new employment. Drishti’s supervisor at Kala assisted her in registering the police complaint and finding alternative employment for the client through her wide contacts with NGOs and development agencies.

The examples narrated above suggest how protibad is commonplace among both young women and men growing up with NGOs, especially amidst sexual harassment and gender based

violence. Furthermore, young people working within NGOs find it easier to practice protibad. In spite of these examples of protibad unfolding on the streets of Kolkata, not all young people are successful in their ability to practice protibad. As I elaborate in the next section, there were several instances when young people were not able to practice protibad in spite of their consciousness.

The Limits of Protibad

Conditions of powerlessness often prevented young people from enacting their desire to practice protibad, as was the case with Deb. When Deb (23) first joined a multinational call centre as a trainee he was excited about his real-world job; but when he witnessed sexual harassment at his workplace, he was paralysed, even though he desired to speak up and take action. Growing up as an active youth member of Jibon, Deb has an astute awareness and strong opinions on sexual harassment. Ever since Deb started attending Jibon as a young 11 year old, he started to learn about gender discrimination and gender violence. As a youth member, Deb demonstrated enthusiasm towards women's issues and was frequently invited back to Jibon after he transitioned out of their programmes to help assist in small-scale, but critical NGO stipend-based jobs, such as "repatriation missions" of trafficked women from Bangladesh or search committees for run-away girls from the shelter home. Beyond Jibon, Deb continues to volunteer with other NGOs working on women's issues in Kolkata, even when he was unemployed. On several occasions, when I would meet Deb for an *adda* (hang out), I would notice him wearing a bright green bracelet around his left wrist with the statement, "Cool men don't buy sex." The bracelet was apart of a national NGO's anti-sex trafficking campaign calling to end the demand for sex-trafficking.

In the summer of 2011, when Deb secured a new position as a trainee at a multinational call centre, he often observed his supervisor behaving inappropriately with female trainees in the office during his night shift. Deb described the ways his supervisor leaned over the desks of

female-trainees touching their shoulders and necks. “This is sexual harassment,” he told me one afternoon in his one room-home in the neighbourhood of Bow Bazaar. Deb elaborated:

I’ve come from Jibon – I know what a good touch is and what a bad touch is, where you should touch and where you shouldn’t touch. But I know – that if I go to the manager and try to protest, he’s going to look at me and say – ‘UNICEF’s office is just a block away from here. Go work there.’ What will I say to that? What will protest do? *Mera to lagaya!* [I am screwed!] Tell, me, am I weak or am I strong? You tell me. Because I don’t know what to do.

Deb tried to rationalise his choices – to practice protest or not, to risk his job or not. “What’s the use of acting like Rahul Gandhi [the youthful leader of the Congress party of India]?” he said. “I am just another trainee. I will lose my job if I speak up.” Despite Deb’s commitment to working against sexual harassment of women, Deb was unable to stand up to it at his new workplace.

Another young man, Amit (25), described a similar crisis of conscience when he encountered a woman at the aftermath of a rape one night. Like Deb, Amit grew up attending Jibon’s drop-in-center in Bow Bazaar red-light area. Unlike Deb, Amit was not a leader of the youth group nor at the forefront of AIDS day rallies, but he participated in a handful of workshops on gender, rights, and trafficking. Mostly though, Amit prioritised receiving educational coaching and obtaining vocational training and certification in car mechanics. In 2011, Amit had rigorous work schedule with little time for leisure between two jobs: he was a motorbike mechanic by day and cable repair operator by night. Between 9am to 9pm, Amit repaired bike engines at a Hero Honda garage, and from 11pm to 3am, Amit rode his own motorbike through the northwest parts of the city checking the functionality of cable towers. Amit finds little time for sleep and little time for friends. I was grateful for the time he carved out to meet for an interview one winter evening in 2011. During our conversation in his home located in a basti in Bow Bazaar, Amit told me about the night he encountered a rape victim.

A few months ago, while on duty as cable operator, Amit was on his motorbike with his supervisor riding along Eastern Metropolitan Bypass – the main highway circling greater

Kolkata. In the middle of the night, Amit saw a woman with tattered clothes on the edges of the bypass. Her clothes were ripped and she appeared to be in trouble, he narrated, during an interview at his home one night. Amit and his boss decided to stop and see if she needed help. “Are you okay?” asked Amit. “I am really hungry,” she told him. “I was just raped by a group of five to six men.” Amit paused in the middle of his story. Several moments later he turned to me and asked, “What was I supposed to do? You tell me.” Amit and his supervisor decided to take 30 rupees and buy fruit and bread for the woman. They offered her the provisions and she accepted. Then, they left. In our interview, Amit stared into a distance and ruminated:

So what did I do? Did I do anything? I did not have the courage to bring her home or to call Aunty [the director of Jibon] and tell her what happened to this girl. What can we do?

...This has happened a lot in my life. As if I cannot do anything. What can I do? It was so late at night – maybe 2am or 1:30am. What would I do with the girl? If I took her [with me], I would get trapped in a [police] case.

What can I do? I was able to do a little bit. ‘You should eat.’ I was able to do that, but I am not able to do more than that. It’s happened so often, even after seeing everything, knowing everything; we’ll know everything about the situation, but we won’t be able to do anything.

Amit’s astute reflection points to the dilemma young people are caught within as they navigate their consciousness and lack of power to enable individualised change. Amit attributed his inability to take action to his increasing detachment from Jibon over the years.

Nowadays when I go about thinking that I should do something or when I want, or when I try to, I always feel like I am alone. That’s why I don’t have the courage to move forward. When I was in Jibon, I didn’t feel like I was alone – I felt like everyone was with me.

The experiences of Amit and Deb point to different configurations of powerlessness that obstruct post-NGO youth from practicing protibad in spite of their desire and conscience. First, both of them occupy positions of vulnerability in their respective situations. Deb, for example is vulnerable as a trainee at the bottom of the employment ladder at a multinational call centre where the status of his employment is precarious. In Amit’s case, as a young struggling man, with scarce time, resources, and sleep, he fears how his eyewitness account, as well as his gender, may lead to his own entrapment into a police case. Both of them encounter a sense of fear at the risks of protibad. Second, both Amit and Deb’s respective distance from networks of NGOs also lead

to their feelings of powerlessness. In Deb's situation, despite his active involvement in women's issues, in the corporate world he is amidst a different field where there are different 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000) and his NGO habitus is of little benefit. He is displaced from an NGOised world "where cool men don't buy sex" into a corporate setting where anti-violence cultures are less prominent. In a corporate world setting, protibad is laden with risks. It can jeopardise one's own well-being without much promise of improving the situation of female co-workers. Amit's experience of isolation however signals a greater alienation from a culture of protibad, which he found at Jibon. Now, over the years, with barely any time to stay in touch with Jibon, Amit feels he does not have the power or resources to effect change in the lives of others. His belief in protibad is slowly eroding. Third, both Amit and Deb's gender also affects their (in)ability to address violence against women. Although these two young men did not explicitly reflect over their positionality as men in my interviews, their actions of speaking out against violence against women was entangled with confronting a 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), one that is embedded in patriarchal cultures of violence. It is possible then that, for Amit and Deb, speaking up about violence against women is inherently a challenge to hegemonic masculinity and thus entangled in deeper anxieties.

Deb's and Amit's powerlessness to enact protibad as young men detached and disengaged from NGOs or collectives of power was shared by other young people in my research community. In a focus group discussion on politics and social change, participants echoed Amit and Deb's experiences. Neela for example asserted, "To be able to protest, you need power or a back-up. Or else, you can't." Neela elaborated by drawing on Drishti's ability to effectively and successfully file a police complaint against her client's victimisation and support her in the search for alternative work. According to Neela, Drishti is able to "rescue" girls and take them to the police station in Kalighat because "in the back of her mind, she knows Kala will be with her as a back-up." Neela continued to make her point: "...But if I go...who will listen to me? Who will listen to a young woman making a complaint on behalf of another young

woman?” Drishti agreed with Neela. “Neela is right,” responded Drishti, “I couldn’t do it alone, not until I have support behind me.”

“Back-up,” according to Neela, is a source of power beyond the individual. Indeed, back-ups can take many shapes and forms such as neighbourhood clubs, political parties, and of course, NGOs. Neela, Amit, and in some instances Deb, feel they have access to none of the above. Drishti, on the other hand, as a current NGO worker at Kala has the privilege of relying on the organisation as a back-up. Neela and Drishti’s discussion, as well as Deb and Amit’s experiences, point to the limitations of *protibad* for post-NGO youth. Amit, Deb, and Neela do not share the same ‘position of enunciation’ (Hall 1996) as Drishti, Rinky, and other young people who are embedded within NGOs or other collective formations that can serve as a back-up in the face of injustice. Young people who are on their own and are building lives beyond NGOs are not always able to practice *protibad* in spite of their consciousness and desire. As Uma explained, sometimes there is “100% desire and only 10% courage.”

