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## **Pulling the City: Labor, Family, and Survival among Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers**

**Saptarsha Seal**

Doctoral Scholar, Center for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi- 110067

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### **ABSTRACT**

Hand-pulled rickshaws had been the part of the iconic symbolization of the megapolis like Calcutta since the early part of the 20th century. But although the transport saved its berth in the list of the tangible heritage of Calcutta, the men who had pulled the transport on their shoulders remain marginalised always from time to time. This paper examines the migration dynamics of such rickshaw pullers from Bihar and Jharkhand to Kolkata, analyzing the interplay of push and pull factors shaping this phenomenon. Drawing on existing literature and empirical evidence, it offers a nuanced understanding of the economic, social, and structural forces driving migration, while also highlighting the implications for both the sending and receiving regions. This ethnographic research paper delves into the intricate dynamics of the families of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their socioeconomic conditions, cultural practices, and daily struggles. Through participant observation, interviews, and engagement with the community, this study sheds light on the challenges faced by these families, their coping mechanisms, and the resilience ingrained within their social fabric. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the multifaceted issues impacting the livelihoods and well-being of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers and their families.

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## Introduction

*"Rickshaw*

*Oh, Rickshawaala*

*I miss your rickshaw riding*

*Let's drive again forgetting*

*The fortunate past and farthest future"*

Hand-pulled rickshaws have long been an iconic mode of transportation in the city of Kolkata, serving as a lifeline for many commuters in the bustling city. Although "Life in A Metro" like Kolkata necessitates the commuters these days to choose an Ola, Uber or any other cab driving services mostly to travel from one region to another, the hand-pulled rickshaws are still enjoying the dependence of a group of small businessmen in parts of Central and North Kolkata and also remained as a helpful transport of many families of Calcutta till date. Behind this symbol of tradition and resilience lie the families of the rickshaw pullers, who navigate a complex web of socioeconomic challenges on a daily basis. Despite being an integral part of the urban landscape, the lives and experiences of these families remain largely undocumented. This ethnographic research seeks to fill this gap by offering a nuanced exploration of the migration of these pullers from the neighboring states like Bihar and Jharkhand in the quest of 'roti-rozi' in the mega polis and stayed being the part of the 'streetscapes' or 'urban public sphere' for generations. This study also delve into studying a glimpse of the familial realities of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers of North and Central Kolkata who are decreasing in terms of numbers on one side because of changing their occupations and almost stoppage of the flow of their migration .

**Methodology :** In this study both qualitative and quantitative data were used. Though there have been very few studies done on the rickshaw pullers, the study draws from the available secondary literature such as civil society organisation reports, census and research studies to contextualize the background of the migration of the rickshaw-pullers. The research methodology employed in this study is primarily ethnographic, relying on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and immersion within the community to gather rich, qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including rickshaw pullers, their union leader, Mukhtar Ali and and the local authorities, to gain insights into their lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

**Literature Review:** Earlier in various studies, we can find the studies of migration and the changing position of the rickshaw-pullers of different cities of India as well as South Asia- including Delhi, Haryana etc. But studies on the handpulled rickshaw pullers are rare though it is there in the fabric of the



city since last few decades. If we look through the spectacles of social sciences we must say there are some wonderful research works like “Calcutta Cycle-Rickshaw pullers: A Sociological Study” by Subir Bandopadhyay throw light on the various aspects of the lifestyle of the cycle rickshaw pullers whereas a study on “Action Research Programme on Rickshaw and Rickshaw Drivers: 2000-2002” by “Jan Paribahan Panchayat” or “Lokayan” focuses on the position of the rickshaw-pullers of Delhi, Meerut, Alwar etc in the social strata. Such types of research had remained my inspiration and source of encouragement to work on the hand-pulled rickshaws and the people who pulled it using their shoulders everyday in various parts of Kolkata based on several newspaper reports , case studies done in earlier decades and definitely interviews and oral records. This paper tries to put light only on a few avenues of this transport and their pullers.

**Findings:** The findings of this research portray how the situations of the hand-pulled rickshaw pullers of Calcutta witness several dynamics since the later decades of the 20th century till present times. In the initial part we have tried to trace the various ‘push and pull’ factors acted behind their migration. The ethnographic study reveals a myriad of challenges faced by the families of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata. The experience that they have shared during the interviews showcase factors like economic insecurity and challenges which emerges as a central theme, with most families struggling to make ends meet on meager incomes derived from rickshaw pulling. Limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services further exacerbates their vulnerability though according to their union leader the present government have taken many welfarist measures for these people . Despite these adversities, a strong sense of community solidarity and mutual support is evident within these neighborhoods, underscoring the resilience ingrained within the social fabric. But it is also evident that during recent times , their occupation-based organizational solidarity is decreasing because of the gradual decline of their numbers and the constant increment of their interest in other professions following the economic issues those they had faced during recent times.

