

**INFORMAL POLITICS, MASCULINE LABOUR:
AUTO-RICKSHAW AND E-RICKSHAW DRIVERS IN WEST BENGAL**

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In 2014 and 2015, toto rides were one of the attractions for me in Siliguri and Balurghat. I visit Siliguri roughly ten times in a year. Ten years ago, we neither had a two-wheeler nor a four-wheeler vehicle. Usually, my experiences with traditional modes of public transport outside Kolkata have not been exciting or comfortable. The local residents adapt to their transport system over a period of years. But for occasional commuters like me, such situations were extremely unhappy. I would keep saying that we needed urgently a private vehicle, at least a two-wheeler, until I took my first toto ride. My first experience of the toto was in Balurghat. That was just before the pujas¹, i.e., before October, and most of the places in North Bengal offered beautifully pleasant weather. I discovered a completely new vehicle which I had never seen before. I had heard about battery-operated vehicles or e-rickshaws during my work in a research project titled ‘Increased understanding of gendering of workers and culture and politics of organisation of workers with special reference to auto-rickshaw drivers and beauty workers in Kolkata’. The project was funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and conducted from 2013 to 2015 at the School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University. Henceforth I will refer to the project as SWS-RLS Research Project in this dissertation.

¹ Durga Puja, the weeklong major festival of the Bengalis, usually dated in the month of October.

The new vehicle was faster than a cycle-rickshaw but not as speedy as the auto-rickshaw. It was spacious and open, therefore offered more comfort than an auto-rickshaw or a cycle-rickshaw. In Balurghat, which is a cheaper town than Siliguri, the base fare to travel a short distance was Rs. 5. However, this fare continued only for few months. As the toto grew in popularity, the base fare soon rose to Rs. 10. In those days, toto drivers used to move freely throughout the towns. There were no fixed routes, no stands and no standardised structure of fare. The drivers of the freely-plying vehicle, popularly called toto, were hesitant on the road. They were abused by the cycle-rickshaw pullers in the lanes and by-lanes and by other drivers on the main roads. During that time, a driver would say, “*asunna, niye jabo*” – ‘please come, I will take you to your destination’ and “*din na, oi dosh taka*”, ‘rupees ten will be enough’. Sharing seats with other passengers was rare in the initial days. Once I had booked the vehicle, all the vacant seats would be mine. I often imagined a ‘phaeton’² ride as described in Bengali novels in the colonial period and never missed to smoke a cigarette during such rides. At least for the time of the travel, the toto gave a feeling of travelling in a private vehicle, more like a taxi than an auto-rickshaw. The drivers, whom I came across in the initial days in Balurghat, were mostly in their fifties, who left their previous jobs and bought the new vehicle to test their luck. At that time, they

² A luxury sedan, produced in Great Britain, popular among the Europeans and Indian elites in during the British rule.

had no idea about the future of the vehicle, which was becoming familiar to all as toto.

But, within four to five months, toto's visibility on the roads of Balurghat increased significantly. By that time, Siliguri, the most important city in the north, had also become familiar with totes. In December, the New Jalpaiguri³ Railway station had long queues of totes waiting for passengers. In 2016, when my family moved to Shantinagar, in the eastern outskirt of Siliguri, I got introduced to a young man, in his early thirties, who ferried me from the railway station to my house. I became curious because he lived close to my home in the same locality. Our new locality was far from centre of the city and therefore we found the new connection beneficial. We could call him to travel to our desired place in the city. His vehicle was always available if we had to catch an early morning train to Kolkata or if we arrived at night from Kolkata. From being 'always available', toto has now become our habit and inalienable part of our life. Now by 'us', I mean every commuter in West Bengal, except in Kolkata. Toto's entry in Kolkata has been strictly prohibited since its inception. This is an auto-biographical explanation of why I chose to write my dissertation on the autos and totes of West Bengal.

I am most obliged to my supervisors, Prof. Samita Sen and Prof. Partha Pratim Basu, for their constant guidance and support, advice, and patience during my

³ It is the most important railway station in Siliguri.

doctoral dissertation. They developed my interest for informal labour and informal politics. Prof. Sen guided me to consider informal labour sector as an area of research interest, whereas Prof. Basu directed my attention to informal politics. Beyond this PhD dissertation, their wisdom and experience have also guided my decisions in personal life as well. I believe that their blessings and support are eternal treasures of my life.

As a student of Political Science, I became curious about the connection between informal labour and informal politics when I began to work as a research assistant for the SWS-RLS research project investigating the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. Prof. Sen was the Principal Supervisor of the research project and encouraged me to develop my own research interest from the experiences of research in the project.

I am deeply thankful to the School of Women's Studies and the SWS-RLS research project. The research project offered me the opportunity to meet and talk to auto-rickshaw drivers and beauty workers. I had chance to meet leaders of political parties and trade unions, lawyers, government officials and police officers in the course of the project work. During my tenure at the project, I started to develop my interest for informal labour and focus on the political aspects of the sector. In the doctoral dissertation, I have used 120 qualitative interviews done by me and my

colleagues and transcribed by other individuals associated with the School of Women's Studies.

I am truly indebted to the auto-rickshaw drivers, activists, lawyers, journalists, trade union leaders, government officials, and Kolkata Police, for their support. Interviewing them and listening to them at workshops and meetings gave me insights into the functioning of this sector. I could not have achieved any of this without their help and guidance. I would like to thank Sri Dola Sen, Sri Anadi Sahu and Sri Shyamal Chakravarty specially for allowing me to interview them. I deeply acknowledge the support of the toto drivers whom I have interviewed in Narendrapur, Rajpur, Siliguri, Balurghat, Jalpaiguri and Panihati Sodepur. In course of my ethnography, I have spent wonderful moments with some toto drivers in Siliguri and Narendrapur.

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In the end, I again thank my supervisors, my Gurus, for giving me the strength to submit my thesis.

Saurabh Paul

13 March 2023, Monday

Narendrapur, Kolkata 700103

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Abbreviations

1. ILO – International Labour Organisation
2. TMC – Trinamool Congress
3. CPI (M) – Communist Party of India (Marxist)
4. CITU – Centre of Indian Trade Unions
5. INTTUC – Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress
6. AITC – All India Trinamool Congress
7. INTUC – Indian National Trade Union Congress
8. SDO – Sub Divisional Officer
9. BDO – Block Development Officer
10. SMC – Siliguri Municipal Corporation
11. KMA – Kolkata Municipal Area
12. KMDA- Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority
13. CIRT – Central Institute of Road Transport
14. RTA – Regional Transport Authority
15. RTO – Regional Transport Office
16. MLA – Member of Legislative Assembly
17. MP – Member of the Parliament
18. TIN – Temporary Identification Number
19. CF – Certificate of Fitness
20. MVA – Motor Vehicles Act.
21. SWS – School of Women’s Studies
22. RLS – Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung
23. INC – Indian National Congress
24. EO – Executive Officer
25. SESRU – Self-Employment Scheme for Registered Unemployed
26. DYFI – Democratic Youth Federation of India.

Chapter 1

Introduction

My dissertation aims at understanding ‘politics’¹ in the auto-rickshaw and e-rickshaw sectors, which are characterised by informal labour practices, in the context of West Bengal. A major segment of informal urban transport in West Bengal has been dominated by the auto rickshaw from the 1980s. Since 2014, the ‘e-rickshaw’ has emerged as a major mode of intermediate transport. As yet, e-rickshaws, called ‘toto’ in local parlance, are not allowed in Kolkata. In every district and other urban areas, such as, Siliguri, Howrah, Durgapur, suburbs of KMC area, the toto is now the most popular form of transport. Both these, the auto rickshaw and e-rickshaw/toto, are characterized not just by informality but by layers of ‘illegalities’². The workforce is engaged through myriad informal arrangements too. The extreme informality in the structure and working conditions of auto-rickshaw sector is in stark contrast to the highly organised nature of the workers, who are fully and powerfully unionised. The toto sector, however, has remained unorganised till the end of 2022, more than a decade after its introduction. In the initial stage of this research, I had hypothesised that similar to the auto-rickshaw, the toto sector would be organised by the ruling party’s trade union. So far, however, two different pictures of organisation in these

¹‘Politics’, in this context, is used to signify the competition among stakeholders to corner an ever greater share of power and pelf within a sector.

