

Women and Children Migrants: A Study of the Urban Workforce in Kolkata

Debarati Bagchi and Sabir Ahmed

The presentation is divided into five broad sections. We first discuss some recent trends in the patterns of migration as can be gleaned from various census decades and the recent rounds of NSS data. We then proceed to develop a conversation between such macro data and the dynamics of population growth in KMC area. The idea is to see if the population trends in the KMC area conforms to the larger national trend. Next, we look at the three available surveys of pavement dwellers in the KMC area done in three different periods: in 1973-74, in 1986-87, and in 2012-13, to understand the local dynamics of migration in the city among the lower crust of the working population. As revealed in all these surveys, the trends in rural-urban migration among the lower strata of population can be discerned from the groups living and reproducing on the city streets and pavements who are usually termed in India ‘pavement dwellers’. Our next task is to locate the rag pickers among the pavement dwellers and understand the processes and structures of migration, occupation, life and labor conditions, vulnerabilities and the question of access to infrastructure and resources among this particular occupation group. This is not to say that the rag pickers can only be found among the pavement dwellers. Nor do we intend to imply that rag pickers are distinct in any count whatsoever among the pavement dwellers in Kolkata that demands special recognition. However, we choose this particular occupation group for at least three reasons. First, the population types found among the rag pickers are consistent with the goal of the larger project, i.e. to focus on the participation of women and children in the informal workforce of Kolkata. This might not be the case if we prefer to choose any other occupation group among the pavement dwellers. Second, a major corpus of literature exists on waste management, garbage recycling and urban sanitation at large in the context of the cities of the South which enables us to situate our story in an International comparative framework.¹ Moreover, historical accounts of sanitation in the context of the cities of the North have given us a good picture of the ways in which civilization and modernity have approached waste since the 18th century.² However, we have relatively impoverished sense of such historical mechanisms in Kolkata. Only a few accounts are available as to how the city manages its waste. The work of Christine Furedy in the early 1980s talks of the human processes involved in

¹ Rosalind Cooke Fredricks, *Doing the Dirty Work: The Cultural Politics of Garbage Collection in Dakar, Senegal*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2009; Rocio Del Pilar Moreno-Sanchez and Jorge Higinio Maldonado, “Surviving from Garbage: The Role of Informal Waste Pickers in a Dynamic Model of Solid-Waste management in Developing Countries”, *Environment and Development Economics*, 11, 371-391, 2006; David C. Wilson, Costas Velis and Chris Cheeseman, “Role of Informal Sector Recycling in Waste Management in Developing Countries”, *Habitat International* 30, 2006, 797-808; Chris Birkbeck, “Self-Employed Proletarians in an Informal Factory: The Case of Cali’s Garbage Dump”, *World Development*, 6 (9/10), 1978, 1178-1185.

² Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury, MIT Press: Cambridge MA, 2000.

the management of waste in the Asian cities. She talks of the specific traditions of waste management in these cities and emphasizes on the need for decentralized and participatory processes. However, little is known about the structural relationships between the labour intensive unorganized activities of rag picking and the more capital intensive and mechanized system of waste recycling. The initial exploratory goal of this paper is limited to the understanding of the life, labour and routine of the rag pickers through ethnographic research. We intend to see if qualitative research among a limited number of respondents creatively speaks to the big data in census and NSS. We also seek to understand the time, territory and family structures associated with the occupation of rag picking. Put differently, we are interested in the relationship between the contingencies of occupation and the question of social reproduction.

Migration Patterns

First, let us accept that migration in absolute number has increased over the decades with the continued growth in population. This is clearly observed by scholars.³ They have variously explained the phenomenon of swelling migration in connection with larger phenomena of continued primitive accumulation, the decline of the social schemes of the state, the increasing asymmetry between agriculture and industry, informal and the formal economies and village and the town. Such processes of proletarianization are not matched by the equal capacity of the towns and industries to absorb the newly released populations. Hence is the presence of the unrealized force of the ‘reserve army of labour’ in contemporary liberalizing India that could be found in the swelling migration figures.⁴ It has been shown that ‘both the census and NSS figures indicate that the rate of migration has increased. According to the 2001 Census, the total migrant population in the country is a little above 30 crore (315 million).’⁵ Also, a study has suggested the figure of about half a million in peak season from the rice belt of just one state, West Bengal.