### © Portrayal of Rickshaw in Literature and Films as a part of ‘City-fabric’:

With the development of the urban landscape of Kolkata we can see how the various aspects of the arts and aesthetics-in literature ,film and other aspects of popular culture of the city finds it’s connection with the rickshaws and rickshaw pullers. The stories of the pullers have been reflected in many books and articles. Briton Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’(1885), Leo She’s “Rickshaw boy” (1936) and Frenchman Dominique Lapierre’s “City of Joy” (1988) contain the stories of lives of rickshaw pullers. We can find the mention of the rickshaw pullers not only in such English literature only, but in



writings of veteran Bengali authors and novels we have seen the mention of this ‘about-to-be extinct’ transport. Starting from Sunil Gangopadhyay to Bibhutibhusan Mukhopadhyay in literature, we have found the presence of rickshaws while they have explained the urban Calcutta. Neither only in paintings on Calcutta, the rickshaws are visible as a symbol nor only in the photographs of exhibitions on Calcutta finds a nicely framed snap of a marginal rickshaw-puller waiting for a passenger while sweating, but in the city how the position of rickshaw pullers changed and still undergoing various changes are need to be studied and addressed.

Be it collections of memory-based writings like Tahir Shah’s “Complete Collection of Travel Literature” or Mitali Perkin’s “Rickshaw Girl” or Yug Suraiyya’s “Rickshaw Ragtime: Calcutta Remembered”, be it the filmy sequence of Calcutta-based author Abhimanyu Roy (Ayushman Khurrana) with Bindu (Parineeti Chopra) in films like “Meri Pyari Bindu” or be it Ganesh Bhutoria’s journey towards Darpa Narayan Chowdhury’s house riding on Atmaram Paswan’s Rickshaw in “Bhooter Bhoishyat”(directed by Anik Dutta) in the recent times- the popular culture and literature always show the presence, and significance of the rickshaw to draw the picture-perfect essence of Calcutta in the canvas.

### **Tracing the Migration Pattern of the Rickshaw-Pullers:**

For understanding the pattern of migration of the rickshaw-pullers and their conditions, we must study the dynamism since the past century, whereas understanding their present condition and tendency to leave their occupation and choose any new occupation can be understood from the in-depth interviews and the voices of the participant rickshaw pullers in the study. There are various push and pull factors that have worked in the whole process.

We can trace a few push factors working behind the migration of a group of people from Bihar and present-day Jharkhand to Kolkata who had chosen to be the rickshaw-puller. Economic deprivation and lack of employment opportunities in rural areas serve as significant push factors driving individuals to seek livelihoods in urban centers like Kolkata. Landlessness and agricultural distress force many rural dwellers to migrate to cities in search of alternative sources of income, with rickshaw pulling offering a viable option. Marginalized communities facing social exclusion and discrimination in rural areas are compelled to migrate to urban centers in pursuit of better living conditions and opportunities for social mobility.

There are a few pull factors too that we can mention too Kolkata's informal sector, including the rickshaw-pulling industry, provides employment opportunities for migrants with minimal skills and



resources, making it an attractive destination. Established social networks and community ties within the rickshaw-pulling fraternity in Kolkata facilitate migration by providing newcomers with support and guidance. The ease of entry and low capital requirements associated with rickshaw pulling make it accessible to migrants, further enhancing its attractiveness as an employment option.

Poverty-induced migration from Bihar has been extensively researched in migration studies. As there were a number of people in Bihar who had joined as ‘coolies’ in British colonies like Fiji, Guyana, West Indies etc and joined the plantation colonies, there were a few people too who had done internal migration too from time to time. For such internal migration their choice was Bengal (after independence mostly West Bengal) because of ‘attraction of economic rewards’ of Kolkata and surroundings comparatively than Bihar. Mostly from districts like Munger, Samastipur, and Muzaffarpur, the predecessors of the pullers (whom we had interviewed) had come to Kolkata. How sociologist Subir Bandopadhyay had cited the factors like “choose mentality” and “ambitious outlook” for explaining migration of cycle-rickshaw pullers are also applicable for the hand-pulled rickshaw pullers too as we find a few evidences from the reports of Unnayan, Calcutta Samaritans and the statements that I have recorded while interviewing the pullers.