² First, the way in which West Bengal Government included Auto-rickshaw in its Rules contradicts the Central Motor Vehicles Act. and second, the Calcutta High Court has already banned toto. According to the High Court’s direction, e-rickshaw, which is registered and approved as per the central government’s parameters and ply within the lanes and in-roads are legal. Due to these reasons, the word ‘illegality’ has been used here to refer both the sectors, in general. But in chapters, the word ‘para-legality’ is used specifically for auto-rickshaw whereas ‘illegality’ is used for toto.

two sectors have emerged, which might be the outcomes of two different political regimes.

Gender has also been a factor which has shaped the politics of these sectors. Auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata is exclusively masculine, whereas toto sector has gradually made space for the women. On the one hand, scholars have noted that the history of organisation has been also a process of masculinisation of workforce in the formal sector. The 1990s, on the other hand was considered to be coeval with feminisation— not only in terms of the induction of women in the workforce but because informal sector jobs were increasingly akin to *women's work*. The informal passenger transport sector thus offers two sets of contradictions to explore: first, the tension between informality and organisation and second, the tension between informality and gender. My primary focus has always been the politics of those two sectors. Their politics is absolutely shaped by the informality/ informal practices within sectors. Therefore operations of the sectors with existing informalities decide the politics of the drivers. The dissertation has tried to explore and understand this 'politics of the drivers'. It has been argued that such informal sectors legitimise their irregularities or absence of legalities with the help of the informal politics. Moreover, informality and politics shape the aspects of the sectors, labour practices as well as the social milieu of the drivers.

Auto-rickshaw and Toto: Most important modes of para-transit in West Bengal

Samita Sen's occasional paper '*Organised Informality: Auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata*' (2016) is a foundation literature to understand the informality and politics of auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. The paper discusses legality³ of the sector, government's role, trade union, wage and rent and lastly the gendering of the drivers through their professional and social relationships, with special mention to the relationship with passengers. 230 interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers, taken during SWS-RLS research project, are the sources of qualitative as well as quantitative data for the paper. The paper begins with 'virtual unique' features of auto-rickshaw's operational system in comparison to the rest of India. The historical transition since 1983 helps to understand how the sector started to proceed on an entirely distinct track than the rest of its type in India. The erstwhile Left Front government had done multiple experiments with the permit of the vehicle, which essentially decided the nature of working of the sector. Finally, in 2003, the transport department announced certain routes for the plying of auto-rickshaws. The paper shows how the Left Front government created an exception with auto-rickshaw by introducing Motor Vehicles Rule. That was how, Sen argues, the state government itself created informality in the

³ A sector is legal when its nature and practices are defined by the law of the land. On the contrary, a sector becomes para-legal when there are contradictions or ambiguities between the existing laws and actual nature or functioning of the sector.

sector. Later, during the SWS-RLS research project, it was clarified by the lawyers that in case of disagreement in the court, the central act would prevail over the state rule.

The paper proceeds to show that the state government, though deployed the Regional Transport Authority to decide the route, at least officially, but in case of fixing fare, the sector again practiced informality. Sen's paper reflects that, it was the strong trade union which actually decided the fare. Even in case of route, the union played the '*defacto*' role. In my paper, titled 'Informal labour, informal politics: A case study of auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata' (2015), I have argued that the authority, the government as well as the party, wanted to localise the trade to meet their political interest. Running on specific routes and organised in stands on the both ends of the route, provide the drivers with a unique grip over the locality, which the political authority wanted to utilise.

Sen's paper shows that despite myriad para-legalities, the sector has been controlled, directly by the government through the CPI (M) affiliated CITU. The fully organised nature of auto-rickshaw is really rare in the context of informal labour. At least, despite several informalities, the sector has been organised fully, through decades, by traditional trade union, such as CITU. The organisation had been extremely controlled in a sense that even the employer and employee division could have been ignored. Those who drive auto-rickshaw in Kolkata are officially identified

as ‘operators’ because, there are three sections of individuals directed involve in the trade – owner driver, driver and owner. But there has been only one union for these three groups since the beginning. The union had been strong enough to address the issues of these groups together and thus, according to Sen, could ensure ‘struggle over class, rather than between classes.

The paper establishes the major relationship between the government / ruling party, trade union and the sector. Perhaps for the first time it is academically documented how the trade union extract rent from a sector as a part of the mutual relationship. Later, while discussing on her paper with me, the author observed a change regarding rent seeking mechanism in TMC regime. In the first term of TMC government, regular rent seeking stopped in the auto-rickshaw routes due to factions within the local party and trade union leaderships. Moreover, distinction between party and trade union was almost nil. Due to lack of organisational discipline, rent seeking and channelizing the amount to the party’s central fund became impossible. But the cost of official charges such as certificate of fitness, license, etc. as well as amount of traffic rule violation fines were increased heavily. Circumstantial evidences such as news paper reports on the chief minister’s reliance on bureaucrats and police officials supported the observation. According to her, the government was substantiating the amount of rent with the amount be re raised officially through increased government charges and penalties. This dissertation has tried to find out any

possible organisational setup as well as monetary transaction between stakeholders as cost of informality in toto sector.

In the last section, the paper examines the complex relationship between gender and informality. Sen has pointed that the urge of sustenance through single male breadwinner model and aspiration for inter-generational mobility has been prominent among the auto-rickshaw drivers. Despite gradual decrease in income, 73% of the respondents said their wives were not engaged in paid work whereas only 4% said they were self employed. Drivers including the newcomers preferred the way of formal sector employees. Through the narratives of the interviews, it has been shown how much the drivers live with a middle class identity despite ongoing pressure in the auto sector. The perception of the drivers toward women's work and women's role in family, presented through the narratives of the respondents, support the author's claim about the economic behaviour of the drivers. According to the author, the drivers could hardly cope up with the changing nature of the passengers. Passengers, mostly from urban middle class, usually looked down upon the drivers, usually during conversations or paying fare. They hardly fit to the drivers' perception about women's role (as well as attire). Increasing class gap between the drivers and their passengers has been explained as reason for the clash. Though, such clashes were not regular as represented by the media.

I have found a few research papers and term papers on toto/ e-rickshaw. Most of research papers were Delhi based, whereas the term papers and project reports were based on certain localities in West Bengal. Madhu Sivaraman's research paper⁴, in 2014, was concerned about the unregulated market of toto in New Delhi. Meanwhile, people in rural and few suburbs in West Bengal were introduced with the e-vehicle in the same year. His paper forecasted every problem yet to be faced in West Bengal. According to the paper, drivers of the early days were previously cycle-rickshaw pullers who bought toto with an expectation of upward mobility. Some of the features of the trade, as depicted in the paper, differ from the case in West Bengal. One such case is more than 80 % were driving rented toto in Delhi. During that time, in Delhi, municipal corporations and municipalities were delegated to issue registration and identity card for the vehicles and drivers. The author favoured for municipalities and panchayats to take the overall responsibilities of the vehicle, starting from registration to fixing fare, collecting taxes etc. In West Bengal, controlling and mapping the sector through municipalities and BDO offices was implemented, though that took a different shape altogether which has been discussed in the following chapters.

Another research paper⁵, by Shashank Singh, highlighted the importance of Tripura Battery Operated Rickshaw Rules 2014 and proposed for an implementation of the sections related to regulation and safety of the vehicle in Delhi. As expected,

⁴ Madhu Sivaraman, 'Electric Rickshaw', Centre for Public Policy Research, New Delhi, 2014.

⁵ Shashank Singh, 'A study of battery operated e-rickshaws in the state of Delhi', Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2014.

from his survey in 2014 it was shown that almost 100 % of the vehicles in Delhi had Chinese parts assembled in India, using lead acid battery. Data on social aspects of the drivers in Delhi seems interesting. It helps in determining the importance of the battery rickshaws in the state of Delhi – i) 89% of respondents had an increase in their salary from previous professions, ii) 37% of respondents were either unemployed or cycle rickshaw pullers, iii) approximately 3,00,000 people in the country depend on the profession including the manufacturers, the workers and families, iv) the Government of India announced the Deen Dayal Scheme in June 2014, which would help in the financing and procurement of the battery rickshaws in the country, v) 80% of the respondents travelled to-and-fro from the Metro Stations as well, thus adding to the transport eco-system of the city, vi) 46% were migrants from various states in North India, vii) 65% of the drivers believed that there had been a upward mobility in social status due to the change in profession, but only a small number, close to 19% thought that the change was extended to living conditions as well.