Amitav Kundu, on the other hand, observes a different story of ‘decline’.⁶ He questions the proposition of growing migration by demonstrating that ‘the percentage of lifetime migrants by their place of birth (PoB) to the total population can be noted to have gone down from 30.8 in 1961 [census] to 20.3 in 2001 [census].’⁷ He argues that ‘a declining trend in overall migration is noted over the past three decades based on the data available from the NSS as well.’ To substantiate, he shows that at an aggregate level (rural-urban combined), there has been a slight decline in the percentage of male migrants (from 11.9 to 10.9) during 1999-2000 to 2007-2008, but an increase in the percentage of women migrants both in rural and urban areas.⁸ Also ‘family migration has

³ Ranabir Samaddar, “Primitive Accumulation and Some Aspects of Work and Life in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV (18), May 2, 2009, 33-42.

⁴ *Ibid.* 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Amitav Kundu, Lopamudra Ray Saraswati, “Migration and Exclusionary Urbanization in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVII (26-27), June 30, 2012, 219-227.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* 221.

increased in recent years, compared to adult male migration of earlier years.⁹ He conjectures that ‘these patterns can be attributed to distress being a less important factor in the migration of adult males. They are now moving with women, children and elderly persons.’¹⁰ Alternatively, he suggests that the decrease in the share of adult men could be reasoned as ‘previous migrants are now able to bring their family members to join them’. He also notes a new trend in migration. Accepting that the poor still constitute a substantial proportion of the migrants, he notices that ‘an increasing share is taken by middle and high-income categories, grabbing the new opportunities thrown up by the process of globalization.’¹¹ A related trend suggests an increase in ‘migration for non-economic reasons like attendance in educational institutions, undergoing training or waiting for better future prospects.’¹²

Reading these observations, we may have the reason to ask whether the increase of the number of migrants really hide a story of declining rate of migration. If this is the case, then one needs to explain the institutional arrangements checking migration amidst primitive accumulation. In this connection, one needs also to see the shifting patterns of migration among different registers of population such as male migrants, female migrants, children etc. It also seems important to probe whether the older factors for migration such as employment are declining and new factors such as education are slowly enhancing their share. If this is the case, then what does it tell us about the emerging patterns of migration among different income groups? I want to keep this discussion in mind before entering into the specific story of Kolkata and then moving on to the case studies – the first on long term ‘settled’ migrations (rag pickers) and the other on contemporary short term migrations (nurses in the care economy).

KMC area in the Map of Migration

The population figures in KMC area speak to several waves of historically contingent developments—partition, rural-urban distress migration at the wake of floods and famines in the hinterland of the city, the administrative reshuffles of the territorial limits of the KMC, the declining industrial landscape of the city, the improvement of cheap communication networks with the suburban areas, the increasing trend of converting residential spaces to retail and other commercial uses, referring to patterns of changing land use pushing existing resident population to the ever emerging margins of the city. Let us consider an exploratory framework of the history of population group in the KMC area in conversation with the figures presented in the earlier section¹³.

⁹ *Ibid.* 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* 223.

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¹³ I am indebted to Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay for a detailed conversation on the shifting demographic trend in the KMC area and its suburbs between 1901-2011. The data is collected from <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002620-the-evolving-urban-form-kolkata-50-mile-city>

