

Street Dwelling and City Space

Women Waste Pickers in Kolkata

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This article tracks the life and work of the migrant female waste pickers in Kolkata. A few recent works have pursued the question of NGO-isation and unionisation among them at length. However, none of these works emphasise or discuss the spatial dimension of the dwelling places of this occupation group. The relationship between the contingencies of their occupation and the question of social reproduction is also explored here.

1 Introduction

This article locates the migrant women waste pickers among the pavement dwellers and homeless people residing in a particular area of Kolkata and seeks to understand the processes and structures of migration, occupation, life and labour conditions, and vulnerabilities of this group and whether they have access to infrastructure and resources. I try to illustrate that the gendered question of waste picking cannot be addressed by simply understanding the act of waste picking itself. Rather, it has to be seen in conjunction with their spatiality of dwelling, which is often subsumed in our a priori understanding that waste pickers must be migrants, since they do not belong to the city's formal regime of tenancy. Here, I seek to understand the territory, family structures, and the pattern of shifts in occupation taking place in and around a particular dwelling area. Put differently, I am interested in the relationship between the contingencies of occupation and the question of social reproduction, keeping the question of space alive.

In 1973–74, the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation (CMPO), a unit of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), undertook a survey of 10,000 pavement dwellers in the city (Mukherjee 1975). 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 (Jagannathan and Halder 1988). These surveys reflect on the exigencies of rural–urban migration in-between the 1940s and 1970s and also show how the migrant population gradually got absorbed in different kinds of informal work, the places from where they hailed, and the specific areas of the city where these migrants were concentrated in. Both surveys emphasised that the southern hinterland of the city, that is, the southern part of the undivided 24 Parganas, is where the majority of pavement dwelling population had hailed from.

The occupational pattern in the 1986 survey was divided into “mainstream” and “marginal” informal sectors. Waste pickers formed a part of the latter, which included the poorest sections of the surveyed population. Notably, females constituted 17% of the earning population, among whom 14.4% were paper and waste pickers (Jagannathan and Halder 1988: 167). This survey also revealed that income variation among this group depended on their differential access to garbage vats. This leads to a related issue—the proximity of their dwelling place to workplace, a factor which definitely impacts

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the question of access. We shall discuss this point in the next section.

A sample survey of 196 pavement dwelling households in central Kolkata, conducted in 2012–13, retains the classification of “mainstream” (including those employed in the transport and service sector) and “marginal” (including the socially undesirable like beggars, waste pickers and domestic help) occupations and distinctly records that the waste pickers are mostly women and children (Rawat 2013). This survey introduces the term “homeless” and deploys it interchangeably with “pavement dwellers.” Homeless household is taken as the unit of enumeration and research. Paramita Chakravarti’s study of the homeless women’s movement in Kolkata cited the finding of the Rapid Action Survey of 2011, which put the number of homeless in the city at 37,468 (2014: 118).¹ She indicated the growing importance of the “household” in the enumeration of urban poor. She observed that the 2001 Census deployed the paradoxical category of “houseless households” to account for the homeless population in the cities “who do not live in buildings or census houses but live in the open on roadside, pavements, in hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, *mandaps*, railway platforms and so on...” (Chakravarti 2014: 119).² The figure for such “houseless households” in Kolkata was enumerated to be 8,731 in 2001 (Chakravarti 2014: 119). She closely studies the recent efforts by the Calcutta Samaritans from 2001 onwards in organising slum dwellers and homeless population in Kolkata by forming groups that work in particular wards. As an offshoot of this movement, the Kolkata Naba Jagaran Manch (KNJM) came into being and women waste pickers constituted a substantial section of the participants. Citing KNJM leaflets, Chakravarti showed that the Manch had been successful in securing many of these demands. She argues that the movement helps us discern how urban poverty and homelessness remains a gendered experience in contemporary cities. On the one hand, they create space for women’s voices, but on the other, they reinforce the identification of “home” with women.

