

# **The In-Betweens: An Enquiry into the Quality of Life of Self-Employed North Easterns in Kolkata, India**

**An Observational Study as part of a Project**

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## **Abstract**

With the advent of the globalised age, the increased mobility of goods and services across borders provides a sleek opportunity for increased migration, especially in the informal sector (Sassen 1994). This is, of course, also in addition to the fact that migration majorly takes place as a consequence of unequal development on one hand and natural disasters on the other. The discourse surrounding the governance of this migrating population is vast, and yet, there has been little to no addition to the scientific depository in terms of comprehensive policy frameworks for the same. India's diversity, both economically and culturally, has always been in the spotlight for being a hotspot for migration.

There is a clear dichotomy visible in internal migration in contemporary India. On the one hand, it has truly opened up economic opportunities for several who are at a position to utilise the neo-liberal agenda. On the other, migration has undoubtedly been both the result of and an instrument to enhance poverty and state exploitation of its subjects. With the rise of populist politics, Indian migrants in other parts of India are seen as foreigners: a direct consequence of anti-migrant, chauvinist and nativist attitudes of the people. What is important to note here is that within this migration discourse, labour and economy has played a significant role in shaping the current pattern of mobility. Another important feature to note in this context is the politics of localisation in terms of migration. With increased fluidity of labour across state borders, several Indian states have witnessed public outcry over the magnitude of the 'sons of the soil' phenomenon. The opening up of state borders to people who belong to a completely different linguistic, religious, social or cultural origin has, in a way, solidified the very sentiments against this openness.

Against this context of a different cultural identity and the unique nature of self-employment, this paper shall have the following objectives: (a) to understand the push and pull factors in North-East India and Kolkata respectively (b) To understand if there is any causality between the workers' socio-economic profile and their standards of living in Kolkata (c) To understand the hierarchy of needs of these workers (d) To understand the state's limitations in fulfilling those needs. The ultimate objective will be to come up with a migration policy framework for North-East workers in Indian metro cities, who have a renewed responsibility of 'claiming' their citizenship in their own country, which will be steered to include this population in the overall contribution to the national output. India's exclusive character opens up an entire opportunity for scholars to delve into the matter of social security for migrant workers, juxtaposed against

technological advancements, especially in the age of neo-liberal hyper-nationalism and this is exactly what this paper will seek to achieve.

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is often termed as the saviour of the poor in a society. It is also considered to be economically enriching for both the destination and home-site of the migrant. Along with this branding, it is not an unrealised inference that migration is looked up to by economists and scholars across the globe as a wide arena of research. Ironically, we live in a time in history where the mobility of goods and services across borders is viewed as an asset whereas; the mobility of human beings is viewed as a vice. The cross-path of migration and labour has, over time, attracted vast academic scrutiny. Literature on migrant workers and their impact on the economy is vast, with the academic elite having discussions from time to time about the importance of the two phenomena. However, the missing piece in the complete puzzle is that migrant workers are considered to be human as far as only their economic value is concerned. At least, that is the implication thus far from the numerous academic conferences held on labour migration. This has largely been an outcome of the neo-liberal agenda, where migrant workers are reduced to economic individuals and their sustenance is only necessary for upholding the base of the destination economy. The plight of migrant workers is recognised, addressed but rarely solved. The issue of their predicament becomes deeper when we place migrant workers in the Indian context.

Figure 1 below shows the spread of migrant workers across the country post-1990s. The relatively low literature on internal migration in India was expected to take a dynamic turn with the introduction of the neo-liberal reforms post-1990s. However, in a bid to do the same, scholars realised that there has not been any stark difference in the rates of migration or patterns of mobility even after the economy was opened up to the world (Mishra 2016). The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, launched an India Centre for Migration<sup>1</sup> in 2008 to address the concerns of Indian labour overseas. Similarly, most of such exercises have only been concerned with international migration. Internal migration within India becomes crucial to examine solely for the unique character of the Indian political economy and society. In spite of

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.mea.gov.in/icm.htm>

an increase in migration owing to rapid urbanisation, the exact numbers which record internal migration are not very convincing. In other words, the documentation of internal migrants has been bleak, assisted by the fact that the official definition of internal migrants in India has been way too wide. Migrants, according to the Census, are defined as anybody who has been living outside of their birthplace for a stipulated period of time. How does one make sense of the varied inferences that this definition might hold? Consequently, substantive policy outcomes have been almost non-existent when we talk of a policy framework for migrant labour in India. Their social security measures have been put under an umbrella understanding of what constitutes an internal migrant worker.