The highest growth of population in the KMC area since independence has two distinct moments. The first one is in the census decade between 1941 and 1951. In this decade the population in the KMC area grew by 27.9% while the suburban growth in the same decade was at 30.4% and this growth can be attributed to the partition.¹⁴ However, one should not forget that the growth in the KMC area and in the suburbs was much higher in the preceding decade i.e. 1931-41. In this decade the population of KMC grew by 84.8% and suburban growth was 51.5%. In 1961 census, the rate of population growth in the KMC area was 8.5% which indicated a drastic decline in growth compared to the previous decade. The suburban growth was rather spectacular at 55%. One should remember here between 1951 and 1961 a large number of lower caste peasants migrated to the state of West Bengal that appeared to settle in the suburbs and perhaps marginally in the KMC area. In the next census decade i.e. 1961-71, the population of KMC area grew by 7.6% while the suburban growth was at 39.7%. In the following decade, the population grew in KMC area by 5% while the suburban growth was at 37.9%. The second major growth in KMC population is registered in the census decade of 1981-91. In this decade, the population in the KMC area grew by 33.1% (highest in the postcolonial period) while the rate of growth in the suburban areas declined to such extent that the population increased by a modest 12.4% (all time low) since 1931.¹⁵ One may argue that the KMC growth in this decade could be connected to India's aggressive embracing of neoliberal economic policies but one should also remember between 1981-91, the physical area of KMC embraced many of the densely populated southern areas like Jadavpur, Tollygunge, Bijoygarh and Garia. This also explains why the suburban population increased at a much declining rate. Between 1991-2001, the population growth in KMC area was just 3.9% while the growth in the suburban areas again shot up to 30.4% which means that new areas had been urbanized in this decade and new rural urban interfaces emerged variously connected by rail and surface transport facilities. This is the moment brilliantly ethnographically captured by Ananya Roy in her book *City Requiem, Calcutta*.¹⁶ Roy talks of the institution of paralegal commuting by train by the women from the suburban areas to participate in the booming lower rung of the informal care industry such as domestic help in the middle class households. These women, as Roy finds, could come to the station between 5am and 8 am and would leave the city in the evening precisely between 5pm and 7pm. Any census data would tend to miss this mass phenomenon in Kolkata. Therefore, the question remains whether migration is increasing or decreasing or increasing at a declining rate. The small data of ethnography talks of such institutions as daily commuting and transit labour or partial seasonal migration that complicates the larger migration question. But as Kundu suggests, the rising trend is a phenomenon of female migration and the migration of families with children. It is only in the census decade of 2001-2011 that we find a somewhat decline in the absolute number of KMC population from 4573000 in 2001 to 4487000 in 2011 which amounts to a decline in KMC population growth by -1.9%.¹⁷ But the suburban growth was still at 11.5%. The decline of population in the KMC area happened when the 2011 census reported rapid urbanization in each of the 19 districts in the state. The decadal growth

¹⁴ <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002620-the-evolving-urban-form-kolkata-50-mile-city>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of urban population was 31.89% which was higher than the national average of 31.16%. This might reveal that the rural to urban migration within the state finds new urban centres distributed in various districts. Kolkata might have ceased to be the dream city of everyone.

By comparing three surveys of pavement dwellers in Kolkata in three distinct census moments can enlighten us with historically nuanced facts and figures.

Pavement Dwellers and Rag pickers

In 1973-74 the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO), a unit of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), undertook a survey of pavement dwellers in the city.¹⁸ Apart from collecting information about 10000 pavement dwellers, this report contains life histories of 100 respondents. Not only do they reflect on the exigencies of rural-urban migration in between 1940s and 1970s, they also narrate how the migrant population gradually got absorbed in different kinds of informal work and also the chief places from where they hailed and the specific areas of the city where these migrants concentrated. This survey records that 98.33% of the total population living on pavements were migrants to Calcutta from different districts of West Bengal and other neighboring states.¹⁹ From an analysis of persons willing to continue with their existing kind of occupation, it was calculated that 4.9 percent (which amounts to approximately 490 individuals) were rag-pickers.²⁰ However, this survey doesn't give us any clue about the spatial distribution of rag pickers, their internal social organization and territorialized pockets of activity. Another survey of pavement dwellers, also conducted by the CMDA in 1986-87, has worked with a much larger database of around 55,000 pavement dwellers.²¹ This survey keeps a clear account of the ward-wise distribution of pavement dwellers in the Calcutta Corporation area. Since none of the above surveys intended to be a census survey, they might not reflect the 'actual' number of pavement dwellers given that the number might vary from season to season. But both the surveys emphasized that the southern hinterland of the city, i.e. the southern part of the undivided 24 parganas remained the major contributor to the pavement dwelling population. The occupational pattern in the 1986 survey was divided into 'mainstream' and 'marginal' informal sectors. Rag pickers formed part of the latter which included the poorest sections of the surveyed population. Among the 3200 respondents, 17% were engaged in the vocation of rag picking.²² Notably, females

¹⁸ Sudhendu Mukherjee, "A Report on the Survey of 10,000 Pavement-Dwellers in Calcutta. Under the Shadow of the Metropolis: They are Citizens Too, September 1973-March 1974", in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004*, Vol. I, 1970-1979, Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, 1975.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 249.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 265.