The discourse on homelessness essentially presupposes a right to home. This somehow detaches the question of occupation from the question of dwelling. All waste pickers get clubbed under the umbrella term of “homeless.” The ethnography of a single family in a particular place in Kolkata reveals the limitations of such an approach. Taking a cue from the above-mentioned observations, I would like to explore the life stories of a particular family of waste pickers in a specific urban centre of Kolkata. I would be looking at waste-picking as a socio-economic livelihood practice by tagging it with the notion of homelessness. My aim would be to delve into the layered spatiality of their dwellings, an issue which remains absent in the existing works.

2 Ballygunge–Gariahat Area

I have conducted some field research in the Ballygunge–Gariahat area, part of ward number 68 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, among people who live under the Bijan Setu

and Gariahat flyover. The pavement dwellers reside under the flyover. This arrangement is viable because it does not infringe on the movement of automobiles and pedestrian’s right to passage. I highlight a few important points from my conversation with the women waste pickers living in these areas.

There is space under the Bijan Setu where two parallel roads end up in a u-turn and where a pay-and-use municipal toilet is located. Adjacent to the toilet, shops have been constructed under the bridge. However, most of the shops remain closed, as it does not make much economic sense for shopkeepers to rent shops in a location not frequented by pedestrians, and where there is no neighbourhood of sedentary residence nearby. So, the waste pickers living in 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, and use these spaces as an extension of the inner spaces beneath the bridge. None of the waste pickers I encountered in this particular area are new migrants to the city—all have been living here for the past two or three generations. This particular area, close to the Ballygunje station, is well-documented in the geography of rural–urban migration in Kolkata. K C Roychowdhury, a resident of Ballygunje in the 1940s (and also a member of the legislative assembly), wrote in his testimony to the Famine Inquiry Commission, set up to look into the Bengal Famine of 1943, that how “in June 1943,” “thousands of destitute refugees invaded Ballygunj...from villages south and south east of Calcutta in search of food.” Roychowdhury continued, “a large number of them” could be seen living on “foot-paths of roads leading to Ballygunj and Dhakuria stations.”³

My principal interlocutor, Tuktuki Mondal, took me under the flyover. She is the third generation of a rag picking, pavement-dwelling family with a strong maternal connection. She lives with her mother and maternal grandmother, and hers is the only Muslim family living in this particular area, inhabited largely by lower castes. Her grandmother, Gulbahari, must be in her early 70s. She could not mention the exact year when she migrated to the city from East Mallikpur village near Laxmikantapur in South 24 Parganas, but remembers the time as “*Naxaler somoy*” (the time of the Naxalite movement), presumably in the late 1960s or 1970s. One may recollect that both the surveys of 1974 and 1986 on pavement dwellers refer to the southern part of the then undivided 24 Parganas as one of the major hubs from where people migrated to the city between 1940s and 1980s. The only memory she has is of living in a near permanent state of hunger and extreme poverty in the village. Her husband used to be a *feriwala* (itinerant vendor) in the village when she got married. In a few months, he married another woman and came to Kolkata. Gulbahari vaguely knows that he worked as a cart puller and stayed with another family somewhere near Tollygunge. He used to visit her in the village once in every six–seven 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 of the family. It was due to the persuasion of her ailing father-in-law that

Gulbahari came to the city along with two of her daughters and a son. She initially worked as domestic help in nine households with a monthly income of ₹180. After a few months she drifted to ragpicking. Gulbahari's daughter Putul (Tuktuki's mother) accompanied her since she was a child. From the age of 12, Putul started picking waste on her own.

Gulbahari 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. Chhabi Sardar, in her late 60s, migrated around the same time as Gulbahari from Dakshin Barasat (South 24 Parganas) with her children, unable to bear hunger coupled with the torture inflicted by her husband. Sabita Sardar, 40, who now lives under the Gariahat flyover, came with her mother and five siblings to the Ballygunge area in 1980 after her father disappeared from their village in Gocharan (South 24 Parganas). Pinki Halder of Gariahat has a similar story to tell. A large number of women ragpickers/pavement dwellers in this area migrated with their mothers under different circumstances. Many of them begged for a while or worked as domestic help and then gradually shifted to ragpicking.