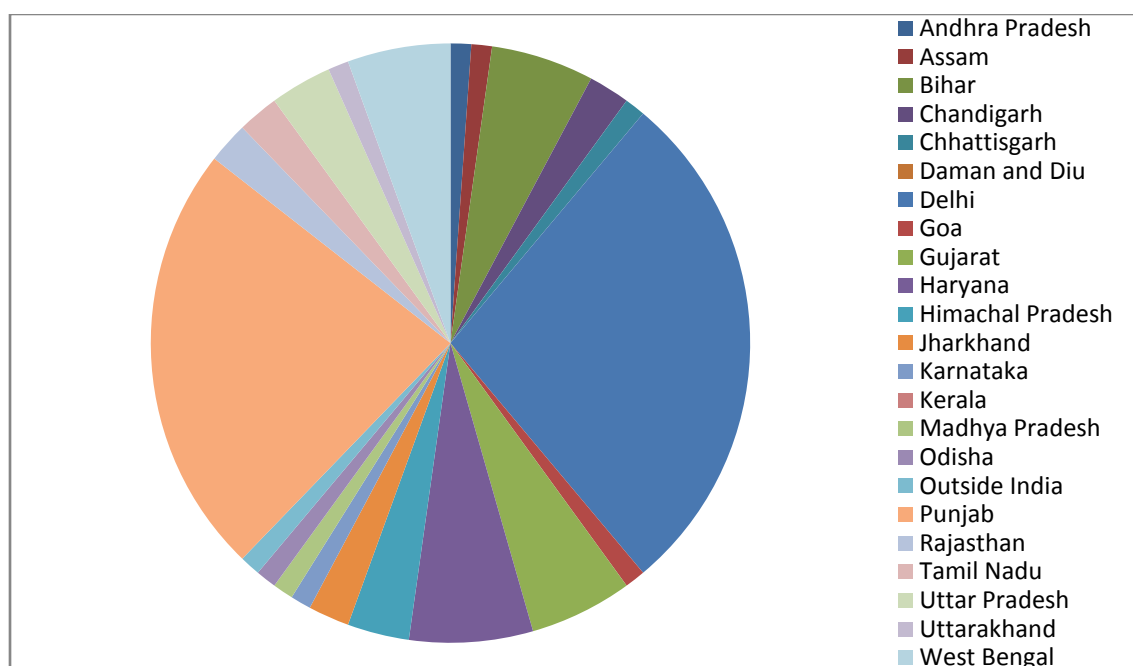


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Migrant Workers in India; *Source: Rodgers et. al, 2013*

Against this background, what is also important to understand is that all categories of migrant workers face an unparalleled nature of exploitation owing to cultural difference. Far-right attitudes coupled with crippling economic conditions in the states lead to a societal expulsion of these workers who are viewed as ‘aliens.’ Then, it becomes the responsibility of the state and the responsibility of the academic circle to question the state on what policy solutions could be thought of for such migrant workers. This paper is a part of a larger project which is scheduled to be completed by May 2020. As part of the workshop, the author would like to place in front of

the audience her ideas and bring to light issues which have been ignored by policymakers in the migration space for a very long time.

## **2. Literature Review: Establishing Context**

### **2.1 Labour Context: Self-Employment**

The classification of the type of work that migrant labourers engage in is extensive. However, most of the literature surrounding migrant workers is mostly analysing workers engaged in the informal sector. The primary objective of such research has been to analyse the welfare status of the unorganised sector's workers, subsequently looking into their social security at large. Such analysis first started with the Todaro model<sup>2</sup> (1969) and continues until today, with a large part of academia only dealing with the plight of the urban informal sector. Such literature has the following assumptions as written in a paper on the urban informal sector (Banerjee 1983):

- (a) The urban labour market is divided into two sectors: a high-paid formal sector and a regressive informal sector,
- (b) Migrants mostly float to urban areas because of the attractive opportunities in the formal sector,
- (c) They search for work in the formal sector while being employed in the informal sector,
- (d) Mobility from the informal sector to the formal sector is possible.

Therefore, an interesting arena of research opens up. What is missing from these assumptions is the obvious fact- what about those workers who are not indulged in this duality? In other words, what about those workers employed in urban areas whose sectoral mobility is not envisaged? Academic literature on self-employed migrant workers is close to scarce. The primary reason behind this is the state's baseless presumption that self-employed workers do not require social security because of the nature of their work, although the international welfare demand for social security includes self-employed workers as well. There is also lingering confusion as to whether self-employment can be considered important enough to be impacting the economy of the state as these establishments cannot be categorised into the existing classifications of the labour economy.

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<sup>2</sup> The Todaro model states that equilibrium is reached when the expected wage in urban areas is equal to the marginal productivity of an agricultural worker. The model divides the economy into a dual form, and also states that in the urban area the workers will spend more time in the informal sector till they find a job in the formal sector (Chen 1994).