As young people make futures beyond NGOs, they encounter different rules of the game in various fields of their life (Bourdieu 1977). In the world of NGOs, *protibad* and activism related to issues of gender and children is a part of the common sensibility. It is an encouraged and affirmed practice. In spaces beyond NGOs, activism against gender and child violence is less prevalent, although this is arguably changing since the massive protests against rape across metropolitan India in the winter of 2013. In their everyday life, Deb, Amit, and other young people who live spatially and temporally outside of NGOs, confront a different ‘reality’ where child labour and violence against women is generally perceived as inevitable. In this ‘reality,’ masculinities attuned to and against gender violence are not celebrated, but marginalised. Further, from Amit and Deb’s marginal positionality, *protibad* usually feels ineffective and is laden with personal risk. In such cases, some young people, like Amit begin to accept injustices and feel that “...Whatever is happening, let it happen.”

Interestingly, some young people also believed that once they spatially and politically move away from NGO worlds and into other worlds, the disposition to protest is likely to dissipate to some degree. An observation made by Rinky about the different sensibilities of NGO worlds and other worlds makes this clear. Rinky, as a woman strongly rooted in NGOs as an employed fieldworker, described the change she witnessed in friends after they moved on to lifeworlds outside the NGOs. Rinky argued that the desire and expression to practice protibad also changed with this movement:

As long as one stays with an NGO is as long as this [spirit to protest] will last. “Oh I have to protest, I have to protest!” And once that person leaves the NGO, then they’ll think, this is reality, a child can only eat if he works, and if he has to work, his boss will beat him. This is the reality [*bastob*].

Rinky observes two different domains of reality: NGOs, where there is a culture of protest and another domain, what she calls “reality,” that is, the world where particular violations are the status quo and a part of the more hegemonic sensibility. This difference between NGO sensibility and “reality” is also apparent in Deb’s experience at the call centre. In our interview, when Deb enacts a hypothetical confrontation with his manager about sexual harassment, in his imagination his boss fires him and suggests he go work for UNICEF – an alternative world where sexual harassment is a violation against women and protesting is the popular form of action.

In this chapter so far, I have discussed the mobilisation of protibad/protest by young people as political practice to better their everyday lives in relations to gender violence. I also discussed the limitations of protibad by drawing attention to configurations of powerlessness that obstruct young people from practicing protibad. Thus far, all the contexts and circumstances of protibad discussed are limited to injustices related to violations against women and children in a grammar legible and constructed through NGO agendas. Young people growing up in red-light areas experience a diverse array of injustices, from malnutrition, inadequate health care, poor education, and work place exploitation. In the next section, I turn to other political practices young people employ as they navigate inequalities that are less

politicised by NGOs and even normalised as inevitabilities in subaltern life and therefore just a part of everyday “reality.”

7.4 Politics of Resourcefulness

Protibad is not the only way young people confront injustices to make their streets and work places safer and improve their everyday living conditions. There are numerous other forms of injustices young people face and confront with alternative strategies of action. One arena, for example, where young people face severe discrimination, which I will discuss at length, is workplace exploitation where youth post-NGO are relegated to long hours, low salaries, and uneven opportunities for organisational mobility. Protibad was rarely invoked in these circumstances. However, even though young people did not directly resist workplace exploitation or join organisations such as unions to collectively organise around workers’ rights, this does not mean they did not recognise class-based discrimination at the work place. Youth practiced a different form of politics to confront class-based injustices and improve their situation. They practiced a politics of personal resourcefulness, which, interestingly young people found prevalent in NGO activism, political parties, as well as in the everyday practices of friends, elders, and communities.

Several scholars view the politics of personal solutions as effects of depoliticisation and a form of “anti-politics” (Ferguson 1994, Kamat 2002). At the same time, another strand of long-standing scholarship also points to non-oppositional forms of agency as forms of political action (Scott 1990, Mahmood 2005, Bayat 2012, Durham 2008, Dyson 2014). In some cases, the politics of resourcefulness and personal solutions is interpreted as agency under constraint (Scott 1990, Bayat 2013), however in other cases, it signals political agency beyond paradigms of power and resistance (Mahmood 2005). Several youth scholars are now turning their attention beyond the politics of resistance towards a politics of resourcefulness (Simone 2004, Jeffrey 2012, Newell 2012, Dyson 2014). Nandini Gooptu’s (2009) study of retail staff in Kolkata’s malls, for

example, examines how young people preserve their well-being instead of mobilising to change systems exploiting them. Gooptu notes however, this does not represent an apolitical attitude, but is expressive of a political articulation that seeks personal solutions to a structural or systemic injustice (2009). A similar trend emerges in my research.

Drishti, for example, is an independent woman who has taken on many challenges in her lifetime. She left an abusive marriage, she is raising a child as a single parent, and as discussed earlier, she regularly allies with and advocates for community members and neighbours who are in trouble. However, when Drishti's auntie-employer gave her a salary less than other trainers because of Drishti's lower educational qualifications, Drishti was enraged but did not protest. Her hesitance to protest emerged from a combination of respect for her supervisor and greater trust in alternative political strategies. Drishti's decision to avoid protest though does not signal a depoliticisation of labour issues, nor a sense of compliance or apathy. Drishti is keen on maintaining her relationship with her long-time mentor and current supervisor. In the face of an unfair work environment, Drishti makes the political choice against asserting her rights and instead nurtures her interdependent relationship with her supervisor for longer-term gain. Instead of confronting her supervisor, she expands her skill set as a staff member and tactfully facilitates discussions on pay scales over the coming months as a staff member investing in the budding organisation. In June 2013, Drishti informed me over a long-distance telephone conversation that her supervisor announced that she would raise Drishti and other art educators' salaries.

Uma's situation is similar. In spite of the praises she receives at Adhikar for being an exemplary NGO worker, she has a disproportionately low salary in relation to her role and responsibilities at work. Over several deep hang-out sessions with Uma during her off hours at Adhikar's drop-in-centre, Uma often expressed anger over the disparity between the salaries of fieldworkers and directors.

Fieldworkers should get a better salary. Because we work really hard! ...Whenever there is trouble [*jhamela*], we have to deal with it. Some boy's mother is going to jail at 2am – "Oh Uma, my son!" And at 2am Uma

has to go. The next day I have to come to the office and write a case study – whose uncle beat up who, who had to take who to the hospital. We have to do everything. They should raise our salaries!

The refrain “raise our salaries” was on the lips of many youth fieldworkers amidst peer discussion. This demand however is rarely asserted in front of NGO administrators in an expression of protest. Contrary to the Sangtin Writers and NGO fieldworkers in North India who asserted their critique of class hierarchies in NGO salary structures through writing a book *Sangtin Yatra*, the youth in my research did not resist their low-incomes or criticise NGO salary structures openly (Nagar 2006). Like Drishti, Uma feels highly indebted to her supervisor, who is also her long-time mentor since childhood. Uma also feels that she is unlikely to find better work opportunities outside of her current position at Adhikar. Therefore she continues to work as a fieldworker despite her low wage. Certainly, Uma complains with peers and in conversations with me, but she does not protest at work. Her colleague, Rinky, feels similar frustration and also does not directly oppose the salary structure at work. Rinky and Uma, like Drishti, ‘actively acquiesce’ (Dyson 2014) to low-paying work and find other means to improve their work experience. In Rinky and Uma’s case, mobilising available cultural resources of NGO work, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is also a way of leveraging alternative forms of power to make their work experience contribute to their mobility.

Acquiescence to workplace inequality is not particular to young people working at NGOs. Beyond the NGO sector, Deb who was working at the call centre and frustrated by his manager’s sexual harassment towards his female colleagues was also angry about the financial duplicity in his company. While signing his employment contract, Deb was promised Rs. 6500 (£71), but when his payslip came around he was only paid Rs. 2,400 (£26). Even though Deb was furious, he did not stand up to his boss. Deb considered discussing the matter with his colleagues to collectively organise against management, but predicted that everyone was more vested in their “self-interest” (*nijer sharto*) and would not collectivise. Deb did not take any action. Instead, one summer later, Deb decided to quit his position and look for employment elsewhere.

His behaviour of ‘solitary retreat’ instead of opposition (Gooptu 2009: 54) echoes behaviours of new economy workers in Gooptu’s study of retail staff in Kolkata’s malls. Young people’s disparate actions suggest tactics and strategies that fall under a rubric of resourceful politics. As discussed so far, such a political frame is not oppositional, nor is it oriented towards collective social change. This form of politics is accommodating and improvisational; it is aimed at individualised change. Within the politics of resourcefulness, one methodology of personal solutions that young people especially identified was what they called “politics.”

Doing “Politics”

Sahar: What is politics?