Another project report⁶ published in 2019 presented data somehow different from the works of 2014. The report titled, *E-Rickshaw Deployment in Indian Cities - Handbook (Supporting Sustainable Mobility under Smart City Mission)* was a Delhi based project on e-rickshaw. According to the report, apart from Tripura as the

⁶ Nandini Shandilya, Vijay Saini, Ashish Rao Ghorpade, *'E-Rickshaw Deployment in Indian Cities - Handbook (Supporting Sustainable Mobility under Smart City Mission)*, ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability, South Asia (ICLEI South Asia), New Delhi, 2019.

forerunner, other Indian states such as Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Telangana framed policies to promote and safeguard electric vehicles including e-rickshaws. Whereas Karnataka, Uttarakhand and Maharashtra had framed policies which were not e-rickshaws specific, but for e-vehicles in general. Kerala mentioned e-autos but excluded e-rickshaws in its policy.

The report categorized three types of growth of the vehicle in India – planned inclusion, unplanned ad-hoc inclusion and planned inclusion to unplanned expansion. E-rickshaw's growth in Delhi has been cited as the third type. The report stated that by 2019, 71% owned e-rickshaws while 29% were driving rented vehicles. Within a sample size of 200 drivers, 89% of the respondents had registered vehicles which suggest a visible improvement in formalizing the sector in NCR. Even there had been change in daily and monthly earning of the drivers in comparison to the reports of 2014.

The report further suggested three modes of controlling – management of the sector and prioritized the role of city administration, i.e. municipalities or municipal corporations for the purpose. The models are – i) municipal administration as operator, ii) municipal administration as regulator which include route identification, policy control, taxation, incentives, registration and licensing, standard maintenance and other regulatory factors related to e-rickshaws and iii) municipal administration as promoter and facilitator. The pilot project of e-rickshaw deployment by Udaipur

Municipal Corporation has been cited as an example of the first model. According to the third model, RTA and Police control the sector whereas the municipality only provides every necessary condition for hassle free operation of the vehicle. The eighth and ninth chapters of the report have suggested measures for further deployment and management of the sector. It has discussed about big bang approach and phased transition approach for deployment of the vehicle in Indian cities. In general, reports and research papers have identified the sector for its capacity of employment generation and therefore suggested for definitive policy framing and action plans by the concerned state governments. In West Bengal, the transport department published Electric Vehicle Policy 2021 and included registered e-rickshaws. But till December 2022, less than 10% of the approximate total vehicles operating in the state have been registered.

A research paper⁷ studied the operation of toto in two municipalities on the west bank of Ganga – Konnagar and Uttarpara. The research was conducted in 2016 – 2017, which identified toto as a necessary evil due to rapid expansion and absence of regulation. But people were accepting the new vehicle because of its uniqueness and lack of intermediate transport in the region. It showed that buses as well as auto-rickshaws were in an uneven competition with toto. The toto drivers were earning more as the vehicles could ply without registration, permit, paying road tax, and

⁷ Suranjana Chaudhuri, Soumen Mitra, Souvanic Roy, ‘Users’ perception of increasing operations of electric rickshaw (toto) service: A case of Uttarpara, India, Urban Mobility India Conference and Expo 2017, IEST.

police could not fine them for traffic rule violation. The paper mentioned that in 2017, 1000 totos were plying within the jurisdiction of the two municipalities.

Another research paper⁸ on the toto sector of Malda district, based on a field survey among 324 drivers, mentioned that according to the Regional Transport Office of Collectorate, Malda District, more than 55000 totos were plying in the entire district in 2019. It is easy to assume that the real figure would be much more. The survey for the paper was conducted in 2019 was focused on the socio-economic condition of the toto drivers. According to the survey report, more than 78% of the drivers aged between 15 years to 35 years. More than 51% were earning Rs. 500 to Rs. 1000 in a day and more than 86% owned their vehicle. It would be interesting to note that only 11.72 % of drivers accepted cases of police harassment. This is the only paper based on toto sector in West Bengal which had found 43 out 324 respondents who had faced regular extortion of money by ‘local scoundrels’. Seeking donation for festivals by the locals is common but not regular. If it is regular extortion, then there is a problem in labeling them as ‘scoundrels’. Usually the public space in West Bengal is controlled by the local authorities of the ruling party. Exceptions are those places where the opposition parties have strong organizational network. If anyone or a group had extorted money from the toto drivers on daily basis, they undoubtedly had

⁸ Dr. Raisul Bari, Md Areful Hoque, Naved Ansari, ‘Socio- Economic Status and Health Condition among the E-Rickshaw Puller Drivers: A case study’, *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, Volume-5 | Issue-2, January – February 2021, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd38355.pdf

the support of local party authority. Lack of regulatory as well as welfare policies have been pointed out as the major challenge for this sector.

Arindam Roy⁹ presented a scenario of Barddhaman town in 2016, where 565 e-rickshaws were registered among 6000 – 7000 active totos. He also pointed that an unemployed youth of the town could earn Rs. 12000 – Rs. 15000 in a month driving his own toto. The pan Indian scenario of e-rickshaw or toto indicates that the sector has been successful to be an alternative source of employment. The state governments have been benefited greatly in terms of decreased rate of unemployment.

A report¹⁰ prepared by ICLEI under ‘Capacities’ project and a research paper¹¹ by Biswajit Das have portrayed the socio-economic conditions of the toto drivers in North Bengal. The project report was based on Siliguri Municipal area where as the research paper was based on Cooch Behar town. The time period of both the works was 2017. According to the Regional Transport Office of Cooch Behar, in 2016, 1868 totos were active in Cooch Behar town and surrounding blocks, but Biswajit claimed that the actual number was around 10000 in during his work in 2017. The project report does not provide an approximate estimation of the total number of totos plying within the Corporation area and its surrounding. Data of both the papers indicated that

⁹ Arindam Roy, ‘E-Rickshaw Service in Barddhaman Town: Importance, Problems and Future Prospects’, *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Volume 6, Issue 9, September 2016.

¹⁰ ‘Assessment of the E-Rickshaw Operations in Siliguri, West Bengal’, CapaCITIES, ICLEI, 2017.

¹¹ Biswajit Das, Sushma Rohtagi, ‘Impact of e-rickshaw on sustainable urban mobility and livelihood: A case study of Cooch Behar town of West Bengal’, *Geo-Analyst*, December, 2017.

the vehicle, in North Bengal, is not only a mode of last mile connectivity. The ‘Capacities’ project report has categorized the toto routes into three segments – core to periphery, core to core and periphery to periphery. Both the work claimed that toto had become an integral part of North Bengal’s socio-economy. Even in 2017, data of both the works have claimed that the drivers were earning Rs. 500 to Rs. 600 on an average and more than 50% toto drivers have another earning member in their families. 80% of the drivers are from 15 year to 45 year old and educational qualification varied between secondary to higher secondary in maximum cases. Job opportunities had been low historically in North Bengal. Even for higher studies students need to move around Kolkata. Sales and marketing jobs have minimized the crisis up to certain level, but toto has been able to be a comfortable as well as lucrative option. Driving own toto is better than working as a sales executive with tremendous pressure of target and a salary of Rs. 8000 to Rs. 15000 (The start-up companies usually offer more but at the same time they have more pressure of sales target than pre-existing companies).

Informal politics and informal labour

Keith Hart, in 1971, for the first time, used the term ‘informal sector’ to describe that section of the urban labour force which falls outside the organised labour market. As Breman mentioned, the informal sector, since the time has been accepted as a vital concept to understand the third world economies. The term was further refined by a

mission of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which studied the employment situation in Kenya within the framework of the World Employment Programme¹². Sectors which remain beyond the safeguards of law, and therefore mostly unorganised have been categorised as informal sectors. Informal sector is a catchphrase which includes a considerable range of economic activities which are frequently lined up under the all inclusive term of 'self-employment'.