In the last National Sample Survey Office Round (NSSO) data released in 2014, the Ministry of Statistics, Planning and Implementation clearly shows that 51 per cent of India's workers are self-employed, mostly in rural areas. Thirty three point five per cent are employed in casual labour and only 15.6 per cent of them are salaried employees. Amongst only self-employed workers, 41.1 per cent are employed in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> The same report also further categorised self-employed workers into (i) own-account workers: those who run their own enterprise (ii) employers: those who work alone or with a partner in their enterprise and hire labour (iii) helpers in household enterprise: those engaged in household work who do not receive a regular salary. The distinctive feature of such self-employed workers is that they have autonomy in terms of economic decisions i.e., they themselves decide how, what and when to produce and also independence in terms of choice of operations and scale of the market. The remuneration of such workers is divided into two parts: a reward for their labour and the profits that they earn out of their enterprise. Hence, this category of workers poses a rather difficult problem in terms of understanding, classification and solution.

In a paper on the nature of the urban informal economy, the authors make a clear distinction between the urban formal sector, the self-employed workers and what they call the 'residual' informal economy. While several will disagree that this distinction between self-employment and informality is required, it becomes imperative to differentiate between the two simply because of the fact that self-employment is indeed a distinct category in itself. The authors also argue that workers, who do not find employment in the urban formal sector, prefer to join the informal sector. Within this urban informality, however, the household's choice is given little cognizance at the altar of troubles in the credit market which primarily determines whether they will become self-employed or not. Their findings through an econometric model show that people from backward economies or social classes are more likely to be employed in the informal sector with self-employment being the second choice (Shonchoy and Junankar 2014). Effectively, what this means is that for the socio-economically weaker sections of the society (SEW), the credit constraints and the nature of the market places a huge stake in their livelihoods. Without a back-up plan, their failure must be compensated by the state as it becomes the responsibility of the latter to protect them.

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<sup>3</sup> NSS 68<sup>th</sup> Round July 2011-June 2012:  
[http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/nss\\_report\\_554\\_31jan14.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/nss_report_554_31jan14.pdf)

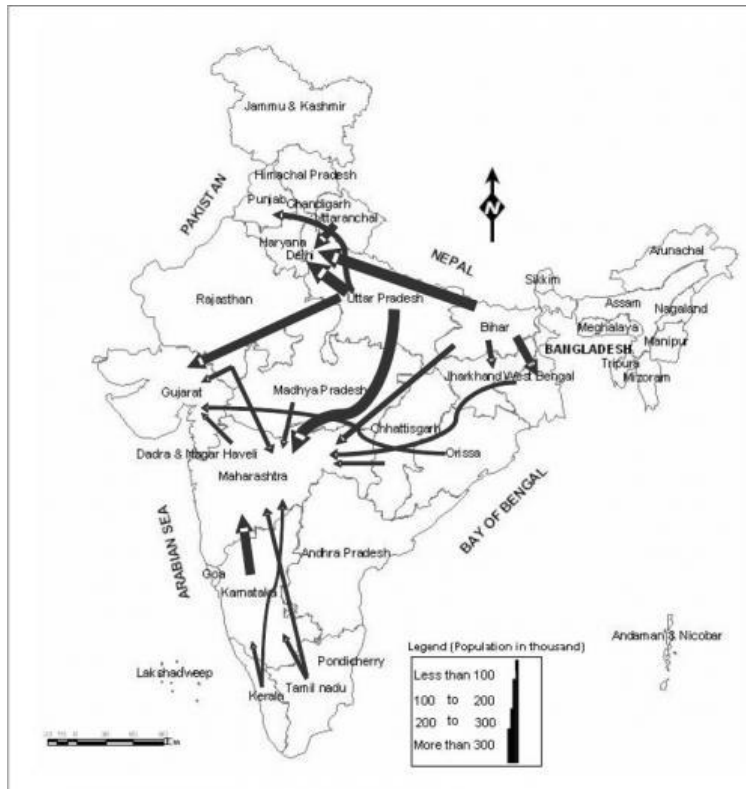
Most importantly, when self-employed persons and migration are intertwined with each other, the socio-economic scenario becomes a little more complex. What is surprising, however, is the sparse literature on these migrant self-employed individuals and issues surrounding the same. In a quest to study this particular subject, this paper will undertake these workers as its focal point of analysis.

## **2.2 Geographical Context: Kolkata, West Bengal**

At the forefront, the state of West Bengal has for the longest time been a hot corridor of passage for people from the North-Eastern part of India. West Bengal's capital, Kolkata could easily be called a melting pot for citizens looking to migrate from a lesser developed region to an urban centre, where living costs as compared to other parts of India is substantially low. According to Census 2011, out of 4.4 lakh men, 1.5 lakh men migrated to Kolkata for work. Theoretically, although many conditions influence migration, the push-pull<sup>4</sup> factors of two points of location are the primary reasons for this phenomenon (Yang 1973). The major pull factor for Kolkata has obviously been the low prices of food for an average meal, cheap transport, easily available land for the opening up of business enterprises, comparatively lower land prices, proximity of labour-intensive industries and availability of accommodation (Das et al. 2016). Figure 2 below shows the migration flows in India, and it is visibly evident that a huge part of the population from Bihar and North Bengal flows into the urban peripheries and core of Kolkata (Abbas and Varma 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> See R.J Pryor, "*Migration and the process of Modernisation*" in *People on the Move*, 33-35, to understand the concept of push-pull factors, often used to explain reasons behind migrating population.