Deb: Politics is a kind of *jalebi* (a sticky, spiral shaped sweet) that has no beginning or end!

Drishti: Politics means *nijer sharto*, self-interest.

Neela: ... What does politics mean? *Rajniti* (Hindi word for Politics), It means ‘the way of the Raja (ruler) – right? This has been going on since the times of Rajas. My way! My way! My way! And now a days, we think we are Rajas – whether it’s a political party or any one. My way!

Neela: Politics you could say is one kind of selfishness. Stealing. Lying. Exploiting. Everything. Politics is the dirtiest thing in the world.

Sahar: Does politics have a good side to it?

Binod: Of course it does!

Deb: To make change, politics is necessary.

The English word politics frequently surfaced in conversations and interviews with young people, not in discussions of the state of affairs of West Bengal or the rallies against corruption in New Delhi, but rather of everyday occurrences in life – a disagreement with a boss, an encounter with a doctor in a hospital, an afternoon class at a computer training session. In a focus group discussion, a group of young people attempted to explain “politics” through scenarios and examples: “If I am down, I have to figure out how to push the person above me, so I can move up,” shared Dheeraj, a 21 year old man from a slum in Tollygunge who attended Jibon’s drop-in-centre regularly through his teens. Another young woman described politics as the practice of never keeping your word, or saying one thing in front of you and saying another thing in front of someone else. Politics was also described as “greasing” (*tel lagana*) someone in power. Based on young people’s explanations, politics is a word used to describe a diverse and

amorphous set of practices with the aim of personal mobility and gain, often times at the expense of others, through instrumentalisation or manipulation. Politics is prevalent in many spheres of the everyday, practiced by many, including young people in my research community.

Many post-NGO youth liberally observed politics in many everyday activities. For them, “politics” is the *modus operandi* of many people in power or without power, unless proven otherwise. “Everyone does it,” said Binod. “Politicians, of course, do politics,” explained Uma. “Mothers and children do politics,” and as Neela said, “I’ve been doing politics since I was in my womb.” However, one of the prime sites of politics identified by young people was NGOs. As Rinky exclaimed: “NGOs? Oh, they do *maha*-politics, grand politics.” In the next section, I will discuss young people’s observation of politics within NGOs and then move on towards young people’s own practice of politics.

“Politics” in NGOs

Young people in my research community – many of who lived a few lanes away from NGOs for nearly a decade and some of whom work for NGOs today – have opinions on the inner workings of NGOs. They especially have astute analyses of the interdependent relationships between the subjects or beneficiaries of development and the facilitators of development, which according to them, is a relationship fraught with politics. Binod, for example, offered his opinion in a focus group discussion about a fundamental way NGOs “do politics” (politics *kore*).

Every NGO does politics. Every NGO. They find a community – whether it’s a minority community, youth community, child community. They take a community, show them off, and bring in money, showing their development. 10% [of the money] is for community development and 90% is for the director’s growing pocket. This is politics, dear.

According to Binod, the entire project of NGOs – development work on behalf of marginalised communities – is a matter of “politics.” From this view, development work is a project of instrumentalisation where communities in need are utilised for an NGO’s material and symbolic interest, progress, and growth. Many young people post-NGO often expressed a

sentiment and analysis similar to Binod, especially after they felt “used” (*babbobar*) by NGOs in the name of development. For example, as I discussed in Chapter Four, a number of youth felt “used” when they were recruited into vocational training programmes that did not offer much benefit to their personal mobility, but assisted the NGO’s programme and reputation. This was true for Jhimli, Rinky, Neela and several others. Neela and Rinky described how they felt used when NGOs encouraged them as children to give media interviews about their experiences of rescue or “rehabilitation.” According to Rinky and Neela, as children, they were too naïve to consider the risks of participating in public interviews as “daughter of sex workers” and the implications it might have on their future lives in a society where sex work and red-light areas are highly stigmatised. Feelings of being used were especially acute in relation to NGO funding processes. Some post-NGO youth recalled instances of meeting funders and performing their best selves in front of funders, but did not recall a surge of resources in their every day experience at the drop-in-centre or shelter home. In the eyes of young people, larger sums of funds supported organisational and higher-level staff interests instead of the everyday lives of youth. According to them, what else could explain the widening wealth disparity between the beneficiaries of development and the professionalised facilitators of development? In one focus group discussion, Binod painted a picture of a typical NGO director complaining about a lack of funds:

Sitting on a 10,000 rupee chair, with a new tablet, using wifi, wearing a 20,000 rupee sari from FabIndia saying, “We don’t have any funds any more... We’re going to have to tell our staff that we’re going to start giving [lay off] notices or that they should start looking for work elsewhere.” Seriously! Do you know how much [a director] makes? Do you know how much money they own? But, [they] never use *that* money [for development]. [They’ll] use money begged from abroad. And then, keep 90 percent, and give 10 percent. This is politics, my dear.

Binod was not alone in observing financial disparities between NGO staff members and the communities they served. Bijoy, a young man who grew up in Kalighat with numerous NGOs and now works as a part-time fieldworker for an international NGO, described the changes he witnessed in the executive director of a small NGO that is housed next to his home

in Boro Gali. According to Bijoy, when he was a child, the executive director would travel to the NGO field office on a public bus, even in the monsoons. “Nowadays, she travels in an AC [air-conditioned] car only!” he exclaimed. The juxtaposition of directors with their AC cars, silk saris, and trips abroad amidst funding cuts, slashed education assistance, and low salaries for NGO fieldworkers is a matter of politics for Binod and Bijoy. According to both of these young men, NGOs fortify middle class and upper-middle class incomes instead of empowering poor communities in the *bastis* and red light areas of the city. This is done through politics. As Rinky summed it up, “NGOs give a lot, but they take more than they give.”

Another example from a young man named Dipu (21) is useful to demonstrate NGO’s self-service over social service. Dipu, a young man living in Kalighat who attended Adhikar’s drop-in-centre for educational coaching for nearly a decade was in need of financial support one year for his high school fees. After failing a year in high school, his father refused to pay for his school admission and told Dipu to finance his own way. Dipu immediately turned to Jibon as educational stipends were a common service it provided. During a focus group discussion, Dipu described his experiences of seeking assistance with Jibon:

They asked me to write an application [to request financial support], I wrote one. Then, Aunty told me to write another, I wrote one. Then, I wrote another one. And another one! My pen ran out of ink but I never got anything! And yet, those who didn’t apply [for financial support], they got help from Jibon. They got money. I’ve been involved with Jibon for years and they didn’t give me anything; and those who haven’t been apart of it got money.

I asked Dipu for a possible explanation behind his experience. He looked at me with frustration. “This is politics!” I was confused. “What does that mean exactly – politics?” I asked. His friend, Rinky who was a part of the discussion, answered my question.

This means – Dipu loves Jibon very much. He’s already with Jibon. But, say, Sahar isn’t. So we better give Sahar money. [Because] once Sahar receives help, she’ll sing Jibon’s praises *Vah vah Jibon, vah vah Jibon* [Bravo, bravo, Jibon]! And then when Sahar joins us, then we have to go after someone else, and help them instead.

In other words, according to Dipu and Rinky, helping young people in need is as much about helping the NGO. For them, Jibon supports young people in order to gain community

membership. Once it has established a relationship with one community member like Dipu, it turns its energy towards new potential members, sometimes at the expense of neglecting older members like Dipu. In this discussion, Dipu and Rinky feel Jibon is not committed to sustained development for each of its “children.” Instead, they feel Jibon’s primary objective is to increase the number of children attending Jibon, so there are more youth singing praises of the organisation and more numbers to show to funders. Yet through organisational expansion, some young people fall through the cracks, like Dipu.

Young people’s tendency to detect politics emerges from a necessity to be discerning individuals in an environment with unequal and uneven opportunity, where conventional advocates for social change, such as politicians, are deemed corrupt. This discernment however can easily evolve into suspicion, making everything a matter of “politics.” The apparent pervasiveness of politics – the belief that “everyone does politics,” from NGOs to political parties – suggests a complicated if not troubling worldview towards social change through NGOs. Further the pervasiveness of “politics” in young people’s lives also led them to embrace politics as a personal practice.

“Politics” in Young People’s Lives

Despite the corrupt reputation of “politics”, young people practice politics as well. They grease, manipulate, and use people and institutions to improve their everyday life. Interestingly, due to the negative associations of “politics,” not everyone will admit that they “do politics.” As an ethnographer, I struggled to detect “politics” among young people in my research community, not because it did not exist, but because I did not interpret actions as politics. However, over several interviews, conversations, and hangouts, I began to see the “politics” in several young people’s actions.