The waste pickers of adjacent areas have an informal understanding regarding their territorial jurisdictions of picking. "We hardly fight, rather we negotiate beforehand and settle who will cover what areas," says both Putul of Ballygunge and Sabita of Gariahat. The women of Ballygunge pick along the stretches of Ballygunge–Gariahat Road and Rashbehari Avenue. Until a few years back, Putul used to walk in the neighbourhoods, in the alleys and by-lanes, before the break of dawn. But after the corporation people started collecting garbage from homes, neighbourhoods have sadly become "cleaner." Nowadays, Putul claims, they have shifted from the residential areas to the main thoroughfares. Each day, they cover a distance of five to six kilometres.

I asked Gulbahari, the eldest in this area, why she preferred ragpicking over working as domestic help. She spoke of a kind of "freedom" of work that attracted her to ragpicking. Ragpickers belonging to different age groups, staying in these areas, expressed similar views. They were all in a minor way boasting about the flexibility in arranging their 24 hours. The Ballygunge women usually set off for their day's work at around three or four in the morning and come back before the sweepers arrive on the roads. Major streets and intersections are always the most lucrative stretches because of the shops and cars; "the more cars on a street, the more bottles we collect." But women of Gariahat collect all night and get back by four in the morning. They start their work a few hours after the shops close and the roads become desolate. "The sooner we collect the litter from the shop fronts, the fresher the things are. And fresher and cleaner-looking scrap fetches more money than the soiled ones," Pinki explains.

The segregation is done at their place of dwelling. "We can do the segregation any time of the day along with cooking and looking after the children." It is this kind of a flexible work arrangement that seems to have made ragpicking a

largely female dominated sector. The self-employment in the waste picking sector relieves these women from the regimented work schedule in the domestic help sector. It is worth noting that what they call freedom essentially presupposes that their work is intimately tied to their space of dwelling.

My encounter with these people also revealed the abject conditions under which these ragpickers work. They often get wounded and infected while sorting and picking 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 take refuge in a place on high ground and wait until the water recedes. However, defying all difficulties, many women like Gulbahari have continued to live on the pavements, along with their daughters and granddaughters for the last few decades. They use the public toilets, paying standard rates.

'Freedom' of Work

One reason for them to stick to this particular area is that this is close to their area of scavenging. Their work starts early, when no train is available for commuting to their area of work. This is a point of major difference between them and the women who commute by train 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—subjects of Ananya Roy's ethnographic study (Roy 2003). Also, the second phase of the work, sorting and segregating the collected scraps, is carried out in the place where they live. The collected scraps are piled in front of their dwellings. Then every object is sorted—plastics of various kinds, glass, aluminium foil, metals, cloth, etc—and put in separate sacks. Discarded waste turns into recyclable and saleable waste only after it undergoes such processes of segregation. Thus the waste pickers try to stick to their location of dwelling amidst the threat of eviction or natural calamities. The women living in the Ballygunge station–Bijan Setu area have a little more space to store these sacks, so they can afford to sell their objects once in a week. However, the women living under Gariahat flyover usually sell them daily or every alternate day. Here, the parked cars shrink the spaces for keeping the sacks.

