

## Negotiating for 'Security': Migrant Women Workers in Colonial Calcutta (1881-1951)

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### Introduction

H. Beverley, the special census officer of the 1881 census, spent a whole section of his report on the increasing number of mud huts in some areas of Kolkata. He described the increase in the number of huts, especially in some of the municipal wards, as significant because it showed at least a 15—to 20-percent increase in the number of migrants in some of these wards after the first official census in 1876.<sup>1</sup> Beverley also mentioned that the people mainly migrated from Bihar, then the United Province (Uttar Pradesh, after the independence), and Orissa to make their fortune. They lived in the mud huts of the slum areas of the city. The report also mentioned that most of these migrants were predominantly male and left their families behind in their ancestral villages.<sup>2</sup>

Although Beverley accepted that male migrants were coming to the city due to the increase in industrialisation activities within and surrounding areas of the city and its suburbs, he admitted that “the law of natural progression will be affected by the relative proportion of sexes, the healthiness and unhealthiness of the locality, and other causes”.<sup>3</sup> While the main City areas had a lesser number of women (i.e. 33.3 per cent, which was far more inferior than the 1876 census of the town) among the residents mainly lived in the slum areas, the number of female residents was higher (i.e. 41.4 per cent, which was slightly higher than 1872 census of the suburbs) in the suburban areas (Balliaghata, Entally, Ooltadanga, Tollygunge and others).<sup>4</sup> As per the 1881 census report, the migrants who lived in those areas belonged to the Santhal and Dhangar communities and primarily engaged in conservancy work or manual scavenging.<sup>5</sup> Raja Binay Krishna Deb Bahadur’s writing about the city mentioned the female migrant workers in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Belonged to the family of one of the most affluent beneficiaries of the British (Shovabazar Rajbari), Binoy Krishna witnessed several migrant women workers in the “royal families” of the city. Most of them were appointed as housemaids, but there were some “low caste” women appointed as manual scavengers for the toilets used by female members of the “royal” or “aristocratic” families, midwives and several other “odd jobs”.<sup>6</sup>

The census of 1891 posed a larger question about the socio-economic position of the female migrant workers. According to the census, many migrant women were engaged in household jobs. They worked as washer-women, female barbers, cooks, maidservants and nurses<sup>7</sup>. Apart from these jobs, women migrant workers were also involved in selling vegetables and fish in the markets, and some were also involved in selling wines in the wine shops at the Lal Bazar area of Calcutta.<sup>8</sup> However, as per the census records, a large number of working women were involved in prostitution. According to the census, at least 20,126 women were working as prostitutes in Calcutta. The report mentioned that in

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<sup>1</sup> Government of India, Report on the Census of Calcutta and Suburbs (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1881), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Report on the Census of Calcutta and Suburbs (1881), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Census (1881), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Census (1881), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Census (1881), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Raja Binoy Krishna Deb. *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Romesh Chandra Ghose, 1905), 46.

<sup>7</sup> Govt. of India, Report on the Census of Calcutta (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Census of Calcutta (1891), 30-31.

most of the cases, these helpless women had nothing to do except sell their bodies to earn a livelihood.<sup>9</sup> It was the first time that the census reports counted the number of prostitutes for the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act to save the colonial elites from this illegitimate relationship [].<sup>10</sup>

### **The Problem**

The bias in the colonial census was not only the female-male bias. The report considered the white prostitutes as morally sensitive than their native counterparts and quit the profession. The attitude to execute the Contagious Diseases Act against the native women sex workers showed the colonial notion of security against the subjects. The Police Administration Reports of the late Nineteenth Century also witnessed the mentions of migrant women workers involved in 'criminal activities'. Their primary goal was to create a 'disciplinary mechanism' [Michael Foucault's idea on disciplinary mechanism in Security, Territory, and Population] to protect and secure society. None of the acts were concerned with ensuring the security of the women migrant workers.

The invisibility of women migrants, especially workers, in public documents, showed a colonial idea of the visualisation of migrants through a masculine lens. The changing character of the migrant working class, as Dipesh Chakraborty, Parimal Ghosh and Samita Sen observed in their research, was primarily based on the increase of the jute industries in the city. However, little is said about the role of women workers among the migrants. Samita Sen correctly pointed out the reason behind the invisibility. According to Sen, women migrated from Midnapore, Birbhum and Bankura to work in the jute mills till the 1890s. The number of women workers gradually decreased with the rising number of male migrant workers from Bihar and the United Provinces. Women workers, as argued by Sen, were replaced by migrant men from those areas due to different socio-economic reasons. The cheap price of labour was one of them.<sup>11</sup> However, Sen agreed that a section of single women still migrated to the city and became involved in various professions apart from jute mills. According to Sen, either they came due to some social exploitation in the villages or were trafficked by some female/ male members of this village.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the accounts given by labour historians on the Bengal Jute industry, there was little data about the women migrant workers. However, the census reports and the public surveys in the archives mentioned the women's workforce in different marginal professions (housekeeping, domestic workers, midwives, etc.). However, there was little concern for drafting policies to ensure their security. The role of the women, even through the lens of the evangelists, was limited to the households. Those who worked outside in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were considered "a person with immoral character" or "bad women". Therefore, the concern about their security was also seen through a colonialised masculine perspective.

The situation changed when women from middle-class or lower-middle-class households came to the job market to save their families from the economic crisis. Although criticised by the popular vernacular media, these women became prominent in public documents as they had been considered the backbone of the economy. There have been several literary references to working women since post-World War I. However, ignorance remained, reflected in the lack of proper policies on the health and security of women workers, especially migrant women workers.

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<sup>9</sup> Census (1891), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Census (1891), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Sen (1999), 33-34.

## **Aim of the Project**

This research project will reflect the situation of migrant women workers in colonial Calcutta, their representation in the workforce of the city and their invisibility in the public records except when some objections came from the city elites or legal action was taken against some of the ‘obscene’ or ‘vulgar’ jobs done by these “migrant women”. However, the presence of women in the workforce was reflected in the first official census reports in 1881 and the census in 1951. But, regarding health and social security, the reports did not explain anything significant. Therefore, the project will primarily focus on the colonial rulers’ health and social security policies and their benefits/drawbacks on migrant women (especially women workers). The project also brought a critical concern. Were the migrant women workers considered one of the essential categories in urban life during colonial times? Was there any shift in their position with time? Do these women carry a liminal position for the colonial rulers as they were not figured or framed in a particular category, or were they considered marginalised? The project also tries to shed some light on the class-caste dimensions among these women workers with the transformation and diversification of their work.

The research for this project will be based on the historical analysis of Public Records in the archives, Census Reports, Municipal or Development Authority surveys, and the Acts and Judgements on the one hand and vernacular and English newspaper reports, articles published in different popular vernacular magazines, biographies and memoirs, and writings on the city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the other.

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