**Figure 2: Source- R.B. Bhagat and S. Mohanty, "Emerging Pattern of Urbanization and the Contribution of Migration in Urban Growth in India," Asian Population Studies, vol. 5 no. 1 (2009): 5-20**

It is also a commonly known fact that several workers from the North-Eastern districts of Darjeeling as well as states like Assam and Tripura migrate to Kolkata in search for work and urban life. The same stands for Bihar, as 22 per cent of the population in Kolkata includes Bihari migrants. Most of these parts of India are either economically very weak or are fraught with political instability, giving a hard push for economic beings to migrate to Kolkata. As an important link to mainland India, workers often wish to settle in Kolkata, temporarily working in the unorganised sector to finally aiming to be employed in the formal sector. Additionally, according to NSSO data, two hundred and thirty out of 1000 households engaged in self-employment in Kolkata Urban. Consequently, it becomes crucial for a scholar to understand exactly how self-employment plays out in this scenario.

There is a visible mushrooming of small enterprises in the urban areas of Kolkata, mostly selling fast food or items of daily use. A huge portion of these enterprises also include the *paan* stalls that Bihari migrants open up in urban Kolkata. Significant within these enterprises is also the



increasing number of roadside stalls by migrants from the Darjeeling district of West Bengal or Assam, selling their traditional Tibetan or Nepalese food. These enterprises might have a huge addition to the economy of the state, apart from obviously providing low-cost goods and services essential for the survival of other informal workers in the economy. It is only because of the fact they do not fall under any standard employment relationship (SER), owing to the uncertainty in business registration, that their exact impact on Kolkata's economy becomes difficult to measure. Often termed as the 'second economy'<sup>5</sup> or the 'parallel economy'<sup>6</sup>, their contributions to the state become an important factor to compute the state's gross domestic product.

### **2.3 Welfare Context: Social Security of Self-Employed Migrant Workers**

Against this context, therefore, merely identifying self-employed workers is not enough for the academic depository. What is essential is to understand the lives of these migrant workers as uncategorised labour, left at the wrath of their business. Understanding the social security of these workers is crucial for a policymaker to understand the social policy and governance mechanisms of the state at large. What is unique about these self-employed workers is that their income is barely dependent on a particular entity. Their income level is left at the feet of the autonomous economic decisions that the enterprise owner takes. An increase in their income will only be possible if the decisions taken by them or their employer understand market conditions as the choice of producing what, when and where is completely left at their discretion. In other words, the entire lower strata of these workers employed in their own enterprise do not have a stable source of income.

Along with the income factor also comes in the fact that their living conditions are dismal. Most of these workers either reside inside their enterprise or take up housing in nearby slums with limited access to even basic living conditions. To top all of this, they barely experience a cultural integration in the society. Keeping the metropolitan nature of Kolkata aside, these migrants are often subject to regional or even racial discrimination owing to their physical features and socio-economic profile. Out-migration from the North East Region (NER) to other parts of India is quite a recent trend. These workers come to urban centres because of employment or educational

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<sup>5</sup> The second economy was a term first used by Gregory Grossman in his article "The Second Economy of USSR." It was used to explain the informal sector of Soviet Russia, called second as it was the non-tax paying sector.

<sup>6</sup> The parallel economy is also used to explain recent debate around the idea that a formal economy can never be able to sustain itself without a parallel informal economy.

opportunities. Despite having a high literacy rate, the NER does not have the form of labour market to meet the pace of the fast-changing Indian economy. After moving to the urban centres, however, the fact that they have to constantly negotiate with the city to make their place has significant impacts on their physical and mental well-being. Very often, they are also denied the political and legal rights and termed as illegal migrants from neighbouring countries as a means of exploitation (Remesh 2016). Thus, questioning the state's responsibility towards these workers becomes an imperative on the part of welfare policymakers.

## **2.4 Quality of Life**

In the field of public policy, quality of life (QoL) has been one of the major indicators of the standard of living of an individual. Several administrative departments formulate policies based on the general perception or accurate measurement of the quality of life of a specific cohort. QoL is layered at multiple levels and is a nebulous concept. Important to note in this regard is that the measurement of QoL, which is largely borrowed from medical policy, is different for different kinds of individuals depending on age, qualifications, etc. However, the academia has not yet settled on a singular theoretical framework for the definition of QoL (Brown, Bowling and Flynn 2004), making it difficult to measure for such a precise set of people. There exists, therefore, an ocean-like treasury of indicators which are both subjective and objective, to measure the quality of life of individuals. Quality of life can be understood both on a larger, macro level which concerns the society or polity at large (education, incomes, etc.) or it can be understood at a micro level (prestige, self-respect, etc.) which concerns an individual and is subjective in nature. The latter aspect is especially highlighted in the pioneer study done by Rosenberg on QoL, which states that the mainstream indicators of measuring one's life's quality barely has any resonance with the fact that every man differs in their understanding of what a good life is- thereby a need arising for a model which shall look at natural as well as hermeneutic thinking (Rosenberg 1992).

