

Migrant Workers and Informality in Contemporary Kolkata

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This abstract seeks to understand the centrality of the question of labour in the conjoined discourses of migration and urban space. It is commonly assumed that a large amount of rural-to-urban migration takes place due to the shortage of employment opportunities in the rural areas. The flip side of this assumption tells us that a decline in the rate of migration indicates increase in such opportunities in the rural areas or its absence in the cities. All in all, the question of labour – the potential of its absorption in the city space or the challenges that it may face due to the changing nature of the cities – occupies a central position in the associated discourses. Although the primary concern of this paper is not to contradict this centrality, I am curious as to how this centrality is constituted and sustained in these discourses, especially in a time when the cities are becoming less a space of production and more a space of circulation and restrictive elitism. The aspect of ‘restriction’ is particularly important as ‘migration’ has always been considered by the ‘original’ residents as a sort of infringement in the socio-economic sovereignty of the city space. At one level, the migrants seem to ‘take away’ means of economic sustenance from the locals and, on the other, they are prone to ‘violate’ the established social and cultural norms of urbanity. The current conceptualization of the city space as a ‘gated community’ manifested in various strategies of ‘gentrification’ makes good use of these axes of fear, discomfort, and embarrassment. However, migration to the cities induced by the hope of finding jobs has not stopped, if not increased; even though some cities like Mumbai or Delhi tend to attract more people than others like Kolkata.

It is useful to study the reasons of this discrepancy. There is a steady decline in the rate of migration in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) over the last few decades. In 1971, the rate was an exorbitant 33.35% which came down to 27.84% in 1981. The 1991 census registered the rate at 16.2%, and ten years later, in 2001, the rate diminished to an all-time low of 6.2%. Compared to the national average of 12.7%, or the other metropolises like Mumbai (15.1%) or Delhi (16.4%), one cannot help but notice that Kolkata is quite unpopular among the prospective migrants. Among those who ultimately chose this city as their destination, 57.22% came from the other districts in West Bengal, whereas only 36.15% came from the other states in the country. This situation is quite opposite in the case of Mumbai. According to the 2001 census, a huge 63.11% of the total migrant population in Mumbai came from the other Indian states and only 35.86% came from within Maharashtra. Delhi shows a similar trend where only 3.68% of the total migrant population came from within the state and a staggering 94.13% migrated from the other Indian states.¹ In the case of Kolkata, migration from the other countries (presumably from Bangladesh and Nepal) is a non-negligible fact. 6.63% of the total

¹ Here one should keep in mind the small size of Delhi as a state. But this argument cannot be applied for Maharashtra which is much bigger in size than West Bengal.

migrant population in Kolkata came from other countries. This rate is six-times less in Mumbai (1.03%).

There may be many reasons why a person chooses to move to a particular city, the foremost being the distance between the place of origin and that of migration. However, as in the case of Mumbai, this reason is often overturned by other considerations like the probability of finding a job in that city, its cosmopolitan environment, the chances of finding suitable places to settle in, etc. All these considerations add to the pull-factor of migration. The decision to migrate is also influenced by the push-factors where the poverty and other distresses (like political turmoil) in the place of origin force a person to look for relocation. The usual explanations of a declining rate of migration in Kolkata focus on both the push- and the pull-factors. The chief reasons of this decline are described as follows: (1) the reduction in employment opportunities in the city following closing down of many factories and industrial complexes; (2) the growing competitiveness of local residents against the migrant workers; (3) the 'successful' implementation of the land reform measures in the state; (4) the improvement in the networks of transport and communication resulting increase in daily commuting to the city rather than settling in it, etc. We may add two more points to this set of explanations: (5) shifts in urban policy geared to transform factory spaces into real estate properties and (6) changes in the coveted forms of labour in the city space. I believe that these two factors are crucial to understand the 'labour question' in connection with migration practices in contemporary Kolkata.