Coining the term 'informal economy', Hart argued that informal economic activities represent entrepreneurial activities even though the individuals involved would not be classified as entrepreneurs by Western definitions of the term. In the view of ILO, informal economic activities are possible palliative for the lack of employment growth in the 'modern' economic sector and can be identified as a potential source of employment growth in developing nations. Viewing 'informality' as a counterpoint to 'modernity', it emphasises the negative aspects of informal businesses (small size, low – capital support, low skill, low productivity, etc.) that should be addressed by specific programmes designed to overcome them. Informality as a whole is seen as the result of dual – labour market in which access to the high wage informal sector was blocked for substantial segments for the population, who thus turned to survival strategies in the informal sector.

¹² Jan Breman, 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the 'Informal Sector' Concept: I: The Informal Sector', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 11, No. 48.

According to John C. Cross¹³, informal economic activities comprises those economic strategies which break laws regulating how business should be conducted, rather laws specifying what business may be conducted. In other words, selling marijuana would be illegal in India irrespective of anything, but driving toto in West Bengal during 2014 was not illegal, because laws related to e-vehicles were about to evolve, until in forthcoming years when the vehicles was declared illegal by the Calcutta High Court. But still, thousands of struggling families survive on toto and the government could not stop the trade. Auto-rickshaw in Kolkata, despite several legal contradictions, cannot be termed as an illegal trade because the sector exists in a situation overlapped by legality and illegality. It would be better to identify such a sector as para-legal. In case of toto and auto-rickshaw, the question of legality is overlapped with informality. In case of selling illegal goods, people operate informally, since there is no question of paying taxes or getting permit. But in case of toto and auto-rickshaw, huge section of the population earn their livelihood whereas, another huge section of population or the citizens avail the services as a part of life in the society. Thus it becomes tough for a democratic government to handle such sectors with ultimate strictness and at the same time, people continue their informal operation by entering into certain informal relationships with different stakeholders such as the local authority, officials, etc.

¹³ John C. Cross, *Informal Politics: Street vendors and the state in Mexico City*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998.

Cross recognises the relationship between groups involved in informal economic practices and the state authority as informal politics. In his book 'Informal Politics', he wanted to find answer for the question whether individuals in informal economic sectors could represent new types of economic and political interest structures. He found that people working in informal economy were seen as passive economic subjects rather than economic actors, which meant those who had lost out in the struggle for formal jobs rather than as people attempting to win the struggle for a decent living. He had chosen street vending in Mexico City due to its proximity with the political authority and bureaucrats. Moreover, the sector is known for regular confrontation with modernisation, urban development, etc. and it had been through a history of repression in early decades. The factor of its existence in the capital city had differentiated the sector from the peasants and the factory workers. Cross presented a historical outline of street vending in Mexico City and, in particular, the history of state interventions in 1950s and 1960s.

The author showed how the street vendors in the capital city organised and prepared themselves for collective bargaining with the city administration and the state. The book is aimed at understanding the role of those street vendors in shaping the politics and mobilizing the political authority for their sustenance. Politics and political negotiations had been the driving force of those individuals in informal economy. The street vendors proved their efficiency by becoming politically

beneficial to the local leaders. Though, their location in the capital city had favoured them in this case. Despite chances of repression by the government, the vendors seldom looked for oppositions support. Such a case, as depicted by Bandyopadhyay¹⁴, draws similarity with attitude of the hawkers of 1960s and 1970s Calcutta, where most of their trade unions were pro-government. Even the street vendors, as Cross narrated, were successful in establishing a client – patron relationship with the government officers who saved the vendors in many situations.

The state's failure in removing them permanently could not be seen as a failure because the existence of such groups ultimately counts in favour of the political authority. Periodic attempts of cleansing footpaths might be strategies to control them. Such act of the state immediately invokes protest but then these groups negotiate and submit to the authority to ensure their existence. Negotiations, which can be in terms of both money and political support, are counted as the cost of informality. According to De Soto, informal economic activities survive through this 'cost of informality' which 'extra-legal' arrangements with the authority (political authority in case of auto-rickshaw and toto drivers) that allowed them to continue their trade without legalising the activity itself. Lack of legal protection and guarantees, the loss of growth potential and size efficiencies, and cost of evasion –

¹⁴ Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, *'Streets in motion: Making of infrastructure, property, and political culture in twentieth century Calcutta'*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

such as to bribe or to pay regular rent to any authority remain relatively hidden within the cost of informality.

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay in his book '*Streets in motion*' narrated the transition of street vending in Kolkata. The book gives an outstanding trajectory of the city's historical development from 'Calcutta' to 'Kolkata'. Mobilization of public space including footpath is the central theme of the book. Hawkers' movements, unionisation and negotiations with the government, local party authority and the police has been well documented in the fifth chapter of the book. Not like systematic rent seeking and hierarchical flow from grass root level to the party fund, but collection by the associates of the local leaders and local clubs existed during 60s and 70s in erstwhile Calcutta. Even local leaders of the ruling party (then Congress) at times manipulated the government's initiative to remove the hawkers. Thus a client patron relationship safeguarded the hawkers from getting evicted from the prime footpaths of the city. But when the Left Front government successfully launched an operation of eviction, the organisations learnt to become stronger to resist any further repression and the opposition of that time was also able to gain support of these urban poor as a consequence of the operation. The author claimed that the 'progressive' leaders of the Left were focused in modernising the city for attracting foreign investors. Therefore, question of the existence of the sector remained directly in a reciprocal relationship with the losses and gains of the political parties or the

authorities. But presence of rent seeking in the context of Kolkata seems very relevant to the sectors dealt by this dissertation. Rent seeking, though not the central criterion of the relationship, but important among others. This is a direct expression of the relationship. Other features could be obligation for the authority, strengthening the organisational base of the party, service to the party especially during electoral session, etc.

Though, this can be understood simply as client patron relationship, but the existence and activities of such groups in the political system moves beyond the clientelist negotiations with the political patrons. Such groups of people, who could not find space in the formal setup of socio-economic framework of a political system, try to sustain with prospects beyond the ambit of law. They have been unfortunate enough to get access to the available 'equal opportunities' provided by the state. Still they exist; and in such a huge number that the state can hardly ignore them. State or the authority enters into a client patron relationship with them at times, but that is not at all a constant feature of this relationship.

Partha Chatterjee cited the case of 'four hour operation beginning at two in the morning' at Sukhchar in Panihati, on 30 June 1993, by a force consist of 5000 policemen, to remove and cremate the body of Balak Brahmachari, who officially died on 5 May 1993. Though a religious group, but the Left Front could secure the support of the devotees for years, who were basically *namasudras* – a lower caste

peasants in central Bengal¹⁵. Ignoring the concerns of panchayat and municipal elections, the government carried out the operation. The political authority, in this way, at times, balances its relationship with such groups to let the other side know about the range of government's power. Chatterjee uses his concept of 'political society' to locate these groups in a third world democracy like India. They are not individuals, but identify themselves as groups to deal with the system. Based on the example of the illegal squatters (in erstwhile Calcutta) on public land and their organisation in associational forms to resist governmental action to evict them, Chatterjee argues that those collective forms cannot be categorised as civic associations nor are they a replication of kinship organisations, even though they talk in the language of community. Since they are illegal, the state does not recognise them. At the same time, it cannot ignore them either considering that there are many such settlements and organisations all over the country or the value of their votes. The ground on which the squatters struggle is not that of civil society 'but rather that of a political society where claims and benefits can be negotiated between governmental agencies responsible for administering welfare and groups of population that count according to calculations of political efficacy'¹⁶. According to Chatterjee, those groups do not deny the fact of breaking the laws but want the government to create an exception to accommodate them in the system. In most of the cases, the government

¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *'Politics of the Governed'*, Permanent Black, 2004, Delhi.

¹⁶ Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'The 'Poverty' of Political Society: Partha Chatterjee and the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, India', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2010.

allows the exception. These groups may manifest their demands through organised violence and protests. Government usually approaches them with its welfare policies.