Deb admitted to “doing politics” with Jibon. Deb grew up attending Jibon’s drop-in-centre in Bow Bazaar emerging as a dynamic youth leader. Deb actively contributed to Jibon as

an active leader in his community, reporting incidents of child prostitution, mentoring younger children, and organising rallies. From a young age, Deb dreamed of being a graphic designer. At Jibon, he served as the design editor for Jibon's community newsletter and worked on short-term participatory media projects for the organisation in exchange for a stipend. In November 2011, when I met Deb for an interview, he told me he was no longer a part of Jibon. It had been nearly nine months since he left the organisation. Apparently, he resigned from his stipend-based job because of a conflict with his supervisor. Deb did not want to elaborate on the specifics of their conflict during our interview. During his time away from Jibon, Deb pursued paid work in other sectors, including the call centre.

A week after my interview with Deb, I went to the drop-in-centre in Bow Bazaar one afternoon to meet with a few staff members. To my surprise, I ran into Deb. He was painting a large banner for the upcoming AIDS Day Rally. I was puzzled by Deb's presence, especially after he told me he no longer was involved with Jibon. A few weeks later, when I called Deb to meet up again, he told me he was on his way to Jibon to serve on a repatriation trip of a trafficked girl back to her village near the border of Bangladesh. Again, I was surprised. In his interview, Deb had explained how he was no longer involved with Jibon, but here in front of my eyes, he continued to engage with Jibon. In January, Deb informed me that he was returning to Jibon for paid work. He was offered a position for a media project at Jibon supported by UNICEF. Nearly six months later, in a focus group discussion, Deb's behaviour suddenly made sense to me. I suspected he was doing "politics" with Jibon.

Sahar di, I still believe that Jibon is my platform – only it can make me into a graphic designer....only it can. I want to be a graphic designer. Who can make that happen? Jibon. As long as I stay with Jibon, I can easily get connected to design industries. Only Jibon can make me rise. So do I leave? No, I don't leave. I have to speak highly of Jibon. I have to thank it immensely... I have to use this platform to establish myself.

Deb recognises Jibon as a "platform" or resource in his life he must mobilise, instrumentalise, and manipulate to increase his chances at achieving his aspiration to practice

graphic design. To achieve his end goal, Deb forgoes former conflicts with the NGO and continues to access the resources Jibon can offer for his future. In turn, Deb resorts to flattery – “I have to speak highly of Jibon...thank it immensely” – as he described – in order to reap any opportunities that come through Jibon. For Deb, this methodology of politics is the best strategy to navigate inequalities and gain social mobility.

As Deb’s engagement with politics suggests – the practice of politics is hard to read precisely as “politics.” It is always a concealed activity, where manipulation is never explicit but is concealed in one’s intention. Similar to James Scott’s (1985) formulation of political ‘weapons of the weak’, politics is composed of ‘hidden transcripts’ – concealed intentions that occur ‘off stage, beyond the observation of power holders’ often times within oneself (4:1991). The hidden nature of politics makes it all the more difficult to detect. As Neela explained while discussing politics, “Everything isn’t always visible, some things are invisible.”

Further, the hidden transcript of politics allows for ambiguity in intentions. In one movement, Deb can “use” Jibon, but perhaps in another, he is also genuinely supporting Jibon. Most likely, both possibilities can be true for him within the same moment. The hidden transcript is elusive, ambiguous, and dynamic, and in some sense, is determined by the eyes of the beholder, who can (mis)judge the intentionality of action as politics or as something else.

7.5 Conclusion

Journalistic and scholarly discussions on youth activism point to a new wave of politics spreading across the world – the activism of large-scale public defiance. The culture and tenor of this activism is optimistic. In several cases it is considered democratic, people-centred, youthful, participatory and most importantly contagious, spreading across cities and continents. Recent work on youth politics focuses on this arguably ‘new’ activism examining the convergences of uprisings across geographically public squares and virtual spaces.

Like other marginalised youth across the world, post-NGO youth are also subjects and actors experiencing the globalisation of disaffection and negotiating various forms of heightened social and economic injustice. Post-NGO youth from Kolkata's red-light areas however seem to be far removed from the signs, affect, and language of "Activism 2010+." They are also disenchanted with the region's historically vibrant political traditions of "party politics." Furthermore, social movements, in spite of the deeply relevant and proximate sex worker's movement, fail to inspire a new generation of youth to clamour for structural and collectivised change. Young people post-NGO shy away from formal politics as well as large-scale social movements as the way forward in confronting injustice and improving their surrounding social conditions. Similar to Nandini Gooptu's (2009) findings of young people in Kolkata's new work economies who disavow collectivised political activism and distrust political parties, youth in my research similarly express new political subjectivities and practices that prioritise the 'responsibility, autonomy, and agency of the self-driven, enterprising individual' (54). They do not respond to their immobility by occupying streets or workplaces; nor do they mobilise non-dominant power in the face of injustice

On some occasions young people engage in an oppositional politics of *protibad*, but only at a smaller scale of individualised change. They take stands and protest against injustice in everyday spaces and in interpersonal moments and encounters. Furthermore, young people's practice of *protibad* is generally restricted to injustices that are NGOised into "issues" such as gender-based violence and child exploitation. However, even amidst NGO-recognised violation against women and children, *protibad* is useful and effective only in particular configurations of power and injustice, accessible to young people who can access "back ups." When *protibad* fails, young people practice individualised, informal politics of personal resourcefulness with the aim to improve their everyday, individual lives. This politics is far from social change in a collective sense, for "politics" as defined and practiced by youth seems contrary to any notion of structural, let alone progressive social change. As a matter of fact, this individualised approach to

improving life affirms what scholars describe as the NGOisation of activism and social change (Kamat 2004, Kapoor 2005, Sharma 2008, Roy 2011) in India and in other parts of the world (Alvarez 1997, Miraftab 2004), a process that prioritises technical solutions and individualised change, threatening radical political possibilities of social change that privilege solidarity, community, and sustainability.

Young people's everyday agential acts of resourcefulness and personal solutions to improve their daily lives may confirm scholarly critiques of NGOisation's depoliticising effects, but in another sense, it highlights young people's resilience and creative ability to manoeuvre through hardship in everyday life and find ways, in spite of NGOs, to make the everyday a little better. Both of these interpretative possibilities on young people's political practices raise important questions for the implications of theorising non-oppositional agency in light of neoliberalising trends, such as NGOisation, that foster dispositions, values, and practices centred on personal responsibility and personalised change. It is tempting to read young people's political practices of agency as a 'depoliticising' effect of NGOisation. This chapter, on the contrary, invites an alternative consideration. It holds young people's resourceful agency in creative tension *with* NGOisation. It recognises the politics of resourcefulness to some degree as an effect of NGOisation and wider political economic trends of liberalisation. At the same time though, it does not render a politics of resourcefulness as merely apolitical, but rather, as an alternative political expression and practice. This reading in turn troubles dominant interpretations of NGOisation as depoliticising forces and invites alternative fine-grained analyses to better unpack, sift, elucidate the politics NGOs engender.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

The chapters of this dissertation have explored NGOs, youth, and world-class city urbanisation in India. The ethnography that I conducted tells the stories of subaltern young people from Kolkata's red-light areas who grew up participating in NGOs that offer 'development' through shelter home care, drop-in-centre services, informal education, scholarships, human rights education, and employment training. The promise of these NGOs was to develop and empower subaltern young people so that they might lead a better life. During my field work, I followed subaltern young people's lives after their participation in NGO programmes as they made a living and tried to "stand up on their own feet" in a rapidly changing world-class aspiring city. I studied youth narratives and practices in three key spheres of public life – work, leisure and fashion, and politics – to examine the role and effects of NGOs in subaltern young people's lives as they interacted with the city. In this final chapter, I reflect on the central ethnographic conclusions of my research and the contribution of my work to theoretical and scholarly debates of NGOisation, global urbanisms and subalternity, and youth studies. In this concluding discussion, I demonstrate how a localised story of young people post-NGO from Kolkata's red-light areas serves as a useful lens to critically reflect on debates and theoretical understandings of NGOisation and urbanisms in the global South. I speak from a youth studies vantage point to emphasise the rich analytic 'youth' provides to understanding wider social and political processes such as NGO development and urban change. At the same time, I also consider how an analysis of NGOs and world-class city making enriches conceptualisations of 'youth' in youth studies. I conclude by outlining some future areas of research this ethnography inspires.

The next section is divided into two parts. In the first portion, I outline this study's contributions to debates on NGOisation. In the second portion, I demonstrate how debates on NGOisation can generate critical reflection on theories of agency within youth geographies.