After segregation, they carry the sacks to a nearby scrap dealer (usually a fixed one), who forms the lowest rung of the chain of intermediary traders in the recycling industry. These shops are usually known among the waste pickers as *kabadi dokan* (scrap dealers), *knach-loha dokan* (glass-iron dealers) or *kagoj dokan* (wastepaper dealers). Different objects accrue different rates.⁴ There are various categories of plastic. The transparent plastics in which garments are wrapped (known as PP) sell at ₹20 per kg, if they are clean and a little less if they are soiled, the bigger plastic bags for ₹5 per kg, and Mother Dairy plastic containers of milk sell at ₹12 per kg. Mineral water plastic bottles sell at ₹10 per kg, but the bottle caps sell at double the price. Everyday fibre items and shoes fetch around ₹10 per kg. All kinds of alcohol bottles sell at ₹1 per kg, except beer bottles, which is the only object that sells at ₹1 per piece. The

discarded perfume containers are expensive, and they earn ₹80 per kg. Aluminium foil and beer cans, gathered mostly from the garbage bins of restaurants, fetch ₹40 per kg. Scrap tin is priced at ₹8 per kg, iron at ₹10 per kg, while discarded steel vessels at ₹18 per kg. Packing boxes collected from electronic and other shops constitute a chunk of their everyday objects and are sold for ₹7 per kg. Elderly pickers like Gulbahari earn around ₹300 a week. For the younger ones, the earnings vary between ₹100 and ₹200 a day. However, some of the women living in Gariahat supplement their incomes (by around ₹800 a month) by cleaning big shops during the day.

My ethnography does not look into the details of the chain of traders in the waste recycling industry in Kolkata. However, the two commodity streams that Kaveri Gill speaks about in her study on waste recycling and plastic industry in Delhi seem to operate (with minor variations) in the Kolkata market as well. Gill, in her extensive study explores the nature of exchange relations between each actor in the vertical value chain of plastic recycling industry, beginning with the informal waste pickers, scrap dealers to various intermediary traders right up to the factory level (Gill 2010). The lowest rung of the informal recovery of recyclable waste in Delhi consists of the waste pickers or scavengers and the itinerant buyers. The pickers collect from a “wet, unsegregated mix of organic and inorganic waste... only some of which is recyclable,” while the itinerant buyers deal in “dry, segregated, inorganic waste, some of which is reusable and all of which is recyclable” (Gill 2010: 88). Owing to such differential access to waste, Gill illustrates that the pickers and buyers enter two different commodity chains. The lower waste recycling stream, of a lesser value and smaller margin, has a short chain, with the waste pickers selling to the *panni* (plastic bag) dealers who in turn directly sell to the factories. The upper waste recycling stream involves higher margins and numerous intermediaries between the *kabadi* dealer (to whom the itinerant buyer sells) and a factory.

3 Some General Observations

The following are some of the major observations of this study. First, the story of migration, as narrated by the women I interviewed, is predominantly an account of domestic/household loss—for example, death of the earning husband or his desertion compelled these women to migrate to the city for a livelihood. This account differs from the standard political-economy and demographic arguments of rural–urban migration (such as the dissociation of the peasant from the means of production, etc). Arguably, Gulbahari’s husband was already an “urban migrant,” a non-peasant, who used to visit the village once every few years.

Second, we have seen that most of these women who migrated to the city were acquainted with each other, as most of them had migrated from the same area and ended up settling in the same pockets of the city. This means that migration was never a complete rupture from the past, or that of a “new” voyage to an unknown world; though, in some of their accounts, the unknown city and its structural anonymity predominate.

Third, most of my respondents agreed that waste-picking was not their first occupation when they came to the city. Many of them, for a while, took recourse to begging. Subsequently, some of them switched to the domestic labour sector. Both begging and domestic wage work must have enabled them to understand the intimate geographies of these neighbourhoods and the local cartographies of power (for example, who had access to what in a neighbourhood). To become a waste picker, it was necessary to be known to the sedentary residents of the neighbourhood and not considered as a complete outsider (for example, a potential thief). Even the stray dogs needed to acknowledge them with silence. Therefore, regular begging and the experience of domestic work provided some of my respondents with the social and cultural resources to become waste pickers. To the residents, on the other hand, this switch in livelihood—the fact that they did not choose to remain beggars—represented my respondent’s “honesty.” In short, I argue that to become a “worker” in the city is a historical process. Similarly, the life histories of my respondents show how difficult it was for them to establish credibility to seek employment as domestic workers, as the potential employers always looked for a home address to track them. A constant allegation from the residents was that the pavement dwellers were too “unclean” to be worthy of cleaning work in their households.