²¹ N. Vijay Jagannathan and Animesh Halder, "Pavement Dwellers of Calcutta – 1987: A Socio-Economic Study April 1988", in *Metropolitan Kolkata: An Anthology of Socio-Economic Studies and Survey Reports of KMDA 1970-2004*, Vol. IV, 1986-1992, Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority: Socio-Economic Planning Unit, Directorate of Planning and Development, 2004.

²² *Ibid.* 127.

constituted 17% of the earning population, among whom 14.4% were paper and rag pickers.²³ Their average income of this occupational group was Rs. 67 which meant there was an upper and lower limit to their income. The variation depended on the various location of the garbage vats that they accessed: 'a rag picker with access to the garbage vat outside a luxury hotel or a fashionable residential complex can be expected to earn much more than another person who has to be content with the pickings from a depressed neighbourhood'.²⁴ As is evident from the above quote, the rag pickers indeed have a routine route to follow. Their access to garbage vats located at a place with potentially more rent value enables them to earn relatively more. The important ethnographic questions that emerges from this are the following: what determines their differential access to vats with different grades of income potential. Does it then suffice to say that even the community of rag pickers is internally graded across an incipient class line? What does it tell us about the discourse of the 'urban poor' as an undifferentiated mass? Is it possible to explain the notion of differential access across the line of caste, ethnicity and religion?

A study of 2012-13 on pavement dwellers by Pranjali Rawat has conducted a sample survey of 196 households in Central Kolkata in order to throw light on 'the state of human development' and applicability of traditional components of healthcare, food security and education.²⁵ This survey retains the classification of 'mainstream' (including those employed in the transport and service sector) and the 'marginal' (including the socially undesirable like beggars, rag pickers and domestic help) occupations. This study also distinctly records that the rag pickers are mostly women and children. It is observed that while most van pullers, cooks, cobblers, day laborers and rickshaw pullers are predominantly men, most rag pickers and domestic helps are women. Rawat also observes certain income disparities among male and female rag pickers. Average daily income of a rag picker is 68.2, whereas for a male rag picker the figure is 85, for a female ragpicker it is 61.²⁶ However, the interesting thing here is the introduction of certain categories that are not consistent with the literature of previous years mentioned above. Rawat uses the term 'homeless' interchangeably with 'pavement dwellers'. Presumably, the import of the term could be tracked from the literature on homelessness in the United States and Latin America. Secondly, Rawat has ironically taken the *homeless household* as the unit of enumeration and research. If we remember Kundu's observations about the new trend of increasing family migration among the rural poor, this indeed could serve as a case in point.

Existing work on Calcutta Rag pickers

Apart from these scattered allusions in these surveys, the first detailed study of the scavengers and rag pickers of Calcutta was carried out by Cristine Furedy in early 1980s as part of her extensive research on recovery and recycling of solid waste in Asian cities. Waste scavenging has been a very

²³ *Ibid.* 167.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 132.

²⁵ Pranjali Rawat, *Findings of a Socio-Economic Survey of Pavement Dwelling Families in Central Kolkata*, 2013.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 12.

usual phenomenon in most third world cities. However, as Furedy argued, every city has its own specific ways. Scavenging had been the prevalent mode of disposal since colonial times in Calcutta carried out mostly by the Chamar castes. The first municipal dump was created in 1867, but, she presumed that the proliferation of squatters around dump sites is likely to be a post-independence phenomena following Calcutta Corporation's recruitment of low caste immigrants as sweepers.²⁷ Comparing it with other developing cities, Furedy teased out the specificities of the nature of squatting around Dhapa, the biggest dump site of Calcutta. Furedy's chief contention was to look into the socio-political configuration of the waste economy instead of treating the issues of collection or disposal merely as a technical process. Thus Furedy's study brought the 'people involved', the informal workers like scavengers and waste pickers to the forefront. Furedy upheld the social rights of waste workers and their involvement in the decision making processes. She critiqued the existing waste management literature to be oriented by western mechanical approaches as they did not pay heed to social considerations.²⁸ Furedy tried to understand the Asian phenomenon of waste management by grasping the complex networks and relationships between different stakeholders – like the municipal workers, junk merchants, small operators and industrialists, and the largely paralegal and extralegal exchanges on which the industry thrived.²⁹ The street pickers were the most visible and indeed the poorest among the many participants. Her works also highlight the prevalent middle class social perceptions about scavengers as nuisance or social threat who were to be prevented from accessing dump sites. The central role of women and children in street and dump pickings recur in most of her works. She explains the usual mode:

Pickers work in family, groups or individually: a mother nursing an infant forms a depot with large cane baskets where her older children deposit their gatherings; older children supervise the work of their younger brothers and sisters; ... All share the space with other scavengers: pigs, goats, cattle, kites and vultures, and many varieties of smaller creatures.³⁰

Taking cue from these observations, it will be interesting to explore the role of women and children in the contemporary scenario of the informal sector of garbage recycling.

Initial Field Experiences

Furedy's work explores an almost virgin territory of social research in Kolkata. It has left no legacy behind. From the burgeoning reports and surveys on the East Kolkata wetlands, we hardly get much idea about the developments in the garbage recycling industry since 1980s and its impact on the everyday life of rag pickers. A section of our larger project thus makes a modest attempt to form a

²⁷ Christine Furedy, "Survival Strategies of the Urban poor – Scavenging and Recuperation in Calcutta", *GeoJournal*, 8(2), 1984, 132.

²⁸ Christine Furedy, "Socio-Political Aspects of the Recovery and Recycling of Urban Wastes in Asia", *Conservation & Recycling*, 7(2-4), 1984, 167-173.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 170.

³⁰ Furedy, *Survival Strategies*, 132.

conversation with Furedy's work. We expect this would enable us to see the developments in the sector with a cross-decadal comparison. Whereas Furedy chiefly concentrated on particular dump sites like Dhapa, I would like to conduct my field survey in two or three areas of the city where the rag pickers concentrate as pavement dwellers. I have so far conducted initial field trips in the Ballygunge-Gariahat area, among the people who live under the Bijan Setu, and the Gariahat flyover. The infrastructure of bridge and flyover create spaces underneath that become shelter for the pavement dwellers. This arrangement is viable because it does not infringe on the movement of automobiles and pedestrian's right of passage. Let me briefly mention a few important points from my conversation with the women living under the Bijan Setu to highlight some of the threads that I would like to pursue during my field research. A space is created under the Bijan Setu where two parallel roads end up in a u-turn blockade where there is a pay-and-use municipal toilet. Adjacent to the toilet, there are two floors beneath the bridge which are usually rented to shopkeepers. Although most of the shops remain closed as it does not make much economic sense for the shopkeeper to get a shop rented where pedestrians scarcely pass, where there is no neighbourhood of sedentary residence of the city. So the rag pickers, living on this part, mostly women, make use of the shaded frontage of the locked shops. They annex these spaces with pieces of tarpaulin sheet, build a notion of privacy, use these spaces as the extension of the inner spaces inside the bridge. None of the rag pickers I encountered in this particular area are new migrants to the city, all have been living here for the last two or three generations. My principal interlocutor Tuktuki Mandal took me there. She is the third generation of a rag picker-pavement dwelling unit with a strong maternal connection. Before marriage, she lived with her mother and maternal grandmother who are the only Muslim family in this particular area among the largely low caste population. Her grandmother Gulbahari must be in her late 70s. She doesn't remember the exact year of her permanent migration to the city from a village near Laxmikantapur in South 24 Parganas (one may recollect that both the survey of 1974 and 1986 on pavement dwellers refer to the southern part of the then undivided 24 parganas as one of the major hubs of migration to the city between 1940s and 1980s). The only memory that she has is a near permanent state of hunger under extreme poverty in the village. She also remembers that the extremity of their poverty followed the prolonged illness of her father-in-law. Her husband used to work in Calcutta, had another family somewhere in the city. He used to go back to the village once in every ten years only to gift her with a child. There was hardly any remittance from the city to the village that could check the pace of dispossession for the family. It was in the persuasion of the father-in-law that Gulbahari came to the city along with two of her daughters. She initially worked as domestic help in nine households with a monthly income of 90 rupees. After a few months she drifted to rag picking. She used to pick with a group of women who came from different villages along the rail track running between Sealdah and Laxmikantapur suggesting strong pre-existing village networks in the territorialisation of this vocation. I asked Gulbahari why she preferred rag picking over domestic help. She gave an interesting reply. It was 'freedom' of work that attracted her to rag picking. What kind of freedom was she talking about? She was in a minor way boasting for flexibility in arranging her twenty four hours. The freedom also released her from the little comforts for a roof above her head. The self employment in the rag picking sector relieved her from the regimentation of time in the domestic help sector. Generations of rag pickers, Laxmi