8.2 NGOs and NGOisation

One of the benefits of adopting an ethnographic lens on young people's post-NGO lives is that it engenders valuable insights into the multi-faceted and variant effects of NGO(isation) on subjectivities, desires, and lived experience. In this way, current NGO debates may be 'enculturated' with a youth based analysis (Sharma 2008). Over the last decade, several scholars (Nagar 2006, Sharma 2008, Alvarez 2009) have described the NGOisation of social movements, grassroots politics, and feminist agendas but broadly through an analysis of institutions, collectives, and feminist discourse rather than the lived experiences of young people. Critically, some of these studies have revealed how NGOisation consumes and threatens the possibilities of radical social change, even among activists and collectives who resist NGOisation (Kamat 2004, Nagar 2006). Other scholars (Townsend et al 2004, Sharma 2008, Grewal and Kaplan 2014) emphasise the heterogeneous and multifaceted forms of NGOisation and its incongruous effects on processes of social change. My empirical research joins the latter vein of scholarship as it examined the incongruous effects of NGOs but through the everyday life for subaltern 'subjects' of development. In this way, my research unpacks the process of NGOisation 'from below.'

Drawing on young people's everyday experiences and interactions with NGOs in the city, I have shown that NGOisation is a flexible 'social drama' in the lives of young people (Sharma 2008). Growing up in red-light areas of Kolkata, young people experience the drama of NGOisation through an assemblage of vocational training classes, gender empowerment workshops, interactions with middle-class, mostly upper caste activists, foreign volunteers, and other encounters in drop-in-centres and shelter homes. Analysis of this drama reveals three keys

insights into the operation and effects of NGOisation. First, it demonstrates the ways in which NGOisation is a subject-making force, among several other competing social forces, for youth that attempts to produce and regulate their youth practices, values, and aesthetics. Throughout the empirical chapters, I have documented the ways in which young people's desires for respectable work, middle class and activist aesthetics, or what Rinky and Uma called 'matte' aesthetics, and commitments against gender-based and age-based violence point to young people's investments in NGO-based cultural and political visions for citizenship. I have outlined the significant role NGOs play in cultivating subaltern young people's habitus, altering and extending their tastes, dispositions, desires, and their aspirations for social mobility. NGOisation, therefore, is a process not only affecting movements, politics, and activism: it is also an intimate social process unevenly influencing young people's subjectivities and process of self-making.

To analyse NGO subject making and youth self-making, I have built on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concept of habitus. The concept of habitus invites temporally sensitive understanding to ever-changing subject-formation. Habitus is not static, but changes over time and can be constantly re-formed through every new experience. At the same time, the theory of habitus privileges one's earliest experiences as formative. These initial influences on people's lives never completely disappear. They are foundational and sediment into one's consciousness with possibilities of being recalled or triggered, even reconfigured, at given points in unknown futures. Furthermore, as young people move on in life, their formative experiences with NGOs and the red-light areas inflect their futures. The concept is also beneficial to this study because it offers a frame of subject formation that is sensitive to multiple competing social forces in young people's lives. It is clear that NGOs are not the only force of subjectification in young people's lives, but rather one of many forces that include families, slums, schools, and the city. Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, NGOs play a critical role in producing youth social and political subjectivities as well as economic aspirations and opportunities.

Secondly, my study's focus on subjectivities, as well as the everyday experiences of post-NGO youth, reveals NGOisation as a 'contradictory resource' (Jeffrey et al 2008). NGOisation offers young people cultural resources for social mobility in the form of novel travel opportunities, cosmopolitan exchanges, and, sometimes scholarships and 'respectable' employment. It also cultivates cultural proficiency among subjects in embodying and performing the tastes and practices of the new middle classes, which have been rendered more visible and attractive especially since the ascent of world-class city making policies. Furthermore, NGOisation politicises young people and communities, providing information about select social and political issues such as HIV/AIDS, violence against women, child exploitation, and human rights. Such "awareness-generation" programmes cultivate young people's skills and the ability to participate in public political debate, thus, politically and culturally empowering youth communities. At the same time, however, NGOisation also reproduces inequalities in young people's lives, a process often camouflaged by the more evident benefits of development. In spite of the cultural distinction and access to cosmopolitan opportunities NGOs offer to young people, they also reinscribe class differences between the targets of development and the facilitators of development, mirroring the gap between the poor and the middle class. This is especially evident through NGO vocational training programmes, all of which are located in lower-class economies, such as manual and craft-based labour, retail, and hospitality. Even when NGOs offer young people employment within the NGO sector, class discrimination appears to underlie the positions and pay scales young people are offered, which are most often at the bottom of NGO employment hierarchies. As I illustrated in Chapter Five, several young people who became "NGO workers" were fieldworkers. While these jobs provided a degree of respect and respectability, they were typically the lowest paid positions in the NGO structure. Furthermore, from field-level positions, young people rarely encountered pathways for organisational mobility. Fieldworkers were perceived to lack either foundational skills, such as English fluency, or the education credentials deemed necessary to move into higher paid and

more prestigious positions. Even though NGOs offer access and resources to develop youth beyond their cultural subalternity, the same NGOs also reproduce and maintain young people's lower class positionality by offering morally acceptable (that is, beyond the sex work economy), but economically bleak employment pathways.

The contradictory nature of NGOs is not exceptional. Recent scholarship points to the contradictions in a variety of modern social institutions, from educational establishments (Jeffrey et al 2008) and special economic zones (Cross 2009) to community based empowerment schemes (Miraftab 2004, Young 2010). In my dissertation, I emphasise young people's acute awareness of NGOisation's contradictory nature. My ethnography makes evident how young people, over time, became aware of the partial and incongruent benefits of growing up with NGOs, acknowledging its rewards, limits, and risks. One way I made this apparent is through highlighting young people's paradoxical feelings towards NGOs. Over the course of the previous pages, young people conveyed a range of emotions towards NGOs, including affection and gratitude as well as suspicion and anger. Youth praised the NGOs they grew up with for the "platform" they offered in their lives, for the way they were "raised" (*manush koreche*) and "prepared" (*toire koreche*) to stand up in the world. Young people regularly acknowledged NGOs as a resource in their lives particularly in ways that NGOs seek to be resources. Yet, young people also expressed frustration, distrust, and anger towards NGOs for their inadequate partially fulfilled promises, reproduction of (class) hierarchies, and instrumentalisation. Young people's ability to encompass anger and gratitude demonstrates a complicated relationship with NGOs. Laughing, Tara described NGOs at the end of her interview: "They love us and they kick us." Rinky, in her interview, similarly stated: "They give a lot and take a lot." NGOs offer a great deal of cultural and social benefit to young people, but as young people perceive it, they serve communities in order to serve their own institutional power. Young people's critical awareness of NGOs as a 'contradictory resource' shaped their investment and participation in, as well as transgression of, NGOisation.

Thirdly, I have shown that that young people are not merely submissive receptors to NGO development, but active negotiators in the face of NGOisation. Unlike policy and planning discourses that render youth ‘targets’ as passive, at-risk, and vulnerable recipients of potential development, my ethnography revealed how young people actively and selectively mobilise, reject, appropriate, and even transgress NGOisation to better their own everyday life. Young people do not solely submit to or resist NGOisation, but they mobilise NGOisation in light of structural inequalities to improve their everyday lives. Young people were vigilant as they participated in “NGO life” making sure that they were not getting too “deep” and entrenched in NGO culture. For some, this navigational ability came swiftly; for others, it came after experiences of disappointment and unmet expectations. In different ways, young people were deft at selectively mobilising their identities as NGO participants and appeasing NGO administrators, while knowing how to remove and even disinvest themselves from the political and social cultures of NGOs. Youth demonstrated acute awareness of the structural barriers that constrained their social mobility despite NGO visions for their futures. Young people’s active negotiation with NGOs demonstrates that NGOisation is not an all-encompassing phenomenon, but rather a limited and uneven process that can be unsettled by the very subjects of development. Young people are not caught in NGOisation ‘nets of discipline’ but manoeuvre and leverage from NGOs through ‘dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity’ of ‘anti-discipline’ (De Certeau 1998: xiv).

One way young people manoeuvre within NGOisation is through their selective participation in NGO values, embodiment, and participation. Several young people growing up with Jibon, for instance, developed a moral and cultural compass shaped by the organisation’s abolitionist approach to sex work. These values influenced young people’s aspirations for careers beyond sex work, careers they deemed respectable. However, in light of their economic and social obstacles to attaining respectable livelihoods, young people appropriated NGO-promoted notions of respectability to align with more achievable livelihoods given young people’s social

and economic conditions. Amrita's participation in the sex economy, for example, attests to the young people's improvisation of NGO values around sex work and sex economies. Amrita appears to recalibrate her moral compass by participating in the sex economy in a 'respectable' way as a business owner rather than as a sex worker herself.