Models on QoL are also not consistent as one can trace in the past literature on the same. Perhaps the very first model that one identifies in this regard is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which talks about one's needs as hunger, loneliness, security and self-actualisation, and in that order (Maslow 1954). Another model, which focuses on the psychological indicators, includes QoL based on one's perceived level of independence, cognitive abilities, autonomy or

competence in the society- the level of pessimism/optimism associated with the same (Larson 1978). Important also under this category is QoL based on an individual's current status and their aspirations in employment, standard of living or societal standing, especially in comparison to others in the society (Krupinski 1980).

Perhaps, the one work which has topped all other academics in terms of Quality of Life is that of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who edit a volume on perceptions of QoL. As development economists, they argue that economic growth indicators can barely quantify the QoL of an individual. What matters more is one's capability in choosing what they wish for themselves. In other words, the higher the degree of freedom the individual has in deciding for themselves, the better is their QoL (Sen and Nussbaum 1993). Placing these concepts against the backdrop, it becomes crucial to examine what is the quality of life that these migrant petty entrepreneurs lead in a climate of political instability, economic un-surety and racial discrimination.

## **2.5 Globalisation vs. Localisation**

When one deeply thinks about the issue that is posed in this paper, one will realise that there is a fundamental contradiction in terms of the contextualisation. On the one hand, we talk of increased inter-state migration and the increased flow of capital goods in the wake of globalisation and opening of borders. On the other, however, lies a paradox where the flow of these people from their home state to destination state is rejected by the locals. This comes despite the fact that the economic value that they add to the destination state is more than welcome by the locals. Essentially, therefore, there is a visible deadlock that policymakers are arrived at- economic value versus societal acceptance of an 'alien' culture.

What becomes interesting to note is that most of the petty entrepreneurs that are talked about in this paper are engaged in the selling of cuisine, which, although named after the original North-Eastern delicacies, are in reality, what we could call a 'Kolkata-nised' or a 'Bengali-ised' version of the cuisine. Inevitably, this turns us back to the argument made in one of the finest papers in the politics of localism- there is a growing urge to localise in the age of globalisation in the Global South owing to resentment to global forces (Harriss, Stokke and Tornquist 2004). In this context, as we politicise the industry of food, we also must examine the fact that low-cost culinary delight sold by these petty entrepreneurs are one of the greatest contributions to the

state's economy despite the fact that most of these businesses go unregistered and do not pay taxes. In what we could possibly call the only legitimate work on North-Eastern migrants in Delhi, Duncan McDuie-Ra talks of how the introduction of this global capital has contributed to the de-Indianisation of the urban culture, taking citizens away from the traditional culture of the country. This has favoured the North-Easterns (McDuie-Ra 2012). But, the question that we must examine is despite this demand for ethnic food and despite the travel of products, is culture really travelling?

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

In this context, understanding the migration of workers and their social security summons for the adoption of a theoretical framework to grasp what is called the blueprint of this research. To establish this blueprint in a political economy framework, while also considering the social state, this study seeks to address its research questions through the lens of the *theory of citizenship*. As a result of increased migration, citizenship laws across countries have gained centre stage, raising serious questions about the idea of citizenship altogether. To further complicate this phenomenon is the application of citizenship theory not just in international relations, but also in inter-state relations. With the regional tendencies growing stronger, especially in a country like India, where localism has been a hot topic of debate, anyone outside the border of the state is not considered to be a 'citizen' of that federal state. This also stems from the idea of cultural ethnicities growing stronger, either based on language or on region. Therefore, to understand inter-state migration, adaptation of a citizenship perspective and role of the state as a part of the global welfare regime towards these migrants assists in comprehending the root causes of the problems.