Doloi, Mana Sarkar and all others I spoke to, harped on this point. Predictably, they do not have much idea of how their act of rag picking contributes to the economy of waste management as explicated by Furedy. I would like to conceptually address this idea of work and freedom in course of my research.

Defying the threats of evictions and other difficulties, many women like Gulbahari have stayed back in this area, along with their daughters and granddaughters for the last few decades. One reason for them to stick to this particular area is that this is close to their area of scavenging. These women follow the route between Kasba and Kalighat for picking. Their work starts in the dawn when no train would take them to their area of work. This is a point of major difference with those who work as domestic help whom Ananya Roy met for her ethnography. May be this provides one clue as to why they try to stick to their location of living amidst the threat of eviction, natural calamities, structural closure to the access to infrastructure. They use the pay and use toilet at the standard rates. No wonder this is the case when public infrastructure is created to sanitise the city under private management. My encounter with these people also revealed abject conditions under which they work. They often get wounded and infected while sorting and picking from all kinds of wastes with bare hands. Monsoons are always the worst time for them. 'It is hard to sell drenched papers', they complained. During heavy rains, they usually sit on some elevated place and wait until the water recedes.

Tuktuki Mandal is in her second year of graduation in Jogomaya Devi College. She acts as a bridge between the ethnographer and the subject community. In the era of 'NGOisation of development', Tuktuki also acts as a bridge between different NGO initiatives and the pavement dwellers. Rag pickers are being organized under various NGO banners like the Calcutta Samaritans wing *Kolkata Naba Jagaran Mancha* (KNJM). Members like Tuktuki are being implicated to lead the process of co-opting others under various agendas: demand for Annapurna Antodyaya Cards, BPL cards, voter id. cards, claims for being considered worthy of the city's law and order regime, educational schemes for the street children etc. It will be important to see whether such 'institutionalization of informality' through organization creates certain enclosures within the urban poor. Does this in any way influence the phenomena of migration? Instead of entering into a wholesale critique of the NGO moment, I would rather like to discern the complex relationship implicated in the birth of such knowledge regimes and the subjects.

If we remember the ethnographic questions we raised after the literature survey on pavement dwellers, one can find we are yet to have a comprehensive idea about the internal dynamics and external linkages associated with the rag pickers. How are their conditions of living structurally connected to the specificities of their occupation? Is it possible to say that living on the street has cultural and social dimensions to it that the mere analysis of their income from rag picking might not reveal? This is because we have to assume that not all rag pickers live on the street. There must be some who are scattered in many slums and squatter colonies in the city. What does then explain the multigenerational living in a particular location on the street? These will be crucial questions that this research will attempt to address.

Also, it would attempt to tease out the role of various actors – the rag pickers, the municipal sweeper and garbage collector, the dealer or the transporter – participating at different levels of the waste management sector in tandem with the recommendations of the Pollution Control Board, the Kolkata Solid Waste Management Improvement Project and other projects taken up by the Kolkata Corporation.³¹ My aim would be to understand the structural relation between the formal sector of waste management and the informal processes of waste recycling.