I shall begin with the last point. Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal have argued that, with the development of 'new towns' around and adjacent to the old cities as more technologized centres of capitalist accumulation, a 'bypass approach' has been introduced in the discourses of urbanization in India and, simultaneously, it has given birth to new, 'immaterial' forms of labour disconnected with the earlier regimes of urban regeneration.² Taking a clue from Hardt and Negri's definition of immaterial labour as 'labour that creates immaterial products, such as, knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response' thriving on the conditions of aestheticized urbanity, Bhattacharya and Sanyal point out that the old metropolitan centres fail to accommodate these new forms of labour as the 'presence of a large informal economy' hampers complete 'gentrification' of the city space.³ As a result, the construction and expansion of the new towns have to bypass the old cities and mark out a space of their own. They extend Sanyal's own theory of 'post-colonial capitalism'⁴ characterized by the distinction between 'need economy' and 'accumulation economy' to these new towns and show that these two apparently disjointed sectors are connected by an 'economic logic' of 'survival circuit':

² Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal, 'Bypassing the Squalor: New Town, Immaterial Labour and Exclusion in Post-colonial Urbanisation', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 31 (July 30, 2011), 41-48.

³ *Ibid*, 43, 42.

⁴ Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality, and Post-Colonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007).

If new towns are built by displacing peasants, rural and peri-urban petty producers as well as old industries whose workers lose jobs and lack the skills for immaterial production in the global circuit, the presence of a survival circuit in the new towns implies that a need economy (a production economy that supplies subsistence material goods as well as low-end services) must emerge for the social reproduction of labourers in the survival circuit.⁵

This argument is interesting for two reasons. One, Bhattacharya and Sanyal seem to forge a structural relationship between need economy and accumulation economy where a mutually dependent circuit of social reproduction is required to sustain the urban machine (the apparatuses and networks of urban expansion). Two, by virtue of this structurality, one may argue that the relationship between need economy and accumulation economy becomes much more complex than what was previously held by Sanyal, i.e., one of constitutive externality.

However, it may also appear from this essay that Bhattacharya and Sanyal want to demonstrate the case of new towns as an exception which ‘bypasses’ the ‘normal’ course of regenerative urbanization and gains an exclusive identity. The new towns are exceptional in absorbing the informal need economy into networks of capitalist expansion through the backdoor of survival logistics, though the development of new towns as a site of immaterial labour is necessary precisely because the old metropolises cannot afford complete gentrification (total expulsion of the informal sector and material labour). Notwithstanding the tautological framework, this logic of exception does not allow the old cities to have a similar structural relationship between accumulation economies and need economies. Moreover, it forecloses the possibility of any such relationship by describing the failure of the old cities to manage the informal economy as a pretext of the development of the new towns.

I think that the strength of this essay lies elsewhere. The exclusivity of the new towns – if any – resides in the novelty of their mechanisms of accumulation. Bhattacharya and Sanyal mention this in passing, but they do not emphasize the exact strategies by which they are able to expand their territories and exploit labour and capital. A more comprehensive approach can be found in another study of the development of the Rajarhat Township in the vicinity of Kolkata where the authors show how the questions of livelihood, resistance, and capitalist accumulation are intricately linked with each other.⁶ Even though the official narratives of construction of these townships give the impression of starting from ground-zero, they actually make it happen by effacing the rooted histories of numerous, closely knit life practices and claims. The ‘urban dystopia’ of these new towns is such that they absorb and abate the most virulent instances of resistance in the name of a spatial vacuum strategically manufactured through various coercive mechanisms and consent-building exercises.

Now the question is: how far does this practice of effacement get repeated in the old towns? If we go by the spirit of Bhattacharya and Sanyal’s essay, we may arrive at this conclusion that there is a

⁵ Bhattacharya and Sanyal, ‘Bypassing the Squalor’, 44.

⁶ Ishita Dey, Ranabir Samaddar and Suhit K. Sen, *Beyond Kolkata: Rajarhat and the Dystopia of Urban Imagination* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013).

marked distinction between the respective accumulation networks in the old and new towns. I agree with this argument only partially. There are many evidences that a similar network of dystopic accumulation is operative in the old towns like Kolkata, but these networks cannot be actualized to their full potential due to certain practical/political constraints. One of them is of course the geographical limits of the city. Unlike the new towns, the old cities cannot grow horizontally. Also, any attempt at applying coercive means to appropriate urban land within the city is faced with serious civil society activism infused with middleclass nostalgia over the lost glory of its socio-cultural-economic legacy. All these add to the difficulties of absolute effacement of collective histories and memories of dwelling in the city. I think that the strategies of accumulation take a slightly different route in the case of the old cities. Besides continuous attempts at creating spatial vacuums by enforcing eviction over the so-called 'illegal' occupants of 'public space,' many strategies of negotiating with the city space have come about in the last few decades including that of recycling urban land with a pointed direction towards real estate speculation.