A second way post-NGO youth manoeuvre through NGOisation is through their recognition, and in some cases criticism, of class discrimination and class regulation within NGOs. Young people felt NGOs prioritised their cultural transformation over their need to have well-paying jobs that promise social mobility. Furthermore, according to some youth, while NGOs cultivated particular middle-class tastes and embodiment among youth, they also reiterated to youth their inability to belong to middle class lifestyles. In Chapter Six, for instance, Rinky recounted her frustration with Adhikar's director for encouraging NGO youth members to be taken to a single screen cinema hall instead of a multiplex for a fieldtrip. Rinky found the director's recommendations to be underwritten by class-based assumptions that Rinky and her peers were not civilised ("*bhadro*") enough to be movie goers at the multiplexes of the world-class city. Rinky's interpretation or analysis is not isolated. Several young people expressed experiences with class discrimination as well as class regulation within NGOs. They felt that NGOs promoted select aesthetics, such as clothing or film tastes, while at the same time ensuring that young people did not develop middle-class habits, since they remained lower class, or *basti bari log*: slum tenement communities. In the face of NGO attempts to cultivate, but also regulate, young people's cross cultural practices, youth do not remain docile. They actively integrate the new amenities of the world-class city into their everyday lives in spite of NGO caution, participating in consumption cultures of the middle class even as it is deemed out of their league or status (*aukaad*).

Finally, a third way youth navigate NGOisation is by subversively using NGOs as "back ups:" a source, a job recommendation, a course, a training, without politically and ideologically investing in NGOs. Throughout the chapters, but especially in the final empirical chapter,

Chapter Seven, I described the way young people both feel used by NGOs and in turn how they subversively use NGOs. Young people explain this relationship as a practice of “politics” – a practice of achieving personal gain often times through the manipulations or expense of others. As some activists and scholars (Roy 2004, Nagar 2006) have argued, NGOisation may depoliticise communities from engaging in large-scale structural change, but as I have demonstrated, young people in turn mobilise NGOs and NGOisation to improve their everyday lives in the world where transformative and structural change appears a distant possibility.

Implications for Youth Geographies and Youth Studies

Young people’s improvisation and appropriation of NGOisation has implications for scholarly understandings of agency in youth studies. Agency has been a central concern of contemporary scholarship on young people. ‘Agency’ is a key theme running through my research and draws from and contributes to debates in youth studies. Through each chapter of this dissertation, young people demonstrated different forms of agency, from resistance to more subtle forms of agency such as resourcefulness. Resourcefulness is a key practice highlighted in my research. Several scholars have pointed out various practices of resourcefulness across contexts and communities including active quiescence (Dyson 2014), a politics of personal solutions (Gooptu 2009), and social non-movements (Bayat 2011). My ethnography has also foregrounded young people’s navigation of social inequalities and structural barriers through the creative manipulation of the resources available. This resourcefulness reminds readers that young people amidst developmentalism and NGOisation are not passive receptors, but strategic negotiators (Klenk 2010). They are not always only ‘at-risk’, but also take risks.

It is important to consider how this study’s argument for reading youthful agency beyond acts of resistance can also be dangerously deployed to support neoliberal strands of global youth development that prize ‘personal responsibility over public provision’ (Kamat 2007:1217) as the optimal path to social change. Increasingly, youth resilience and enterprise are

being refashioned as tools to confront underdevelopment, mirroring policy prescriptions on women's development. As Sangeeta Kamat (2007) in her review of the 2007 World Bank Development Report on youth points out, youth enterprise is promoted as a solution to confronting poverty reduction. Youth resilience, resourcefulness, and enterprise therefore are increasingly valorised as tools for development. Studies on youth agency, such as this one, therefore need to further contextualise the implications of resourceful forms of youth agency within wider debates on contemporary neoliberal forms of development and governance.

New governance regimes, as highlighted in a rich body of Foucauldian governmentality studies (Foucault 1991, Gordon 1991), are characterised by enterprise and self-regulation. In India, as Nandini Gooptu (2013) has observed, new narratives of enterprise are gaining prominence since market reforms in the early 1990s, celebrating the construction of the 'new Indian' - 'active subject agents,' 'do-ers who have the capacity to aspire in spite of whatever barriers may lie' (3). As Gooptu states, 'These doers are no longer held back by scepticism, they do not place blame on political systems or infrastructure; instead they take the responsibility themselves, roll up their sleeves, and plunge into action' (3). Many of the young people featuring in this ethnography resemble the 'new Indians' and 'doers' who do not resist unequal systems and structural barriers, but find enterprising ways to manoeuvre around and through them to improve their everyday surroundings and life conditions. Such youth resourcefulness is described in several other ethnographies on young people's lives (Katz 2004, Durham 2008).

While scholarship in youth studies has importantly illuminated paradigms of agency beyond resistance, especially agency as resourcefulness (Jeffrey 2012), it must also begin to critically contextualise and interrogate young people's practices within wider political economic processes and cultures of enterprise. Such a task entails the delineation *between* agency and enterprise cultures, or the critical theorisation of agency *within* enterprise culture. This study took one first step and emphasised the tension between recognising multifarious forms of non-oppositional agency and the proliferation of enterprising subjectivities promoted through

NGOisation. It invites scholars to consider the political stakes of resourceful forms of agency in light of wider cultures of neoliberalisation. It also raises important questions about the efficacy of available theoretical tools and frameworks to theorise youth agency in light of larger neoliberal social and spatial processes like NGOisation in Kolkata.

To summarise: first, NGOisation does not only affect large-scale processes, but is also embroiled in intimate subject-making. Secondly, NGOisation is a contradictory resource. Indeed, while it threatens radical possibilities of social change, it also provides novel opportunities and resources in the lives of subaltern community. These opportunities do not erase the inequalities but perpetuate them in new sites, configurations, and forms. This incongruent effect of NGOisation on the everyday lives of youth reveals its contradictory nature. Lastly, ethnographic consideration of young people's experiences with NGOisation stresses the importance of examining NGOisation not just as a top-down global process, but also as a horizontal social drama that young people and other communities of development destabilise, mobilise through improvisation, and in some cases, even transgress.

In the next section, I outline how my study provides grounds to reflect on debates on world-class city making through ethnographic analyses of subaltern young people's lives post-NGO. I also discuss how the ethnographic stories of post-NGO young lives offer an account of what Spivak calls 'new subalternity' (1999). I conclude the next section by the discussing the contributions these debates make to youth studies.

8.3 World Class City Making and New Subalternity

This study offers important insights into scholarship on world-class city making in the global South, through the lens of subjects who rarely appear at the centre of global urbanisms literature: that is, subaltern youth entangled with NGOisation. In the current 'century of the city' (Peake and Rieker 2013: 10) where the experience of childhood and youth are increasingly urban, youth experience is analytically informative in understanding urban experiences, especially new urban

experiences of world-class city making. My findings about young people's changing habitus post-NGO sheds light on newly emerging configurations of subalternity and class (im)mobility in a world-class city such as Kolkata.

Across the world, and most notably in the global South, there is scholarly consensus that the project of the world-class city involves spatial reordering, class violence and segregation, as well as mounting middle class hegemony (Ong and Roy 2011). As I noted in Chapter Two, world-class city making is not a uniform and monolithic process; rather it is a fragmented ensemble of policies and practices, including beautification drives, a new surge of often gated urban enclaves, slum evictions, and the proliferation of new middle-class spaces of consumption, as well as new forms of employment in multi-national organisations. One strand of scholarship on world-class city making in the global South emphasises the influence of rising middle-class leisure and consumption on spatial organisation (Fernandes 2006, Ray and Baviskar 2012), state-sponsored accumulation by dispossession (Bhan 2007, Ghertner 2011), and anti-poor urban renewal campaigns (Baviskar 2004). Another vein of urban renewal scholarship focuses on the urban poor's resistance and resourcefulness in the face of the social and spatial violence of slum evictions, anti-hawking laws, and resettlement colonies (Appadurai 2002, Anjaria 2006). A third emerging strand of literature contests presumed antagonism and segregation between middle-class inspired and state-sponsored urban renewal and the urban poor (Ghertner 2011, Schindler 2013). Seth Schindler (2013), for example, asserts that the middle class and the urban poor often work with each other, as the lifestyles and habits of both groups are interdependent. The poor, for example, often provides essential services for the middle classes to uphold their class distinctions. Drawing from research in New Delhi, Schindler found that the middle class do not spatially shun the poor but regulate the poor, and the poor accommodate to middle class regulation for their daily survival. Asher Ghertner (2011) also examines both the bifurcation and enmeshment of class in world-class city making through the focus on the poor's participation in world-class city making. In his study of a slum in New Delhi, Ghertner found that poor residents

opposed evictions but at the same time partook in aesthetic aspirations of a world-class city as they imagined better futures for themselves. My research supports the perspectives on world-class city making and class politics not as bifurcation, nor as hegemony, but as class entanglement.