Ana M. Vargas has referred the case of rickshaw drivers (unlicensed vehicle) in Bogota¹⁷ and narrates how the huge mass of illegal rickshaw drivers operates everyday in a hostile relationship with the police. The strong associations of the drivers and the police are in a unique relationship whereas the government appears to be apparently indifferent to find a permanent solution. On the one hand, police restricts and represses the drivers, and on the other, the associations offer protection to the drivers. Extortion of excessive rent is the cost of protection offered by those organisations. The scenario represents an informal relationship where the drivers are at the receptive level, the associations represents them and acts as middle men in negotiating with the government, but at the same time, police represses the drivers as an act of controlling illegalities in a political system.

Ajay Gudavarthy has shown the role of the leaders of such groups, who act as middlemen, in weakening the movements by compromising with the authority or the entrepreneurs. According to his work, political authority, at times, turn deaf to the protests of villagers against entrepreneurs¹⁸. In case of large investors, the political authority hardly concern for the electoral dividend of the protesters. This situation can

¹⁷ Ana M. Vargas, 'Organising Everyday Resistance: An Ethnographic Study of Rickshaw Drivers in Bogotá', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2021.

¹⁸ Ajay Gudavarthy, *Politics of post-civil society: Contemporary history of political movements in India*, Sage, New Delhi, 2013.

be understood by Cross's idea that it becomes hard for the government to overlook the demands of such groups in housing in urban spaces due to media and civil society's intervention. But in urban spaces too, the political authority needs such groups. The case of West Bengal is a good example. Historically, the left has been stronger in the rural West Bengal, whereas in the urban areas, specifically Kolkata, the opposition consistently has done well even before the arrival of Mamata Bannerjee. The urban upper and middle class have been consistently voted against the Left. The ruling party always needed the support of such groups in 'managing' the votes for victory. In return, the authority had incentivised them in different ways. As a part of government initiative, many shops with inadequate space have been built from Ruby more toward Avishikta Crossing, on the left side of the bypass. Similarly, trees and plants, once planted for beautification are cut down from one side of the footpath of Anandapur Road to build such shops with inadequate spaces. There are slums on occupied public land on the either sides of Anandapur road. Is the TMC government planning to provide economic benefit to those slum dwellers with the aim of mobilising their support? Answer is yet unknown.

The associations of such groups, even if they are not traditional organisations such as trade unions, usually show their obligation to the incumbent political party in West Bengal. This can be better explained by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya's idea of

‘party society’¹⁹. Since their historic victory in the state assembly election of 1977, the Left Front, lead by CPI (M) could dominate the social, economic as well as cultural sphere of the society through their agencies. Such a presence of the party in every sphere of society was initially empowering the huge rural population who were once dominated by a handful of landowners. But later this phenomenon resulted in such a situation that allegiance to the ruling party could be the means to get avail any resource or opportunity. Bhattacharya also mentions that the ‘coercive party society’ of the later decades of Left regime continued to exist and operate in the same way after 2011. Since the assembly election of 2011, the TMC started to occupy every sphere of public life following the path of its predecessor. But as the new regime lacked the organisational discipline, it could not retain its control over different apparatus and agencies. Weakening of trade unions in auto-rickshaw sector could be an example. The TMC in the following years has been successful in eliminating the organisation of opposition party and offer an arrangement for the population to sustain which is based up allegiance and rent. A person from the population pays rent to the concerned authority to avail certain resource and to some extent it is considered as the loyalty to the party as well. Individuals from every informal sector showed loyalty to the party to get legitimised. This created a situation where two groups of informal labours, auto-rickshaw drivers and toto drivers of same locality had regular

¹⁹ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as practice: Democratic left in a transforming India*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

confrontations while both the groups were loyal to the TMC. Police, in such situation, did not arrest any of the miscreants but mediate. While the party leaders met both the groups at a time and ‘inspired’ them for peaceful coexistence. As the party benefits from both the groups in terms of rents and allegiance, it cannot afford to disappoint any of the groups.

Research questions

Except the work of Sen (2016), the politics of those informal workers in West Bengal is not much explored. ‘Informal labour sector’, ‘transport labours and their sectors’, ‘trade union movements’, etc. in India are areas which are well researched. But understanding the politics of these informal sectors, with special reference to auto-rickshaw in Kolkata and toto in West Bengal, needs more academic explorations. There are several works on client-patron relationship and electoral politics in India which can also be considered as an important section in the study of informal politics. But informal labour sectors’ engagement with the political authorities and their long term relationships by which they are legitimised to operate despite illegalities, are yet to be explored for better understanding of informal politics and as well as informal labour sector. Several reports exploring socio-economic conditions of these informal labours in transport sector, nature of vehicles and operations of the sectors have contributed to carry out this research. But most of the earlier works lack the introspection in the politics of these informal labour sectors.

The existing literature, news paper reports, experiences, interviews of the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata and initial observation on the toto sector in West Bengal have contributed to frame the research questions. Later, I have considered those questions while preparing and modifying the questionnaire for the interviews of toto drivers. Understanding the politics of these informal labour sectors has always been the prime concern of this thesis. The research has tried to understand the politics of these sectors which is reflected in the complex relationship between the drivers, organisation, political party and the government. The research questions follow as –

1. How does informality shape the labour practices in the auto-rickshaw sector of Kolkata and e-rickshaw sector of West Bengal?
2. How do informality and social expectations constitute the nature of politics in these sectors?
3. How does the informal politics shape different aspects such as the organisation of these informal labour sectors?
4. How do these informal sector workers negotiate with their organisations, political parties and the government?

Methodology

My research follows an empirical method. The method adopted in investigating the problems has several components. I have primarily relied on interviews and

ethnographic explorations but newspaper reports, articles and project reports also constituted a major source of information. The research is based on the qualitative interviews of auto rickshaw drivers, toto drivers, trade union leaders, government officials, legal experts and passengers. Accounts of ethnographic studies have enriched the introspection in toto sector. Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers were arranged by collaborating with the trade union leaders or secretaries of the 60 routes in Kolkata and its suburbs. Field surveyors were appointed by the Principle Investigator of the SWS-RLS research project. Interviews were taken from 2013 to 2015. Later I meet some of the earlier respondents in 2017. All the interviews were transcribed by the members associated with the research project. I have revisited some of the auto-rickshaw drivers, who were previously interviewed for my dissertation. I have used 120 interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers for qualitative data.

I have done snowball sampling in case of the interviews with toto drivers. I have used qualitative and quantitative data of 70 interviews of toto drivers in this dissertation. Since it was not possible to cover every district in the state, therefore, I selected two districts from South Bengal and three districts from North Bengal. Reaching some areas in both Northern and Southern parts were important because of the nature of politics, demography, etc. The two areas I had chosen in South Bengal are suburbs of Kolkata, whereas Siliguri is the second most important city in the state, Balurghat is a town and Malbazar and Chalsa are mostly rural areas. Outskirts of

Siliguri and Balurghat are counted in rural areas. Therefore, for my research, I had been able to reach a city, two suburbs, one town and some rural areas.

I considered the political scenario as a vital component while choosing those areas. The ruling TMC has monopoly in most of the districts in South Bengal. Specifically the two districts which I had selected are strong holds of the party. On the contrary, the opposition parties have been successfully challenging the supremacy of TMC in North Bengal. The Indian National Congress was strong in few districts such as Maldah and Murshidabad. But recently, since 2014 and more specifically after the panchayat election of 2018, BJP has been able to strengthen its organisation in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur districts of North Bengal. Even in minority dominated North Dinajpur, BJP is the nearest competitor of TMC.

I included Panihati Sodepur from North 24 Parganas and Narendrapur Rajpur from South 24 Parganas. In North Bengal I had chosen Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and South Dinajpur districts. I have interviewed drivers in Siliguri which is in Darjeeling district, though technically some parts of Siliguri city are under Jalpaiguri district. I have interviewed drivers in Malbazar and Chalsa which are in Jalpaiguri district. In South Dinajpur district, I have met drivers of Balurghat. Interviews were conducted from 2019 to 2022. Due to COVID and lockdown, the process of interviewing toto drivers was disrupted.

I had been able to meet a few drivers in Narendrapur and Siliguri regularly because I have accommodation facility in both the places and those whom I met frequently are my neighbours. Therefore I had the opportunity to talk to them on several issues over evening tea in the local tea shop. Even I have invited some of them to my house because they were not comfortable for political discussions in their stand or in public space. During auto-rickshaw interviews, respondents were less hesitant in answering questions on politics. An apparent formal structure of relationship with trade union and party would be the reason. Whereas, till date, in toto sector, relationships are ambiguous in a sense that they exist but not discussed in public. I had to talk to a toto driver for several days to know that they were also paying ‘daily rent’ to acknowledge their membership in the stand.