Fourth, the waste pickers I followed had enough reason to gradually move to this occupation. It, as we have seen, provided them with the flexibility to look after their children, conduct everyday domestic work, and earn better remuneration. As opposed to domestic work that often entailed physical violence and humiliation, waste picking appeared to them as being “free” of such hazards. However, it was a dirty job. Often, it involved spending the better part of the day literally within a huge garbage bin along with violent dogs and crows. The work involved instant segregation between rejectable wastes and recyclable wastes. The next step for them was to bring the piles of recyclable waste to the place where they lived. Subsequently, they had to further segregate the accumulated waste into different heads, as each object would sell at a different price. One could even say that the act of segregation transformed an object in its post-commodity state (pure waste) into its pre-commodity state (object ready for recycling to enter again into the market). The act of segregation was also an intensely household process, for here the contribution from the children was crucial. In this entire process, the waste picker was seen to walk between the sites of collection and the place of segregation which was ideally her “home.”

4 Tuktuki’s Story of Transition

Tuktuki Mondal graduated from the Jogomaya Devi College, Kolkata in 2015. She acts as a bridge between the ethnographer and the subject community. In the era of “NGO-isation of development,” Tuktuki also acts as a bridge between different non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiatives and the pavement dwellers. Tuktuki is an active member of KNJM.

Members like Tuktuki are given the responsibility of co-opting other waste pickers to demand for Annapurna Antyodaya Cards, BPL (below poverty line) cards, voter identity cards, educational schemes for the street children, etc.

Tuktuki's story is one of transition. Unlike her mother and grandmother, Tuktuki no longer works as a waste picker. Besides her college education and KNJM activism, she took up a job with an NGO. She used to teach at evening schools for street children. A few years ago, she got married. Her husband also worked for this NGO. After their marriage, he came to the Ballygunge railway station area to stay with Tuktuki. When I first met Tuktuki, almost a year ago, she was in her fourth month of pregnancy. Despite a few medical complications, she continued with her college and NGO work. In the final months, they rented a room in Kasba, a locality nearby Ballygunge, with the desire of raising the child in a "home." However, while giving birth to her daughter, her condition deteriorated. She had to remain in the hospital for quite a long time. Also, her husband had to stay with her. They overcame the crisis eventually and came back with their baby daughter.

Meanwhile, both of them had lost their jobs for being absent from work for a long time. In a few months, they put up a tea and *kachuri* (a popular Bengali morning snack) stall near the flyover and the station. They run this stall from early morning till noon. It has to be noted here, that this rather quick shift in occupation was facilitated by the very

location of their erstwhile dwelling. Ballygunge is one of the most important railway stations, serving as a transit centre between the South 24 Parganas and Kolkata. (It is worth recalling here that all the women ragpickers staying in this area were migrants from South 24 Parganas). The road towards the station, parallel to the bridge, gets busy quite early every morning because of a thriving fruit and vegetable market there. The morning *kachuri* shop caters to the sellers and buyers at this morning market. Also retailers and hawkers who open their shops around 10 or 11 am in the morning eat at these places. Tuktuki and his husband have to pay ₹1,500 as rent for the small corner of the footpath where they have set up their stall. They mostly live under the bridge nowadays to stay near their shop, but they have retained their Kasba home, for which they have to pay a monthly rent of ₹3,000. Tuktuki's transition to a "happy heterosexual family" involved among other things the renting of a "home" in the city. She has graduated to being a part of the city's mainstream population by finding a place in the tenancy regime of the city. This was also a process of sanitising her life on the street. In many of our conversations, Tuktuki attempted to distance herself from the "usual" women on the street. She mentioned that on various occasions, just being on the street at night was enough for the patrolling police to suspect her of being a prostitute.

