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Story Idea:

Title: Where do Migrant Labour Live? A Survey in Kolkata

The Problem: The norm of “social distancing” following Covid-19 has brought to focus the poor housing conditions of migrant labour. It soon became apparent that migrant workers living in crowded, unhygienic slums, or on pavements, had little hope of saving themselves from the coronavirus. Studies have shown that slum populations have a significant effect on influenza transmission in urban areas. Improper specification of slums in large urban regions results in underestimation of infections in the entire population and hence may lead to misguided interventions by policy planners. (1) Hence we see widespread anxiety, even resistance, to migrant workers returning home.

The Background: Policy makers are well aware of the poor housing options of the migrant labour. A report by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (2) has noted the lack of affordable rental accommodation for migrant labour, which pushed labour to live in slums, illegal settlements, godowns, under flyovers, on the sides of railways, and so on. They have little or no access to safe drinking water and toilets. The government has announced several plans to alleviate the problem, such as construction of affordable rental houses for migrant workers under the PM Awas Yojana. (3) However, as the recent exodus of migrant labour for their homes even in the middle of a lockdown has shown, an overwhelming majority of workers are forced to live in subhuman conditions.

Kolkata gets 2.2 lakh migrant labour, from other states and from Bengal’s districts. Our previous field work (4) showed that menial labour from who have worked in Kolkata’s Burrabazar for decades continue to live in pavements. Migrant workers are possibly a significant part of Kolkata’s pavement dwellers. In the clothes industry of Metiaburz, we found seven to eight workers crammed in 8 ft by 10 ft rooms, with a single bulb and a fan running on a “hooked” wire.

The Research Proposal: This study proposes to examine the dwelling conditions of migrant labour in Kolkata. It will take certain sections of industry which typically use migrant labour, such as clothing and tailoring industry, construction, food processing, small manufacturing and so on, which typically survive on seasonal or round-the-year supply of migrant labour. It will then see what arrangements are being made for the living quarters by employers, municipalities and by labour themselves.

We will look at the policy documents by Union government, state government, municipalities and international aid organisations like DFID,

USAID and so on to see what was visualised for meeting housing needs, and what is the reality on ground. We will look at existing research on accommodations for migrant labour.

Research Questions:

What are the predominant types of dwelling accommodations for migrant workers living in Kolkata?

What kind of access do migrant workers have to basic amenities like drinking water, toilet and sanitation?

What kind of rent do migrant workers pay, and to whom?

What kind of plans have been proposed in the recent past for proper accommodation of migrant workers in Kolkata? What were the major hurdles in the implementation of these plans? What conditions will have to be fulfilled for providing affordable rental homes to migrant workers?

Our study will be limited to the geographical area of greater Kolkata. We will use the methods of interview and focus groups. We will gather data from migrant workers, employers, councillors, municipality and urban development officers. We will also talk to organisations working with migrant labours.