Media representation of toto has been very significant to trace the growth of the sector. A historical trajectory could be made out of the regular reports in print media about the sector. It is expected when the central government is destined to transform the nation’s transport sector with electronic mode of transport; historical understanding of the sector would become important for further research. Apart from the reports of *Anandabazar Patrika*, *The Telegraph*, *Times of India* and *Uttarbanga Sambad*, some local electronic media houses have reported on the toto sector. The dissertation has shown that the two sectors, auto and toto, have been represented

differently by the media. Media reports and articles as secondary sources of data are very important to understand such transforming sectors in public domain.

Official documents are rare to come by due to the para-legal or illegal nature these sectors. The research has been qualitative in nature as it exclusively focuses on the politics of the informal labour and relationship of different agencies related to the sectors. Moreover, the massive number of unregistered auto-rickshaws and totos do not support the quantitative study by a single individual.

Chapter Outlines

Very precisely, this dissertation is about two informal labour sectors, auto-rickshaw and toto and their politics. The research has tried to understand the nature of politics in these two sectors. The second and third chapters discuss the nature, functioning and labour practices, of the two sectors. It also addresses the contradictions of informality and organisation and explores the dynamic relationship between informal work and informal politics. The fourth chapter seeks to understand the drivers' expectations and negotiations with different agencies of the society. The complex relationship between informal labour, organisation and gender has also been explored here. The fifth chapter examines the relationship among the state/ government, political parties, trade unions and the informal workers.

In course of my engagement with both auto and toto sector for this research, I have found that toto sector is still changing. The sector has immense possibilities to evolve in the forthcoming days. Specifically, in the post 2021 assembly election phase, the organisational patterns in toto sector are changing which has been discussed in chapter five. The state government has also indicated toward e-mobility in its e-vehicle policy²⁰. Therefore it is clear that toto has enough time to evolve. District based qualitative as well as quantitative study which this dissertation could not accomplish is the necessity of the hour. Moreover this dissertation could not go deep into the organisational developments of toto sector in the areas where the ruling party does not have monopoly. Different municipalities and municipal corporations have issued several notifications in course of controlling the sector. Study of the state and local governments' role in respect to their policies for controlling the sector needs further research. Further study on the observations and verdicts of the courts as well as government's policies on toto since 2014 will certainly contribute in better understanding of such informal sectors and their politics.

²⁰ Government of West Bengal, Electric Vehicle Policy 2021, Kolkata: Power Department, 2021.

Chapter 2

Auto-rickshaw in Kolkata: Informal sector and informal labour

The erstwhile Left Front Government in West Bengal introduced two stroke auto-rickshaw as a mode of public transport under the ‘self-employment’ scheme SESRU (Self-Employment Scheme for Registered Unemployed) targeting the educated unemployed youths in West Bengal in 1983²¹. There have been several changes in the types of permit issued to auto rickshaw operators since its inception till date.

The auto-rickshaw is a small, three-wheeled vehicle that can carry a small number of passengers, providing flexibility and manoeuvrability in the congested streets of the city. Kolkata adopted the auto (this abbreviation of the English word is most commonly used when speaking in Bangla) in late 1983. The Bajaj Company introduced the vehicle to the Indian market in 1957, ten years after its first appearance in Italy. Designed by Corradino D’Ascanio as a light three-wheeled commercial vehicle to aid post-war economic reconstruction, the auto-rickshaw became popular in Southeast Asia during the same period and is known in many parts of the world as the tuktuk. Sources suggest that a similar three-wheeled vehicle was produced in Japan in the 1930s and exported to Southeast Asia. However, the three-wheelers went out of use in Japan in the latter half of the 1960s.

The auto-rickshaw has remained a crucial mode of public transport in densely populated parts of Asia, and even in the present time, it is a critical element of the

²¹ The then MIC, Transport Department, Government of West Bengal Shri Shyamal Chakraborty stated in an interview with Prof. Samita Sen and Saurabh Paul in September.

public transport system in many parts of Asia²². Approximately 75% of the world's auto-rickshaws run in both urban and rural areas of India²³.

Although there are many types, designs, and variations of auto-rickshaws, the most common one is a sheet-metal body or open frame resting on three wheels, with a canvas roof and drop-down side curtains. It features a small cabin at the front for the driver with handlebar controls and space for three passengers at the back. An alternative design has a bigger vehicle and includes two seats for three passengers each. However, the six-seating auto-rickshaws were banned in Pune in 2003, though they are still present in many cities and suburbs in India, including Delhi-NCR. In Kolkata, the three-seating model is ubiquitous, although by local modifications, they have become five-seating, with the driver's seat extended to allow one passenger each on two sides. In some cases, this extended seat may also accommodate a third passenger. However, such overloading affects the balance of the vehicle and seriously compromises safety. These practices are illegal, but as we shall see, the whole of the auto-rickshaw trade is characterized by legal complications, and the state government has ignored by and large violations of rules and laws by auto-drivers. The size and design of the vehicle are important because its para-legality is rooted in this. We must understand the legal complications of the auto-rickshaw vehicle in relation to two

²²It has been estimated that in 2003, India held second place in the world in terms of the number of two and three-wheeler vehicles. The percentage of such vehicles to the total vehicle count was 79. International Road Federation, *World Road Statistics*, 2006.

²³Akshay Mani and Pallavi Pant, 'Review of Literature in India's Urban Autorickshaw Sector: A synthesis of Findings', Embarq, 2012, <http://www.wriroscities.org/sites/default/files/Review-Literature-Indian-Urban-Autorickshaw-Sector-EMBARQ-India.pdf> (9.5.16)

types of public commercial transport: the bus (stage carriage) and the taxi (contract carriage).

Growth and nature of auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata

As discussed earlier, the auto-rickshaw was introduced in Kolkata in 1983-84 by the then Left Front Government under the Self-employment Scheme for Registered Unemployed (SESRU). The idea was to open an avenue of earning for the educated unemployed youth of erstwhile Calcutta (the name was changed to Kolkata in 2001).

As a contract carriage²⁴, initially auto-rickshaws got the 'Calcutta Permit' which enabled them to move everywhere in the city, similar to the motor cabs or taxis.

During those times, auto-rickshaws had unrestricted mobility in both North and South 24 Parganas, operating from the airport on one side to Dakshineswar on the other.

They were free to operate with or without a meter, and fares were decided either through meter readings or by agreement between the driver and passenger. In the latter case, passengers had to negotiate their fare with the driver, a common practice among yellow taxis in Kolkata.

However, this system did not last long, and their operations were suspended temporarily before being reintroduced with a North-South permit. This effectively

²⁴It refers to the kind of public transport working on an agreement between the driver and the passenger, in order to travel at a particular time from one place to another. On the contrary, public buses ply as stage carriage, which means the vehicle is expected to follow a specific route approved by the Road Transport Authority. Preapproved fair as per the distance is to be paid by a passenger. Fare of the public and private buses running as stage carriage in different routes of Kolkata is decided by the Transport Department of the State Government.

restricted auto-rickshaws to either the north or south of the city, not allowing them to cross the busy and congested central business area of Kolkata. This system was soon replaced by an experiment with short-term permits of 28 days, which was then followed by the "Block Permit" system. The Block Permit restricted auto-rickshaws to operate within limited areas, typically defined by the jurisdiction of police stations. For example, the Jadavpur permit allowed auto-rickshaws to travel only in areas covered by the Jadavpur Police Station. Despite gaining enormous popularity among passengers, the transport department continued to experiment with the operating arrangements of auto-rickshaws.

Towards the end of the 1990s, auto-rickshaws began to ply on fixed routes. The Regional Transport Authority was designated to issue contract carriage permits to the drivers. Those permits would have the routes mentioned. The arrangement was formalized in April 2003, when a government notification changed the auto-rickshaws from being like a taxi to being more like a bus, i.e., from a contract carriage, which passengers could hire to take them where they wanted to commute, to a stage carriage, with a fixed route and fare, which picked up and dropped off passengers at specific stoppages within the fixed route.²⁵ But the auto-rickshaws were not exactly same as the buses, as they could accommodate a maximum of 4 to 6 passengers. A bus in

²⁵ In a notification dated 30/04/ 2003, the state government announced 120 routes with permits for 8591 auto-rickshaws. *Kolkata Gazette Extraordinary*, 30 April 2003.