Tuktuki's story highlights the complex dwelling economy in which a waste picker exists. The literature on "homelessness"

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misses the crucial economic and infrastructural dimensions of the space of dwelling of the urban poor. Living in the heart of the city ensures access to certain public infrastructures and economic activities. Apart from proximity to their work space, the women living in this area could avail the advantages of an important railway station as a transit centre and a thriving street market. Moreover, the station and bridge provide shade, drinking water and public toilets. Hence, the location of their dwelling is structurally connected to the specificities of their occupation. How do we otherwise explain the phenomenon of three generations living together in a particular location on the street? Living on the street has economic dimensions that mere recognition of a “lack of home” might fail to take account of. If the gradual unionisation among the waste pickers intensifies the process of reducing informalisation within the informal economy (Bandyopadhyay 2015), their continuing stake in that particular location in Ballygunj emphasises that housing activism needs to engage with homelessness in a different way. Housing the homeless cannot be a pretext for their displacement to a new frontier of the city.

5 ‘Clean City’ Campaign

In July 2014, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation launched Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s much cherished “Clean City” campaign. “Kolkata will soon become a garbage vat free city. Steps are being taken to abolish the open vats throughout the city and put in the service of solid waste compactors,” the campaign’s website announces.⁵ As we have already discussed, the act of aggregation and segregation of waste is at the heart of the informal waste picking economy. A growing municipalisation and mechanisation of waste segregation will make the role

of waste pickers progressively redundant. Kolkata is at the brink of such a moment. The story is not unknown. In many cities outside India, such a system has been in operation for decades. In Kolkata, this has just been set in motion with the introduction of gated compactor stations in various pockets replacing open vats.

Since this process is still in its initial stage, it is ethnographically productive to track its impact on my respondents. Beneath the Bijan Setu, there is a “Clean City” compactor station. My respondents informed me that the impact of this on the waste pickers in Ballygunge station area is mixed. Those who directly collect waste from the open vats appear to have been affected directly. I was introduced to one such woman who now works as a cleaner in the newly established pay and use toilet. Before the establishment of the compactor station in the area, she used to earn ₹600 to ₹900 per week, but in her new job, she gets ₹4,500 a month.

When I reached the flyover area one late afternoon a couple of weeks back, Gulbahari was busy stitching a broken sole of a discarded shoe. She is usually seen cooking the first meal at this hour. Today, her daughters were taking care of that. Age has made Gulbahari feeble. She can no longer walk long distances for picking. For the last couple of years, she was picking from the adjacent vat. But now, the waste pickers are prohibited to enter the compactor station. “Can you imagine?”—Gulbahari does not hide her shock—“these new vats have alarm systems to call the cops.” No wonder Kolkata is becoming a smart city. Gulbahari now earns some money by mending and repairing scraps for the local kabadi shop before the objects are sold to the intermediary at the next level.

NOTES

- 1 The Calcutta Samaritans and the West Bengal Government Survey, 2011, cited in Chakravarti (2014: 118).
- 2 “Definition of Terms: Houseless Households,” *State Primary Census Abstract of Houseless Population, 2001*, p xlix, Census of India, 2001, *Primary Census Abstract, West Bengal*, Series 20, Vol 1 (Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal), Cited in Chakravarti (2014).
- 3 Interrogation of K C Roy Chowdhury and Babu Nataraj Pal of the Bose–Pukur Relief Committee, Calcutta by the Famine Inquiry Commission on 11 September 1944, Calcutta. Memorandum Submitted by the President of the Bose–Pukur Relief Committee for the Famine Inquiry Commission. Nanavati Papers, Vol 3, p 205. For details of the activities of the *Bosepukur Relief Committee*, see Soumita Mazumder, *Situating Clubs in Colonial Calcutta: A Study of Social Militarization*, unpublished MPhil Thesis submitted to Jadavpur University through the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 2015.
- 4 Rates as on November 2015.
- 5 See <http://aitcofficial.org/aitc/kolkata-municipal-corporation-launches-clean-city-campaign/>.

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