Care Economy: A Study of Migrant Nurses

Many of us vividly remember the dreadful incident of 16th of December 2012 that shook the ‘civil society’. A 23 year old student of paramedical science of the Uttarakhand University who came to Delhi to pursue an internship in a hospital was brutally gangraped by the driver and cleaners of a chartered bus and succumbed to death. The anger of urban civil society manifested in various ways including demand for revenge to the perpetrators of the violence. What emerged from such an unforeseen encounter was the circulation of the victims’ (variously called Nirbhaya and Damini) biography in the mainstream and social media. We were told that Nirbhaya was raised in Delhi while her parents came from a non-descript village in the Ballia district of UP. Nirbhaya’s father sold his agricultural land to give Nirbhaya the best possible education in the care sector privileging her education over his male children. We were also told that Nirbhaya’s father who wanted to be a school master sought to fulfill his desire by educating his daughter. ‘it never entered our hearts to ever discriminate. How could I be happy if my son is happy and my daughter isn’t? And it was impossible to refuse a little girl who loved going to school’ said Nirbhaya’s bereaved father.³²

The aspiration of Nirbhaya and her parents speaks of a very powerful sentiment among a class of peasants with small or moderate land ownership to invest in a future, socially mobile urban life. As the protest of the civil society following Nirbhaya’s violent death reveals, the assertive middle class of ‘New India’ patronises such aspirations. We could find a strong resonance of this story of aspiration, that ended up in tragedy, in the larger trend of migration from villages and small towns to the city by relatively well-off sections. As we have already mentioned in the first section, Amitav Kundu has clearly delineated a trend of ‘new migration’ to cities under the ‘new opportunities’ in the post liberalization era from Census and NSS data. A part of this present project is dedicated to understand the regimes of migration in the booming sector of care economy in contemporary Kolkata.³³ We plan to conduct research on the nurses who migrate, largely from Kerala, Tamil Nadu or some north eastern states like Manipur, are recruited in the nursing homes of Kolkata. A micro

³¹ Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project, “Master Plan on Solid Waste Management”; Kolkata Solid Waste Management Improvement Project, “Rag Picker’s Livelihood Improvement: A Suggestive Plan”;

³² Betwa Sharma, ‘A Year Later, Family of Delhi Gang-raped Victim Press for Full Justice’, The New York Times, 16 December 2013. The New York Times. Rashid Omar, ‘Far from Media Storm, UP Village grieves for its Daughter’, The Hindu, 30 December 2012.

³³ I am indebted to Madhurilata Basu, who is pursuing her doctoral research on the Care Economy, for her valuable inputs and field insights. I have accompanied Madhurilata to the hospitals and Nursing Homes for my field research.

study of nurses employed in particular nursing homes (we have selected Belview, AMRI and KPC Medical College, Jadavpur for our first round of survey) would help us engage with or question the macro trend that Kundu suggests. Our initial findings suggest:

- This trend is largely visible since the proliferation of private nursing homes in Kolkata – a significant feature of urbanization in contemporary Kolkata.
- From our conversations with some of the HR officials, we gather that the most striking feature of this sector is the short term stay of the migrant nurses. Kolkata seems to be treated as the stop gap/transit centre before the next destination – usually Gulf countries – and then the final immigration to Canada or USA. They gather a few years of ‘experience’, which is a prerequisite for their next move abroad. A study of this particular kind of migration would help us retain the question as to how far census enumerations can really capture migration to cities under new opportunities and new imperatives that are emerging.
- Interviews reveal that the pattern of migration is undergoing a recent shift. Migration from Kerala or Tamil Nadu is gradually declining as the private hospitals in their home states have increased the pay packages and have relaxed the ‘experience’ criteria. We would like to follow the train of this particular development and trace back from when and why this kind of migration began, what are the specificities of the fundamental structure of the care sector in Kolkata that facilitates this kind of migration.
- One of our chief tasks would be to look into the socio-religious profiles of the nurses – are they mostly Christians? Is there any kinship/village/town network operating here?
- After a year’s stay as apprentice, the nurses usually have to acquire a government registration before they could be upgraded to a staff nurse. We would like to see if this is a consistent pattern in all nursing homes. We would begin to look into the differences in the official and informal (mostly ayahs) practices of recruitment in government and private health care sector.
- It would also be interesting if we could explore the making of a particular site in the city, Mukundapur – off the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, which has become popular as the ‘hospital hub’ in the past two decades. We would like to see how, under the new process of labour migration, the area has acquired a specific ‘migrant identity’ with the proliferation of Kerala eateries, messes and hostels for the nurses and the shopkeepers adopting the language of the migrants.