There was an attempt from the Leftist Government to stop the rickshaws of Calcutta during Jyoti Basu in 1984 and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in 2005 citing the factor of “human labour”, the rickshaws had been there in the city-scape of Calcutta overlooking the red-eyes of “capitalist communist” Buddhadeb who was encouraged by the idea of “neo-liberalism”. But presently a reverse migration is also evident in some of the junctures because of the problematic situation of Bengal currently as said by a rickshaw-puller, Ramratan Yadav who said –“I am going to Bihar back with my rickshaw. Govt had promised but nithing worked. I have my rickshaw and land in Bihar, I can survive there better now”

### ☉ **Portraying the Socio-Economic Condition of the Community of Rickshaw-Pullers:**

This section presents a brief background about the hand-rickshaw pullers in Kolkata city, examining their survival strategies in the face of strong government initiatives to evict them. Although the sample size is very small (only thirty in number) in comparison to the total number of people involved in this profession, this section gives an idea about their community identity. Two-thirds of the hand-rickshaw pullers surveyed are from the Hindu community and the remaining one-third belongs to the Muslim community. Almost all of them are located in the central Kolkata area. Our observations indicate that the highest proportion of rickshaw-pullers were in the 41–60 year age group, while the second highest proportion were over 60. The proportional representation of elderly people is relatively



high among the surveyed hand-rickshaw pullers, largely because the State Government has stopped issuing new licenses and young people do not feel this would provide a secure livelihood, due to the vulnerable and uncertain future of the occupation. Most of the elderly rickshaw pullers continue with the job as they have become habituated to this occupation over a long time and do not want to take the risk of changing their livelihood. In reply to our question about what other activities they could see as providing possible livelihood options, we found that many do not feel that they can do anything else. The hand-rickshaw pullers are either illiterate or have only a basic (can read and sign only) and primary education. Only a small proportion—belonging to the younger age group—had achieved a secondary level of education. Being poorly educated, these people do not feel confident and are very reluctant to join other livelihoods. Poor reading and writing skills also make it difficult for them to deal with both municipal officials and with the traffic police. Many aged rickshaw-pullers stated that although they had enough money to buy instead of rent their own rickshaw, they chose to rent because they could not deal with the municipal officials who issue licenses.

The rickshaw-pullers often suffer from poverty because they have only one or two earners in their family, supporting several other members who do not earn, and surviving on only a meager income. According to our field survey, about one-third of the rickshaw-pullers have five to six members in the family who are dependent on their income. Another one-third has three earning members in a family of nine to ten. Thus, the ratio between earning and dependent members is about 1:3. We observed only one case where the number of earning members in the family was greater than the dependent members. These figures point to the fact that the livelihood crisis of hand-rickshaw pullers not only affects them but also affects a much larger family community.

### ⊙ Experiences of earning ‘bread and butter’ and livelihoods:

The idea of ‘livelihood’ as conceived by Robert Chambers (1989) can be explained from various angles. In addition to financial prosperity, greater emphasis is placed on the non-economic aspects involved in ensuring survival. Others, such as Ellis, have interpreted it as a comprehensive amalgamation of various components — encompassing assets (natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital), activities (utilization strategies), and access to these (facilitated by institutions and social relationships), all of which collectively determine the sustenance obtained by individuals or households. Although livelihood analysis frameworks may vary in their specifics, the fundamental elements typically include resources (what individuals possess), strategies (what individuals undertake), and outcomes (the objectives individuals pursue). Numerous studies in the literature explore the role migration can play in



the livelihoods of impoverished rural households. It is now widely acknowledged that migration forms a part of the customary livelihood strategies of the impoverished. Seasonal migrations from impoverished to more prosperous rural regions, or from villages to urban centers, are extensively documented in economically underdeveloped areas of developing countries.

The examination of hand-rickshaw pullers in Kolkata aligns with previous research indicating that migration is a common strategy among impoverished individuals seeking sustainable livelihoods. The informal urban sectors of Indian cities are often populated by poor migrants, with a significant portion being recent arrivals from rural areas. These migrants typically engage in casual or self-employed informal occupations, with rickshaw pulling being particularly noteworthy due to its accessibility and lack of capital investment requirement. A substantial proportion of our study participants have resided and worked in Kolkata for over forty years, with few newcomers due to the uncertain future of hand-pulled rickshaws in the city.