Kolkata is legally allowed to carry about 70 people. Though, they carry several times more, depending on the demand. Auto-rickshaws were also unlike the bus in that they had no designated stops. Public buses cannot stop anywhere on the request of passengers. Auto-rickshaw, till date, is allowed to pickup and drop off passengers according to their convenience, unless it violates traffic regulations on busy roads. In both these features, the auto offered greater flexibility. Moreover, the buses in Kolkata are designed for the young and nimble, since the first step is too high for children and the elderly; because of overcrowding, only a small proportion of passengers are able to find seating; and the stop and start traffic requires considerable effort on part of passengers to keep their balance while on their feet inside the moving bus. So, essentially, the auto-rickshaw was much more comfortable with a little extra money; it was an attractive alternative for those people, who were not physically fit to travel by buses. Most strikingly, the middle classes in the city shifted to the auto-rickshaw as their standard mode of short-distance travel. Thus, this change in the mode of operation — from contract carriage to stage carriage — led to an explosion in the number of auto-rickshaws in Kolkata and its suburbs.

Table1: Classification of stage carriage and contract carriage.

Issues	Stage Carriage	Contract Carriage
Route	Specified by the RTA	No route required.
Fare	Specified by the RTA	Should be charged according to the meter.
No. of passengers	Can carry more than 6 passengers	Can carry not more than 6 passengers.

Source: Motor Vehicles Act, 1988

Based on the given information, it appears that the auto-rickshaw sector has undergone changes over time. One of the unique selling points of the sector is the proximity between passengers and drivers, which has been shaped by the nature of the sector since its beginning. This has attracted the middle class or affluent section of people in the city, who may have preferred auto-rickshaws over buses despite the slightly higher fare.

However, the passenger-driver hostility had become a regular topic of discussion in the local media during the time when I was conducting interviews with auto-rickshaw drivers in 2013 and 2014. Despite this, the flexibility of getting down at a desired point within the route (except where there may be trouble with Traffic Police) has remained a huge selling point of the sector.

I was not able to find definitive information about the reasons behind the change in the operation of autos from contract carriage to stage carriage. Further research is needed to understand the complexity of factors that led to this change. In 2017, during my interview, of the Ex-MICs of Transport Department, Shri Syamal Chakraborty and Shri Anadi Sahu, I was told that the change was due to peoples' demands. This view needs corroboration, which I have not been able to find.

In the early 1980s, the taxi system was barely functional. A freeze on permits had led to acute scarcity and the development of a shuttle system along different routes, which delivered higher earnings to owners and drivers. It meant terrible difficulties for passengers wishing for the comfort of point-to-point travel of their own choosing. The media speculated that *benami*²⁶ ownership by policemen facilitated the illegalities in the sector. A very powerful union, led by Kalyan Bhadra, himself an owner-driver at one time and emerging as the chief figure across unions in the transport sector, may have contributed to this too. Another reason to introduce auto-rickshaw, on the roads of Kolkata was to counter the yellow taxis. In New Delhi, meanwhile, a much earlier introduction of the auto-rickshaw had adversely affected the taxis, which disappeared as 'hackney' carriage (now termed walk-up transport) to be parked at stands in different parts of the city. The auto took over as the chief walk-up contract carriage. The Kolkata taxi operators took a third route altogether—neither

²⁶Owning a property in guise of someone else's name.

hackney carriage, nor bound in stands, they began to operate like more comfortable, faster and more expensive buses.

In the case of autos, the informal transition from hackney carriage to stage carriage is still not clear, and it is likely that there were multiple reasons and interests involved. One possibility is that private bus syndicates may have influenced the notification of routes in order to prevent competition from auto-rickshaws. The routes were carefully selected to avoid too much competition for bus traffic. This suggests that the insertion of auto-rickshaws in Kolkata city in the 1980s must be examined in relation to all other forms of passenger transport, their vested interests, and their ability to influence state government policy. Another reason for the change may have been the operation of the metro rail from Tollygunge to Dumdum on a single line in 1984. This may have created a need for first and last mile connectivity for passengers, which could have led to an increase in demand for auto-rickshaws as a means of transportation²⁷.

There has been a huge increase in vehicular traffic in India in the twenty-first century. In 2001, there were 50 million registered vehicles in the country, which increased to 130 million in 2011. In West Bengal, by 2011, there were 3.3 million registered vehicles of which 600,000 were passenger-carrying light vehicles,

²⁷The metro was inaugurated on 24 October 1984, but only from Esplanade to Bhowanipore, a distance of 3.4 kms. On 27 September 1995, the total length of 16.45 kms from Dum Dum to Tollygunge started functioning.

including 80,000 taxis. In the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA), in 2001, the number of passenger-bearing vehicles was 11.7 million, which increased to 14 million in 2011. It was expected that the number would rise to 14.6 million in 2016. According to the survey, in 2001, the number of registered autos in the KMA was 22,000 carrying 3.5 million passengers. In 2008, the number of passengers increased to 4.7 million and was expected to increase this year which year to 5.6 million in 2011²⁸.

But the real number of auto-rickshaws in Kolkata and its surroundings is much higher than what was quoted in the government's report. The West Bengal Economic Survey of 2009-10 counted 16,431 registered autos in KMA, with another 30,300 in north and south 24 Parganas, 1645 in Hooghly and 1040 in Howrah. In 2014, officials of the transport department estimated 10,000 registered autos in KMA. The RTA in Kolkata confirmed that 10,000 registered auto rickshaws were running in the city. In an interview in February 2014, the Vice Chairman of Public Vehicles Department also confirmed this number. All sources agree that the actual numbers are several times more. Some sources say that unregistered fleet is some three times the registered autos. From our interviews with the government officials, journalists, trade union leaders and operators, I have found estimates varying between 30,000 and 120,000 for unregistered autos²⁹. The latest unofficial estimate suggests a total of

²⁸Comprehensive Mobility Plan for KMA, 2008.

²⁹*The Telegraph*, 25 January and 13 February 2014. Cited in Saurabh Paul, 'Informal Labour, Informal Politics: A Case Study of Auto-rickshaw Operators in Kolkata' in *Gender, Informality and*

120,000 (including Salt Lake) autos of which 50,000 are unregistered³⁰. If we take the lower figure, then at present, auto-rickshaws carry more than 15 million passengers daily in the Kolkata Municipal Area. Clearly, the number of unregistered auto rickshaws running in Kolkata far exceeds the number of registered vehicles. An important daily of Kolkata reported that while the official count of auto rickshaws in Kolkata and its adjoining areas was 32,000, the actual count in the region was 62,000. The daily reported the existence of 30,000 illegal or unregistered auto rickshaws in Kolkata and its adjoining areas.

It is clear that auto-rickshaws a mode of intermediate public transport in the city is significant as well as critical. But, despite its importance in city life, the very existence of auto-rickshaw is problematic. The presence of a large number of unregistered auto-rickshaws is just one aspect of the legal complications surrounding the trade, During fieldwork conducted from 2013 to 2015, it was found that unregistered autos were still operating in the city, including in routes in the periphery Kolkata Police District, such as Munda Para - Kalar Khal to Ruby Hospital, which mostly served students and teachers of Heritage Group of Institutions, where there were approximately 40 unregistered auto-rickshaws.

Organisation, SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 10, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2015.

³⁰*The Statesman*, 30 July 2015.

The Motor Vehicles Act, which is the primary law governing the use and registration of vehicles in India, is of colonial origin, having been passed in 1939 to primarily deal with cases of accidents. In 1988, it was felt that the Act needed to be updated to address major advances in road transport technology, patterns of passenger and freight movements, and the development of the road network. Various committees, such as the National Transport Policy Committee, National Police Commission, Road Safety Committee, and Low Powered Two-Wheelers Committee, had suggested updating, simplification, and rationalization of the Act. Despite these efforts, the Act still did not specifically mention the auto-rickshaw, a three-wheeled vehicle that had been on Indian roads for 30 years at that point, leaving it in a legal grey area. Section 217 of the Act repealed all existing legislation on the subject, including those by state governments. The Act was subsequently amended three times in 1994, 2000, and 2001. The first amendment was a response to lobbying by the transport sector to address the introduction of newer type of vehicles and escalating commercial and personal vehicles in the country³¹.