My findings demonstrate how young people's changing habitus post-NGO serves to both deepen and trouble class segregation in the world-class city. Young people growing up with NGOs straddle subaltern practices associated with the urban poor and the cultural practices associated with the urban middle-classes (Jeffrey 2010). The young participants' NGOised aesthetic, comportment, and disposition allow them access to middle class spaces and cultures for suspended moments and in contained spaces, from shopping malls to *addas* on Bengali art house cinema. At the same time, this thesis makes apparent that post-NGO youth are also loyal and proud of their "*kajira*" (trashy/mischievous) aesthetics, cultures, practices associated with the urban poor. Aware of the contours between classes, in some instances young people challenge middle class propriety and respectability by chewing tobacco, dancing in the streets at Kali Puja, whistling in the halls of cinemas, and laughing at Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for wanting to make Kolkata into London. In other instances, they participate in the project of the middle class aspirations and world-class cities by smoothly riding up escalators in shopping malls, rehearsing their knowledge of the variety of cuisines available at South City Mall food court, and drinking cold coffee at swank bookshops.

I have conceptualised young people's gendered cultural practices across a class cultural spectrum through theories of performativity. Performativity, as I explained in Chapter Two, concerns the dynamic process of subject formation. Drawing on Butler (1990, 1993), I understand performativity as the repetition of involuntary bodily and speech acts through which a subject takes form. The iterations of the speech and body are shaped by the sedimentation of norms, what Butler calls a 'citational chain' (1997). This citational chain, I demonstrated, emerges from the ways in which a historical habitus affects the trajectory of a future habitus. For Butler,

the theory of performativity is deeply linked to possibilities of agency. With every citation of a norm, Butler contends, the structure of the norm weakens, as it becomes vulnerable to possibilities of resignification. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler draws on the example of drag queens to demonstrate the precarity of heterosexual norms. The proficiency and mastery of a drag queen in imitating heterosexual norms reveals the instability of heterosexuality and ‘puts their naturalized stability at risk’ (Mahmood 2005: 164). Mahmood (2005), studying the bodily acts of women in the mosque movement in Egypt, draws on Butler to examine young women’s acts of idealised piety. In contrast to Butler though, Mahmood’s research suggests that the mosque participants’ citational practice of piety does not threaten Islamic norms of piety but rather consolidates them as the aspirational ideal. My analysis of young people’s gendered performativity of cross-cultural practices across the city aligns with Mahmood’s findings. Young people’s, especially young women’s practices of participating in world-class city cultures across malls, multiplexes, and privatised parks as well as their embodiment of NGO femininities does not reveal the precarity of middle-class practices, at least not for youth post-NGO. On the contrary, it only strengthens middle-class cultures and practices as aspirational norms. When young women fashion themselves with inexpensive *kurtis* from open-air markets to embody a “matte finish” or when they purchase early-bird discount tickets to INOX cinema halls, they do not destabilise or weaken the value of middle-class aesthetic and world-class leisure. Their citational practice, their mimicry, even if it falls short of the norm, serves to bolster world-class city making as the desirable path for metropolitan India.

At the same time, young people’s complex habitus that is structured by a variety of historical and contemporary social forces, including NGOs, red-light areas, and slum communities, also allows space for cultural dispositions, desires, and practices that oppose the world-class aesthetics. As I mentioned earlier, young people’s selective embrace of “*basti bari*” (slum tenement) practices, such as “gorgeous” fashion, threaten the notions of a hegemonic new Indian middle class. It is in this sense that young people both oppose and take up the world-class

city making by consolidating aspirations of select practices through creative manoeuvring, but also by embracing their *kajira* selves. This dual practice of opposition and participation in world-class cultures points to new ways of being subaltern in metropolitan India.

Gayatri Spivak (1999, 2000) has called attention to new locations of subalternity. In light of the changing global regimes marked by rapid connectivity, diffused governance structures, and internationalisation of civil society, Spivak asserts that the contemporary subaltern is no longer excluded from lines of social mobility, but connected to global flows of culture, governance, and development. The new subaltern, in Spivak's works, is permeable. However, this permeability is only unidirectional. The new subaltern can be recruited into and by larger social forces; but the subaltern cannot meaningfully alter, let alone permeate, larger forces. The new subaltern can cross borders of class, but this movement remains regulated by the rules of the upper class and upper caste. The relations of power therefore remain relatively unchanged.

Since Spivak's call to be attentive to new forms of subalternity, there has little been ethnographic attention to the various locations of new subalternity. To partly counter this absence, I have examined one site of new subalternity: marginalised youth in red-light areas who are at the very heart of global flows of HIV/AIDS, child rights, and anti-trafficking resources and ideas, as well as entangled in urban life amidst world-class city making. An ethnographic lens on young people's lives amidst international and local development assemblages as well as urban renewal draws attention to how heterogeneous subaltern practices creolise new middle class and NGO practices. In spite of young people's participation in and creolisation of dominant cultures, young people as new subalterns seldom affectively alter class inequalities to produce a more sustainable class mobility.

Implications for Youth Geographies and Youth Studies

There is an abundance of ethnographic studies on youth situated in urban contexts (Maira 2002, Newell 2012). These studies theorise youth experiences through frames of education (Jeffrey et

al 2008, Lukose 2009), labour economies (Mains 2007, McDowell 2011 [2003]), development, and urban politics, but rarely in the frame of global urbanisms and world-class aspiring cities. Further, studies concerning youth in the city generally remain concerned with particular urban peripheries, such as the ‘inner city,’ the ‘streets,’ or ‘slums’ (Bourgois 1996, Gough and Franch, 2005). This study is certainly anchored in the peripheries of the red-light area. However, it examines young people’s material and symbolic movement, interactions, and entanglements beyond those peripheries into an urban life that is symbolic of the world-class city. It also foregrounds how the location of the red-light area inflects youth engagement with the world-class city.

As I have illustrated in the chapters of this dissertation, red-light areas are central to youth formation, experience, and performativity. In some cases, the spatial marking of the red-light area invites stigma into young people’s lives and futures, especially as they navigate jobs, friendships, romance, and marriages as they traverse across other spaces of the city. The red-light area thus emerges as a ‘burden of locality’ (Lukose 2009). At the same time though, young people continue to claim a sense of belonging to red-light areas. Rinky recalled how as a child, she would avoid walking back home with her school friends, afraid they would realise she lived in the red-light area. As an adult, as Rinky explained to me, she did not feel the shame she once felt. On the contrary, she feels pride at her origins in the red-light area, but also at her mobility in spaces beyond. The same is true for Amrita. As a business owner in the sex work economy in Kalighat red-light area, Amrita believes that she has achieved respectability through building a life and household far from the red-light area. Her flat in the far peripheries of city serves as her evidence that she has made it in life. This however does not mean Amrita scorns the red-light area. For her this “dirty place” (*nungra jaiga*) is the very site of her livelihood. It is also a space of friendship, community, and history. Similarly, Sunita also now lives far from the red-light area in a low-income neighbourhood on city periphery. She regularly visits the red-light area not just to

see her mother, but also to spend time with friends and attend *para* (neighbourhood) functions, neighbourhood relations and events she continues to value in her life.

Like class and gender, locality deeply influences young people's habitus and their performances beyond their neighbourhood into the wider world-class city. Analyses of the creative tension between peripheral neighbourhoods (favelas, ghettos, streets, and red-light areas) and the global city can enrich understandings of urban youth identity and aspirations amidst contested process of contemporary urban change from gentrification to world-class city making. It can shed light on young people's dynamic and bounded performances, performativity, and habitus across the city.

8.4 Future Directions of Research

This dissertation focuses on how NGOisation, as well as world-class city making, generates and regulates young people's desires, aspirations, and trajectories through young people's experience of work, consumption and leisure, as well as the politics of making change. This project may be further developed through additional research on young people's private and intimate lives, particularly their interpersonal relationships. Due to the ethical reasons that I outlined in Chapter Three, I abstained from investigating young people's romantic lives for this dissertation.

However, with consent for further research, I would like to integrate an analysis of young people's private landscapes for future research. I anticipate navigating ethical concerns by sharing my evolving research vision with youth participants and consulting with them for appropriate and comfortable ways to integrate material on young people's private lives.

Specifically, I would like to investigate: How do NGO discourses of gender equality and anti-violence, as well as broader notions of a citizenship in the world-class city, shape young people's practices and perspectives in the realm of romance and relationships? What do young people's sexual and romantic practices tell us about current processes of NGOisation? An understanding

of young people's intimate, romantic, and sexual lives would enrich analyses of NGOisation as well as urban processes in India.

A second area of additional examination that might enrich this research project concerns youth masculinities. In the present research I have focused on how young women in Kolkata negotiated class and gender norms through NGO-promoted discourses on women's rights. The focus on women's rights, however, presents an interesting puzzle to be addressed through further ethnographic research: How, for example, does the discourse of women's rights shape youth masculinities? Further research on young men's interaction with women's empowerment discourses and their effects on the embodiment of masculinity would be a critical contribution to the analysis of the intersections of NGOisation, masculinities, and cities. Questions such as the following might further enhance the study: What stance do young men take towards unequal gender relations? How does this affect their production of masculinity in everyday spaces? How do NGO inspired constructions of masculinity intersect with class, caste, and other axes of difference in India? These new questions would help scholars address the ways in which NGOisation influences both gender identities and the intimate lives and relationships of young people.