To understand the idea of citizenship, one must trace the evolution of citizenship in the context of migrant workers. Starting from T.H. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class* (1963) to contemporary theorisation of radical citizenship, a vast literature exists on this theory. Varied branches leave a wide range of choices to a researcher to pick that type which suits their study the best. As we trace the idea of social citizenship by Marshall, one is imminently reminded of the 'modicum' that the welfare state is bound to provide to its citizen to establish a basic, decent standard of living for all the members the society, equalising their status. However, Marshall has often been criticised of oversimplification of the idea of citizenship without policy specifications

or the consideration of the economic base capitalism in every society. One of the severe critiques of Marshall is Turner who argues in his paper that Marshall looks at the state with a homogenous composition, and instead suggests that citizenship could either go as evolutionary, going back to the Kantian idea of active and passive<sup>7</sup> citizens or it could be imposed from above in the form of Presbyterianism authoritarianism (Turner 1990). Applying this concept to those of migrant workers, one can easily question why the state must invest in this class of people if these workers are ‘passive citizens’, with no contribution to the society. However, as conceptually flawed as this argument is, these arguments also fail to understand the sheer amount of contribution that self-employment has towards the economy of the state. In that regard, these workers can be called active citizens, perhaps without the realisation of their level of participation in the society. At this point, it would be useful to look at the Rights vs. Participation debate in citizenship theory. Whereas Republicans stress on the state giving rights to individuals if they participate in the society, Liberals emphasise on the need for provisioning of welfare irrespective of the citizen’s participation factor. This, therefore, implies that a North-East migrant worker does not necessarily have to actively participate for a welfare state to consider them as ‘citizens.’

In an essential advancement, scholars argue that citizenship is, therefore, not just a political contract between the state and the individual but also a set of social relations between the two (Lister 2003). These relationships, thus, are fluid in nature as there is a constant force of negotiation that entails (Satsiulis and Bakan 1997). In a way, self-employed workers have, therefore, to be stooped looking at as only economic investors or taxpayers. There is, obviously, a paradigm shift in this social citizenship literature from bringing about economic equality to social inclusion of citizenship-seeking persons. Perhaps, this is what is exclusive to the question of addressing the needs of migrants from the same state. Far from economic benefits, what these workers naturally seek for from the welfare state are social benefits in order for them to be included in the larger socio-politico arrangement of the state. In her 2003 book, Lister also points out that these migrant workers are seen as ‘second-class citizens’, being formally denied of full citizenship. They’re only about considered as a reserve army of economic labour. This has increasingly led to a discriminatory practice among states, especially with regard to the idea of

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of active and passive citizen was laid down by Immanuel Kant, who talks of two categories of state subjects. An active citizen proactively participates in the decision-making of the society and is aware of their duty towards the state. A passive citizen, on the other hand, is just a being in the state and extracts the benefits without contributing to the polity.

partial citizenship as opposed to full citizenship. The welfare state's responsibility, therefore, to account for this informal sector of workers becomes an essential starting point of the rise of what is called 'claim-making.'

The idea is to move away from the long-fought over typology of citizenship participation or rights or identity. As migrant workers who substantively contribute to the economy, citizenship must be viewed by them as making a legitimate claim for membership of the society and equal entitlement to rights. In one of the most comprehensive papers on reviewing citizenship, Irene Bloemraad argues that citizenship has now to be looked at both as status and practice when we talk of the concept as claims-making (Bloemraad 2017). The author goes on to elaborate on why claims-making becomes crucial in the understanding of citizenship. She says that it is, firstly, a relational approach. When migrants make claims on rights, it is not just political claims that they make to the government, but also claims to the society at large for the inclusion of them as members of their community. Secondly, through claims-making, recognition of the claims becomes absolutely essential to gain substantive ground for the validity of these claims. She elaborates on this point by bringing in the framework of migration in non-Western societies. She argues that if we were to look at citizenship as claims-making, we would understand why citizenship is a sequential process in some societies but secondary (or irrelevant) in others. Finally, she says that claims-making also depends on the structural agency of the institutions of the state. Essentially, then, she is looking at the perspective of claim-makers as well as those outside this spectrum (Bloemraad 2006).

On taking this approach of citizenship, therefore, this study will seek to understand why the claims made by self-employed migrant workers hold weight. The policy recommendations following from the data analysis will go back to this approach of claims-making to look at how essential it remains for mobilisation in a structured manner to demand what already belongs to them.

### **3. Study Rationale**

#### **3.1 Research Gap**

The fundamental gap identified is in terms of the actors involved in the process of social security. Although there is sufficient literature on the problems that the migrant workers face in the context of social security, there is no mention of the constraints that a state faces in providing

these facilities. Welfare is usually seen as a one-way process from the state to its subjects. In a policy implementation process, it is vital to also address the capacity of the state in providing for its subjects. The question of self-employed migrant workers has never been placed as one which the state could seem to address as these workers are assumed to be left at their own accord, sufficiently ignoring the standards of living of a huge portion of the population.

### **3.2 Problem Statement**

*What:* The problem is two-fold. Firstly, although vast literature exists on the issue of migrant workers, there lacks substantive research on policy recommendations for solving these issues. The framework of recommendations are too generalist in nature and barely dissect the migrant workers into an effective typology or understand their hierarchy of needs (Aggarwal 2019). Additionally, an important missing link in the existing academia is that of urban self-employed workers because of an erroneous presumption that migrants in a developed destination do not require welfare (Rajan and Aggarwal 2019).