When asked about their reasons for entering the profession, roughly 20 percent of the pullers mentioned being influenced by their fathers, who were also rickshaw pullers. The remaining 80 percent joined the profession through informal social networks consisting of friends, relatives, kin, and fellow villagers. This network of connections can be seen as the social capital of impoverished migrants in a metropolitan environment. Those who have long been accustomed to this occupation typically show reluctance to switch to alternative employment opportunities. A rickshaw-puller, named Prabhat Yadav (57) told-“It is not possible for me to run any other vehicle other than rickshaw. I had tried cycle rickshaw in Belehata and met an accident. In this age , to save my family I have to pull this taanga only. In the mean time, Govt tried to create problem. But this government is a bit sensitive. We have Mukhtar bhai too.”

A rickshaw-puller( who did not want to state his name) in Maniktala stated- “sometimes I think of leaving this and go back to my village. I had once spent four sleepless nights during last July due to rainfall, even the polythene couldn’t save me and now this scorching heat can take my life anytime I feel.” But even after that they have tried to survive amidst much adversities.

These facts give me a clear picture about the struggles of these rickshaw-pullers in everyday lives – how they struggle for their survival amidst much adversities that surround them always- starting from the natural calamities to the problems like the political phenomenon.

### © Income of the rickshaw-pullers and dynamics of spending:



Dominique Lapierre in “City of Joy” had written –“It takes the strength of a buffalo! And once it’s moving, it’s even worse. With passengers on board, you might be pulling a good three hundred pounds.” It is reflective of the high energy demand of the pullers. It is evident from the field study and conversations with the pullers, most of them are unable to run the rickshaw every day. But since the Covid period, they faced more troubles and they had to even run the rickshaw to fight with hunger sometimes.

Our field research shows that the average earning of hand-rickshaw pullers is between INR100–150 per day, thus varying between INR 3,000–4,000 per month. Out of this daily income they have to pay INR20–35 per day to hire a rickshaw.

The majority of our research participants spend an average of INR 60–80 per day on themselves. Very few of them can afford more than INR 80 for their daily needs in the city. Out of this total expenditure, they not only pay for food (especially *chaatu*) and shelter but also for *bidi* (hand-rolled country cigarettes), *bangla* (country alcohol). On average, they spend INR 200–300 per month on such things.

Around one-third of the rickshaw-pullers send INR 750–1,500 to their families. Another one-third send INR 1,501–2,250 per month. Only the younger pullers, who earn more, can send more than INR 2,250 per month to their family. A detailed analysis of the diversified household livelihoods in their villages shows that the remittances constitute a major proportion of their family income and these are also used for building assets whenever possible, after fulfilling their consumption needs.

### **Limitations:**

There are a few limitations of the survey too. Though I have tried to draw a picture of the migration pattern and livelihoods of the hand-pulled rickshaw pullers of Calcutta from my field work, but due to the shortage of time I have used a small sample size of 30 participants, whereas I have followed the random survey while interviewing rickshaw pullers from M.G. Road, Muktaram Babu Street, Durgacharan Mitra Street, Sukea Street, A.P.C. Road, and Raja Rammohan Roy Sarani in Kolkata.

### **Conclusion:**

Decades after decades have passed, the age of the city went on increase, but even in the globalised city of Kolkata, which remained not only “City of Joy” but also “City of Hope” for many is losing the caliber to accommodate the ‘marginalised’ rickshaw-pullers life in the space of providing ‘better lifestyle’ anymore. Instead some government had tried to ban hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata, whereas the



present one is busy in giving the light of hope though their welfarist measures don't even put some light to provide any permanent alternative or rehabilitation except providing rations to them. A 2003 study published in National Geographic found that "rickshaw pullers are near the bottom of Kolkata occupations in income, doing better than only the ragpickers and the beggars. For someone without land or education, that still beats trying to make a living in Bihar". The picture has not changed much since then with the waves of 'parivartan' in post-2011.

Although the earlier government and a significant portion of the populace perceive the occupation of rickshaw-pulling as dehumanizing, the rickshaw pullers themselves do not necessarily hold this perspective. Central to this issue is the concept of subalternity, which entails adopting a perspective "from the bottom up" and considering the viewpoints of those marginalized from mainstream discourse, particularly in the development of policies and practices concerning hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata.

This research endeavor seeks to delve into the subversive and marginalized aspects of mobility associated with hand-pulled rickshaws. The impoverished, migrant, and unorganized status of rickshaw pullers has relegated their voices to the subaltern realm, necessitating attention within the broader academic discourse on migration studies.

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