Let us cull out a few examples. In 2005, Nagarik Mancha has brought out a report on the locked-out factories in Kolkata.⁷ The report has chronicled a list of cases where factory lands were turned into real estate properties with some encouragement from the government. The list includes STM, formerly a factory complex located in Kankurgachi and owned by a sitting MP from Krishnanagar, now the site of a luxury apartment named 'Orchid Towers' and Bangodaya Cotton Mill, owned by the Peerless Group which itself has made a foray into the real estate business and constructed a housing complex named 'Peerless Abasan' in the abandoned factory land.⁸ Similarly, the Annapurna Glass Factory was locked out and turned into Ekta Heights. Even the Jadavpur TB Hospital was closed down by the government and its land was sold off to the realtors and builders.⁹ At first glance, these instances look familiar. Isn't it the same way how land is acquired by the government or private agencies and auctioned in the market to fetch the best price?

Same, but not quite. In this case, the constructions in the lands of locked-out factories give birth to a new informal economy replete with interspersed networks of contractors, labourers, and middlemen. In a way, this is a moment of formal subsumption where the closed circuits of capital are refurbished to accommodate the massive in-flow of a dispossessed, disgruntled labour force. If in the case of the new towns, the older regimes of 'subsistence' production were dislodged and later absorbed in the circuit of capitalist accumulation through survival networks of mutual dependency, here the 'already' discarded means of capitalist production are revaluated to suit the demand of the day. In that sense, it resolves the paradox presented (perhaps unintentionally) by Bhattacharya and Sanyal. In the old cities, the recycling of capital (including previous and subsequent investments in land) paves the way for an informal economy whose effacement (in the form of gentrification) is not only impossible but also harmful for the continuing saga of capitalist accumulation.

⁷ Nagarik Mancha, *A Report on Locked-Out Factories, Plight of Workers and Urban Space* (Kolkata, 2005).

⁸ *Ibid*, 27, 29.

⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

The identity between migration and informality in urban labour market is best explicated in Ranabir Samaddar's words when he talks about the 'context where a majority of urban migrant workers are engaged in construction industry, including clearing of lands and the waste disposal and recycling industry, including garbage clearance.'¹⁰ In the course of this project, I am not going to engage with the construction industry per se; what I intend to do is to take this notion of 'recycling' more seriously to attain a workable understanding of the labour question in contemporary Kolkata. My objective is not to construct a general theory of labour based on this principle of recycling and to explain the issues of social justice only in that light. It is, however, necessary to explore the larger implications of this shift in the narrative of post-colonial capitalism where the prices of land (often extracted in the form of rent) and the wages of labour come in conjunction with each other to set the course of accumulation, primitive or otherwise.

It is in this context that I propose to study two apparently unconnected forms of labour – one, the workers in the service/industry of waste disposal, and two, the taxi drivers – in contemporary Kolkata. These two sectors are reported to accommodate a huge number of migrant workers in the city, especially those who come from the neighbouring states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. No understanding of the range and depth of the notion of recycling is possible without studying the workers involved in the waste disposal sector. In the age of ecological awareness and hygienic aesthetics, the image of a solitary woman/man sweeping the city streets in the early mornings, carrying the hazardous waste on her/his shoulders, clearing the overflowing litterbins with dexterous movements of hands produces a strong and darkly ironical visual effect. Apart from these heart-wrenching stories of exploitation and under-appreciation, there are other aspects of this sector which deserve our attention – especially the institutional details of their participation in the city workforce and the shared genealogies of their socio-political compositions.

At the level of institutional affiliation, most of these workers belong to a shadowy region between the formal and the informal. Although appointed by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation for the task of conservancy and waste disposal within the municipal boundary of the city, these workers do not enjoy formal job security and post-retirement benefits. However, there are also other categories of workers in this sector. For example, every government office has their own staff for waste disposal. Usually, these workers are appointed by each of these offices separately. It is to be seen whether these appointments are made from a pool of workers already engaged in this sector. On the other hand, the gated communities and housing complexes that are coming up every now and then seem to employ a separate staff for maintaining the aesthetic and environmental sanctity within the high walls of these establishments.