*How, Where and When:* This lack of understanding of differentiated needs and this baseless presumption is a problem because it negates academic as well as practical understanding of the quality of life of petty entrepreneurs who migrate from other states to urban centres. Subsequently, it ignores a huge population within migrant workers. Such a problem is evident in a city like Kolkata, where there is an overwhelming presence of these workers.

*Why:* The fundamental basis for this problem is the fact that labour protection has only been looked at through what is called the 'standard employment relationship' (Williams and Lapeyre 2017). There is little challenge to this conception of SER, coming from non-standard forms of employment as self-employed workers are largely left out from the umbrella of labour rights. However, this challenge is sufficiently small and does not fully address the precarious living conditions of not only dependant but independent self-employed individuals (Kautonen et al. 2010).

### **3.3 Research Objectives**

Having identified the research problem and questions, this dissertation will seek to address concerns of the migrant workers who are engaged in self-employed activities (petty employers as

well as the employees) localising the problem in the urban city of Kolkata. The kind of self-employed workers will be restricted to those who have set up small to medium level enterprises selling items of daily consumption. **The micro-objectives** of the study would be:

- (a) To understand the push and pull factors in the North-East and Kolkata respectively
- (b) To understand if there is any causality between the workers' socio-economic profile and their standards of living in Kolkata
- (c) To understand the hierarchy of needs of these workers
- (d) To understand the state's limitations in fulfilling those needs

The **ultimate objective** will be:

*To suggest a policy framework for addressing the deteriorating standard of living of these workers, by examining the Quality of Life (QoL) of Self-Employed Migrant Workers in Urban Kolkata, West Bengal.*

### **3.4 Research Questions**

Following the objectives which have been mentioned, this study sought to address certain research questions corresponding to each objective. They are as follows:

*RQ1. In terms of spatial structure and cost of living, is urban Kolkata conducive to receiving migrants from the North-East and Bihar?*

This question primarily arises from the assessment of the pull factors in Kolkata. It aims to understand exactly how accommodating is the spatial structure for migrant workers and how costly the city is at large for the same. This can only be measured after the socio-economic profiling of these workers. This question will also seek to answer if self-employment has an impact on the economy of the state, including an important question about the cost subsidy of petty enterprises as compared to more established neighbourhood enterprises.

*RQ2. Do the existing state schemes for migrant workers (if any) have any impact on the Quality of Life of this population?*

This question will be explored after defining the indicators of measuring the Quality of Life. It seeks to answer the inclusion/exclusion question from the citizenship framework. This becomes important in understanding whether the state has done anything thus far in terms of these



workers and if it has, how far has the implementation affected the same? Additionally, if the workers are under the assumption of the Todaro model, this question will help to understand if the scheme is conducive for them to step out of their informality and earn a formal job.

*RQ3. Are the current standards of living of this population at par with their hierarchy of needs?*

On exploring their priority of needs, this study will seek to understand if their current quality of life is in tune with the needs that they have stated. This question helps the study solidify its base for coming up with a policy framework for improving the population's living standards.

*RQ4. What are the bureaucratic and economic constraints that the state faces in providing for these workers?*

While looking at this study from an Ideas, Actors and Institutions model, and juxtaposing it against the research gap identified, it is important to understand the larger issues that the state faces in fulfilling the needs of the workers. These may be implementation hurdles or financial constraints or the ease of doing business in the state. As self-employed workers are unique in nature, they must be placed in the large political-economic context to understand the foundation of the problem.

This question will require a deep understanding of the costs that are to be borne by the state in the welfare of these workers, thereby raising the need to explore an important sub-question about *the relationship of these workers with their families*. Often among such workers, any disruption in daily life is met with them returning home and the cost being borne by their families, thereby reducing their social cost.

#### 4. Findings from Observation

Perhaps one of the greatest works done on North-Eastern migrant labour is by Duncan McDuire-Ra. The observations of this author were not very different from his work. A study of Bikramgarh, a neighbourhood in South Kolkata, which has seen the mushrooming of self-employed North-Eastern migrant labour over the past several years, promises to be an interesting area for scholars of policy to look at. The very first observation made was the fact that the migrants who run the small eateries work tirelessly throughout the day owing to the fact that Bikramgarh is home to possibly a community of more than a thousand North-Easterns<sup>8</sup> who come to Kolkata to study in colleges and universities or migrate in search of work in urban establishments. The idea of living together in one neighbourhood is simply because of the fact that they 'stick together' in a setting which offers them social exclusion, tight budgeting and alienation. This stems from their physical appearance, accent and culture, which 'mainland' Indians often fail to consider their own.