A third area of research that can augment this study is an integration of a caste and religious based analysis of young people's lives. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, religion and caste are not always straightforward identities and social relations in red-light areas. These identities can be camouflaged by culturally alternative names, appearances, and embodiment. For example, it is not uncommon for sex workers to claim and perform a religious identity other than their own in their professional life. This dynamism also extends to the lives of young people from red-light areas. During fieldwork, I came to hear of many post-NGO youth beyond my research community who were born Muslim with Muslim names, but took upon Hindu names and identity markers as adults, amidst their attempts to build lives beyond the red-light area. This common practice raises important questions about the role of caste and religion in urban red-

light areas and in young people's lives: How does caste and religion affect young people's aspirations for lives beyond the red-light areas? How do young people improvise different caste and religious identities for social mobility? How do NGOs thwart or perpetuate communal and casteist discourses? Red-light areas, NGOs, and post-NGO youth can serve as an innovative lens to understand the fluidities and fixities of caste and religion in contemporary India.

A final area of further investigation concerns the relationships between discourses of world-city making and the project of youth development. Both enterprises are invested in developing a 'better' future through re-developing cities and developing future citizens. A more rigorous analysis of both of these enterprises and their connections, similarities, and differences would provide important insights into the broader assemblage of neoliberal development affecting cities, development, and subaltern lives.

It is my hope that this thesis, as a situated account about a community of young people from Kolkata's red-light areas making their futures, is an analytically generative addition to geographic scholarship on development, cities, and youth. I hope that it illuminates new insights into scholarly, policy, and activist debates on global south urbanisms, trends of NGOisation, and understandings of youth that can inform each other and inspire future research.

APPENDIX I

Glossary

Abighata	Bangla	Personal experience
Abhadro	Bangla	Ill-mannered
Adda	Bangla	Informal Conversation/Hangout
Adhikar	Bangla/Hindi	Right
Aukaad	Hindi/Urdu	Status
Adivasi	Bangla/Hindi	Indigenous
Aurna	Bangla/Hindi	Scarf
Baba	Bangla	Father
Bastob	Bangla	Reality
Baara-Baari	Bangla	Fight
Babohaar	Bangla	To use/used
Bachcha/Bachchara	Bangla	Child/Children
Baipsha	Bangla	Business
Baire	Bangla	Outside
Bari	Bangla	Home
Bhadrolok	Bangla	Respectable Classes
Bhadramahila	Bangla	Respectable (middle class) woman
Bhadro Samaj	Bangla	Respectable (middle class) society
Bhadro	Bangla	Respectable/ Well mannered
Bhalo	Bangla	Good
Bhara	Bangla	Rent
Bhel Puri	Bangla/Hindi	Salty Street Snack
Bhobhishot	Bangla	Future
Barir Kaaj	Bangla	Domestic Work
Basti	Bangla/Hindu	Slum
Basti-Bari	Bangla	Slum Tenement
Boro	Bangla	Big
Boro Gali	Bangla	Big Lane (The name of a lane in Kalighat)
Chakla	Bangla	District or large administrative area; Enclosure
Chakor	Bangla	Servant
Chakri	Bangla	Job
Chaap Marna	Bangla	To Imprint
Chotobela	Bangla	Childhood
Churidaar	Bangla/Hindi	Traditional tunic with tightly knitted trousers
Didi	Bangla/Hindi	Elder Sister
Di	Bangla	Prefix added, to express elderly sister reverence
Dada	Bangla	Elder brother
Gaala-Gaali	Bangla	Curse words
Ghar	Bangla	Room
Gyan	Bangla	Knowledge
Gutka	Bangla	Chewing tobacco mix

Halla-Bol	Hindi	A protest slogan: Raise your voice
Haater-Kaaj	Bangla	Manually skilled work
Jalebi	Hindi	Spiral shaped sweet
Jubok	Bangla	Youth
Jawan	Hindi	Youth
Jhola	Bangla/Hindi	Traditional shoulder bag
Kaaj	Bangla	Work
Kaijra	Bangla	Trashy/Mischievous
Koshto	Bangla	Hardship
Koshto Lagche	Bangla	To feel bad
Kharaap	Bangla	Bad
Khela	Bangla	Play/Games
Kurti	Bangla	A feminine tunic; a shorter variation of a kurta (traditional north Indian tunic)
Ma	Bangla	Mother
Maha	Bangla/Hindi	Prefix: Great
Madhyamik	Bangla	Centralised exam at the end of 10 th class
Manush Hoiche	Bangla	Grew up/Came of age
Mazza	Bangla/Hindi	Fun
Memsahib	Bangla	Historical reference to colonial women
Meye	Bangla	Girl
Nari	Bangla/Hindi	Woman
Naribadi	Bangla/Hindi	Feminism
Nari Pacchar	Bangla	Women/Girl Trafficking
Nari Uttachar	Bangla/Hindi	Exploitation of women
Naukri	Hindi	Job
Nijer Biye	Bangla	A marriage of one's own
Nijer Sharto	Bangla	Self-interest
Para	Bangla	Neighbourhood
Paliye biye kora	Bangla	Elopement
Pora-shona	Bangla	Studies
Protibad	Bangla	Protest
Puja	Bangla/Hindi	Hindu religious ceremony
Rajniti	Hindi	Politics
Raasta	Bangla/Hindi	Path
Rojgaar	Bangla	Livelihood
Sadharan	Bangla/Hindi	Ordinary/Common/Simple
Samman	Bangla	Equality
Saaj	Bangla	Fashion
Seva	Bangla/Hindi	Service
Taant	Bangla	Traditional sari worn in Bengal, distinguished by A specific weave.
Tel lagana	Hindi	Idiomatic expression: To flatter, butter up, grease

Tiffin

Toiri koreche

Vah vah

Zamindar

Bangla

Bangla/Hindi

Bangla

Snack

Prepared/To make

Bravo

Aristocratic Landowners

APPENDIX II

Interview Guides

Interview Guide for Post-NGO Youth

1. General Bio

Age, full name, neighbourhood, school, NGO, siblings

2. NGO History

- What NGOs did you participate in? How did you get involved?
- What did you and/or your guardian expect from attending the NGO? Did your expectations change over time? How?
- How and why did you leave?

3. Education

- How has being in this NGO affected your experience, relationship, perspective to schooling?

4. Work

- How has being apart of [NGO NAME] impacted your work? Your dreams and desires about work? Your job experience - access, opportunity, and relationships of work?

5. Neighbourhood and Family

- How has being apart of [NGO NAME] influenced your relationship to your Neighbourhood? Do you feel differently about it? Do people look at you differently?
- How about your family?

6. Love

- How has being apart of [NGO NAME] affected your experiences of love, relationships or marriage?

7. Leisure

- How do you spend your free time? Has this changed at all after being apart of NGO? What do you do on Sundays or in the evenings?

8. Morality

Often times [NGO NAME] are committed to teaching us what is right and wrong....

- Do you think being in [NGO NAME] has impacted your ideas of right and wrong? Were there times that you questioned the messages? Can you give an example? How do these messages affect you today?

9. Desires for Self

- What do you want for your self? What feels possible for you? What feels impossible for you?

10. NGO

- What does “NGO” mean to you?
- What does “mainstream” mean to you?
- If you were the leader of {NGO NAME}, what would you do for youth?

11. Other

- If there is a song that best captures or represents your life, what is it?
- What do you think youth in this country need today? Do you think you've had access to that? Do you think [NGO NAME] is offering those opportunities?

Interview Guide for NGO Staff Members

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your organization with special attention to your children and youth related programs?
2. What are key words your organization uses to explain or describe its child and youth related work? Can you tell me what those words mean?
3. What kind of intervention/change/or difference does your organization seek to make in young people's lives in India? How does it do that? What is its process?
4. What are the short-term and long term desired impacts of your supported programs?
5. How do you assess those impacts? Are you witnessing impacts you didn't expect? Can you explain?
6. How does your programming seek to affect young people's relationship with education? With future work? With their family and their neighbourhood? Their sense of self? To their role in civil society?
7. Do you think your NGO supported programs have led to unintended consequences on young people's lives? Can you explain how?
8. From your organization's perspective and from your perspective, how and why is youth development an important process of social change?
9. Can you describe the evolution in youth development practices in your NGO? What do you think is the trend of youth development practices in your NGO today? What do you think is the current trend in youth development throughout in Calcutta? In India? In the global South?
10. As someone working in the field of youth development for so many years, how do you think you have changed through this work? How do think your life has changed from NGOs?

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