Traditionally, and especially in the colonial period, the workers in this sector used to hail from a particular caste like *bhangji* or *methar* and settled in the dingy slums in specific areas of the city. With independence, the colonial policy of appointing workers from a particular caste for a particular job was discarded. Did this bring any change in the social composition of these groups? To answer this

¹⁰ Ranabir Samaddar, 'Primitive Accumulation and Some Aspects of Work and Life in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIV, No. 18 (May 2, 2009), 37.

question, we need to explore the processes of appointment in this sector. These appointments can occur through mediation by contractors and middlemen and by exploiting familial ties and local networks of socialization. It is also of great importance to check whether the people engaged in this sector are present generation migrants or they have come from families which had migrated long ago and continued to live in the city. Incidentally, as we have seen in many other cases, these points may not make much difference in the popular perceptions about these supposedly lowly work forms and the rowdy and uncouth workers involved in them. They remain as 'permanent outsiders' to the city. The question of social justice related to the treatment of workers in the waste disposal sector, therefore, becomes an area of prime importance. It also points to a disturbing question: the supposedly low rate of physical violence on the migrants fits quite beautifully with the cosmopolitan image of Kolkata. But should the issue of social justice be restricted only to the abatement of physical violence? Should it also not take into account the long and still continuing history of social and cultural exclusion practiced by the majority of the 'original residents'? This question is even more pertinent today as the sector of waste disposal has become instrumental in shaping the ethos of recycling in contemporary urban existence.

Similar concerns may arise in the context of the taxi drivers of Kolkata. Often during the heated banter between the drivers and the passengers, the ethnic identity of the former becomes an issue of contention. With growing demand for fast and comfortable transportation matched with the desire for an exuberant and luxurious standard of living, the taxis are becoming a regular mode of transport among the urban middleclass. However, the public discourses on city transport often feature complaints about the misbehaviour and unlawfulness of the taxi drivers. Time and again, they are portrayed in negative light in the media, and in private discussions, even in the most liberal circles, allusions are made to their places of origin (specifically Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and conjectures are drawn about their lack of urbane sophistication. It is in this context that I want to situate the taxi drivers as the other important workforce in the city which exists in between the formal and the informal and contains a huge number of migrant workers from across the country.

The taxi drivers have their unions (at least 8 of them operate quite effectively in the city including the West Bengal Taxi Workers' Union, Kolkata Metropolitan Taxi Drivers' Union, Bengal Taxi Association, Calcutta Taxi Operator's Union, West Bengal Drivers' Welfare Association, West Bengal Drivers' Workers Union, Radio Taxi Safari Association, and Luxury Taxi Association), and these unions play an important role in mediating with the government on the issues of raising fare and ensuring passenger safety. In most of the cases, the taxis are not owned by the drivers and they have to pay a specific amount of money over their day's earnings to the actual owners. Most of the unions, although formed to oversee the interests of the taxi workers (including the cleaners, assistants, and mechanics), are controlled by the taxi owners. A hefty percentage of the taxi drivers come from outside the state. Usually, they communicate in Hindi which irks a section of the passengers. Usually, the migrant taxi drivers without family live together in the garages or in the neighbouring areas and work through the day in shifts; those with families live in the slums or commute from the suburbs.

As in the case of the workers in the waste disposal sector, I intend to explore the changes in the social and economic compositions of the taxi drivers over the last two decades. As we know, once this sector was dominated by the people from the Sikh community. Most of them left the city and settled elsewhere after the anti-Sikh riot in 1984. Currently, the demography of the taxi drivers in Kolkata shows some interesting trends. It is generally assumed that the Sikh drivers were replaced by migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s. Although a huge number of drivers are still coming from these two states, there is certainly a rise in the number of Bengali drivers migrating from the other districts in the state. Whether this demographic shift leads to the intensification of the competitive environment in this sector is definitely a matter of consideration (especially in the context of the rising ethnic tension), but more importantly, it also indicates a shift in the networks of labour recruitment as well. In the course of this study, I plan to explore these new social networks of recruitment and find out how far the changes in the policies of urban transportation designed to turn the city into a fast and smoothly run metropolis imbricated in the speed economy of global connectivity influence shifts in the demographic profiles of a particular workforce.