With a daily average earning which probably does not meet the expense that each of the workers monthly have to bear for their family back home along with the rent that they have to pay for their shops, there is a need to re-think (or rather, think of) the idea of social security for the self-employed. An interesting observation also made was that most of these workers in the eateries are kin of the owner of the shop, who also assists them in their work daily. Essentially, this means that none of these workers are wage labourers, and this re-asserts the fact that in spite of these businesses being formal, the nature of labour employed is largely informal. A brief conversation with the owner of Denzong Kitchen, the highest grossing eatery in the area, informed the author that most of these workers leave their home in search of a better job in urban Kolkata. However, on not being able to cope with the corporate culture amongst people who also have a very different culture of their own, they set up shops to sell their local food to other North-Easterns settled in the area. With rents having risen by at least Rs 5,000/- in the past decade for a two-room sharing apartment<sup>9</sup>, these eatery workers often huddle up in the restaurant itself after shutting shop at night. This is also a common sight in most of the state houses of the

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<sup>8</sup> A street called Northeast Sarani, miles away - Bikramgarh locality in Calcutta a haven for students & professionals from the region, Telegraph India, 2011, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/a-street-called-northeast-sarani-miles-away-bikramgarh-locality-in-calcutta-a-haven-for-students-professionals-from-the-region/cid/372202>

<sup>9</sup> Rents have risen from 5,000/- to 10,000/- says the broker of Bikramgarh, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/spotlight/south-kolkatas-bikramgarh-where-the-hills-meet-the-plains/articleshow/64396181.cms>

North-East – Gorkha Bhavan, Nagaland House, Mizoram House, etc. Most of these state houses run restaurants to earn revenue from local people. These restaurants are often overstaffed with workers and they end up staying in the kitchens- about eight to ten boys in one small kitchen.

Another interesting observation made while talking to the shop workers is that apart from the owner, most of the boys and girls are in their late twenties, essentially meaning that their inter-generational mobility is also sacrificed at the altar of such low-income work. Their remittances back home are meagre and access to public services also becomes very difficult because of the inherent bias against them. Interesting to also note in this regard is that the per capita income of all of these workers might not be equal as the number of household members in each family varies and so does their status as below or above the poverty line. So, what explains this variation of scale? Again, because they are self-employed, the reason to trace this becomes a difficult task. The only possible indicator could be the loans that they take to set up the shop or perhaps the remittances that goes back to their home economy. On further probing, the author also found that although migration rates in the past years have reduced because North-Easterns now prefer Delhi and Bangalore (McDuié-Ra 2012) as better destinations, whenever they are asked about how long they have been working in the shop, they answer that they have been living in Kolkata for the past decade or so indicating that decadal migration has gone up, which is not really the case. The possible reason that they do this is because of the immediate hostility they face in access to services when they say that they have very recently moved to the city.

Interesting to note here also is that the self-employed labourers working in the shops have erratic migration patterns. The faces cooking to make food or the local constantly keep changing- they go back to their home states, come again to work in the shop and soon leave for other working offers. Effectively, this means that they lack stability in their professional lives, largely because of the nature of treatment meted out to them. This also has grave implications for the economy. Remittances are not stable although some scholars do argue that moving from the informal to a formal sector (which is not the case here) is a good option for these low-income migrant labourers. The lack of a contract and the lack of the SER, thus, have their cons which policymakers must seek to address. The most important finding was that unlike hawkers or street vendors, these self-employed migrants lack an association or a formal organisation which fights for their social security. This is again owing to erratic nature of their employment, the very variety under the umbrella of self-employed and the complexities of belonging from seven

different states under the larger term 'North-East.' Access to data, therefore, becomes a huge problem apart from the obvious fact that there is no formal channel through which their social security can be ensured.

## **5. Conclusion**

The need to start thinking about the questions posed above is immediate because every economist will agree upon the fact that in a neo-liberal setting, these small eateries, in a way support other informal labour or low-paid formal labour by providing low-cost services. Informality, therefore, feeds into informality. In one of the most outstanding writings on self-employment and petty entrepreneurship as the pillar of the informal economy, Kalyan Sanyal reviews the traditional notions of capitalism in a post-colonial society and asserts consistently that self-employed labour contributes as much to the economy as a formal contractual wage worker (Sanyal 2014). During a conversation with economist Amitabh Kundu, former Dean of Social Sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, the author also realised that there are some inherent problems with formalising the informal sector and self-employed labour is one such problem because of its complexity. The cost involved in becoming a part of the 'formal' economy is high and brings with a new set of problems that India is not ready to answer yet.

Therefore, the onus lies on this project and the policy academia at large to discuss and come up with a policy which looks at the long-term security of self-employed labour, especially when they are migrants facing the brunt of exclusion. Debates on whether this should be done to formalise them or whether the informal interdependency becomes stronger and more stable will continue to rage among economists. However, what must be kept in mind is that when such a huge network of labourers operate in a vacuum of formal institutions to support them, the actors involved- the consumer, the state and the community have to stop remaining absent and initiate a dialogue for improving the quality of life of the said sample.

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