The Law Commission in its 119th Report once again mentioned the issue of definitions of new type of vehicles. An amendment was moved in 2000 to address this and other questions related to the alteration of vehicles, specifically in relation to

³¹There were other concerns as well related to compensation for victims of road accidents, protecting consumers' interest in the transport sector, road safety standards, transport of hazardous chemicals and pollution control, delegation of greater powers to State Transport Authorities and rationalizing the role of public authorities and simplification of procedures and policy liberalisation.

pollution issues. The exemptions granted to eco-friendly vehicles proved difficult to sustain and they were withdrawn within a year by another amendment. Many of these concerns related directly to auto-rickshaws, especially their compulsory conversion to eco-friendly fuel. Despite considerable public controversy attending such conversions, for some obscure reason, the definitional crisis around auto-rickshaws was not resolved.

There are two problems in this regard. The first issue lies in the definition of a motor vehicle itself. In the Act, a motor-cycle is described as a two-wheeled vehicle, while a motor vehicle is defined as ‘any mechanically propelled vehicle adapted for use on roads, whether the power of propulsion is transmitted from an external or internal source.’ This definition also includes a chassis without an attached body and a trailer. However, vehicles with less than four wheels and an engine capacity of less than twenty-five cubic centimetres are excluded from this definition. As a result, there was no way to include a three-wheeled vehicle under the definition of a ‘motor vehicle’.

The definition of a "motor vehicle" is a broad category that encompasses the distinction between stage and contract carriage, which together cover the majority of passenger-carrying commercial vehicles. A contract carriage is described as a ‘motor vehicle that transports passengers for hire or reward and is engaged under a contract, whether expressed or implied. The contract is made between a person and the holder

of a permit in relation to the vehicle or any person authorized by the permit holder, on a fixed or agreed-upon rate or sum, and on a time basis, whether or not with reference to any route or distance’.

However, the vehicle must travel ‘from one point to another, and in either case, without stopping to pick up or set down passengers not included in the contract anywhere during the journey’. Such carriages include a maxi cabs and motor cabs, in the latter case, ‘notwithstanding that separate fares are charged for its passengers’. In turn a motor cab must be a ‘motor vehicle’ constructed or adapted to carry not more than six passengers excluding the driver for hire or reward. But for the restrictive definition of a motor vehicle as having at least four wheels, auto-rickshaws can be included in the definition of a contract carriage. A stage carriage is defined as a ‘motor vehicle’ constructed or adapted to carry more than six passengers, excluding the driver for hire or reward at separate fares paid by or for individual passengers, either for the whole journey or for stages of the journey. Clearly, then, auto-rickshaw does not comply with the definition of a stage carriage on two counts: They are not motor vehicles and they are not designed to carry more than six passengers.

Challenges due to informality in the sector

Despite not being recognized by the Motor Vehicles Act., the auto-rickshaw has been recognised by the West Bengal government through an exception created in its rules.

However, this exception contradicts the Act. According to Rule 120(3) (A), auto-rickshaws are eligible for permission to ply as a 'contract carriage' to run on routes to be specified by the Regional Transport Authorities [RTA]. On this basis, various states have sought to regularise a fact of urban life by incorporating autos into their rules too. In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, auto-rickshaws are 'contract carriage' in the rules, while Tamil Nadu allows a 'share' system under which the autos, usually limited to three passengers, are allowed up to five passengers. Rule 2(k1) in West Bengal defines a 'motor cab' by referencing the Motor Vehicles Act and explicitly includes auto-rickshaws³². According to these rules, auto-rickshaws with 'contract carriage' permits are limited to carrying four passengers. The RTA is responsible for regulating the number of licenses and permits issued, notifying the routes, announcing fares, and establishing a code of conduct for drivers. Here we have a major conundrum: While auto-rickshaws are recognised in a range of official transport policy documents, the minor amendment required in the MVA to give it a proper legal status has not yet been undertaken. This is a bit of a mystery and I have not been able to find out why this contradiction has been allowed to persist.

The legal category formerly known as 'contract carriage' is now referred to as 'intermediate' public transport, which includes modes such as non-motorized cycle

³²These are the West Bengal Rules 1989, but this provision was specifically included according to Notification No. 5305-WT dated 12.12.2003. Supriyo Roy Chowdhury, Senior Advocate, Calcutta High Court, speaking at a meeting at the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, argued that since the MVA had no provision for a three-wheeler, the inclusion of the auto-rickshaw in the rules may be deemed unconstitutional and may be struck down on appeal. November 2013, Kolkata.

rickshaws, taxis, autos, and even the new battery-operated three-wheelers³³. These modes provide first and last mile connectivity, and can serve as a door-to-door alternative to private vehicles, bridging the gap between private and formal public transport. The Indian government refers to this category as 'para-transit,' which is seen as a supplement to organized Mass Rapid Transit (MRT). In many rural and urban areas of India, para-transit fills the gaps left by mass rapid transport.

According to transport policy documents, para-transit plays an important role in providing mobility but lacks infrastructure support. There is minimal monitoring of driver behavior for indiscipline, violations, disobedience to traffic rules, and regulations. Poor maintenance of vehicles and the use of adulterated fuel contribute to pollution in urban areas. Even the central government's policy documents focus on pollution and driver behaviour.

Pollution is undoubtedly a major problem, but some issues require immediate attention. The government acknowledges that these forms of transport have the potential to provide clean mobility, low emissions, and improved safety if the technology is upgraded. However, employment conditions and the economics of these trades are often overlooked in government plans. In West Bengal alone, close to 10 lakh people drive auto-rickshaws, toto/e-rickshaws, magic³⁴, etc., but concerns about

³³P.R. Fouracre and D.A.C. Maunder, "A Review of Intermediate Public Transport in Third World Cities", Transport Research Laboratory, 1979.

³⁴A four wheeled, motorised, eight seater vehicle which mostly operates in the districts of West Bengal.

their working conditions and economic viability are hardly ever reflected in government policy.

The primary concern of local authorities is cheap urban transport, which often conflicts with extravagant plans for sophisticated systems at par with global standards. The government envisions para-transit as a support service for the MRT network in big cities and as the main public transport in semi-urban and rural areas, which creates noise and pollution. Since 2014, they have aimed to promote non-motorized vehicles, mostly e-vehicles, for first and last mile connectivity to limit the subsidy requirements in public services³⁵.

However, the operation of auto-rickshaws in Kolkata and its suburbs does not conform to any of these categorizations. These have been termed 'informal public transport' - shared and fixed-route services with intermediate stops for boarding and alighting - such as shared taxis, autos, and minibuses, typically seen in small and medium-sized cities that may not have adequate formal public transport services. Such services are called informal because of their ownership structure (individual owners) and lack of regulation and enforcement³⁶. What we have then is this—a system envisaged for small or medium-sized towns was adopted by one of the major metro cities of the country. Kolkata is the only large metro to have set up auto-

³⁵National Urban Transport Policy 2014, Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, p. 17.

³⁶Akshay Mani, Madhav Pai, Rishi Aggarwal, 'Sustainable Urban Transport in India: Role of the Auto-rickshaw Sector', Embarq, World Resources Institute, 2012.

rickshaws as informal public transport. Moreover, this did not grow organically in response to market demands but was facilitated and supported by the state government.

Decisions concerning routes and fare

Since the 1990s, the auto rickshaw sector has undergone significant changes in Kolkata. Instead of freely plying as contract carriages, auto rickshaws began to confine themselves to short routes that connect railway stations, metro rail stations, popular points, ferry ghats, and localities with high commuter density and necessity. They began to occupy already scarce road space in the city and suburbs. Their requirements were manifold: auto rickshaws running within a specific route required first a stand at both ends, then also a space to rest their vehicles, manage necessary work for their routes, and take a break. Road space or spaces adjacent to roads were occupied by them. There has been much discussion on Kolkata's low proportion of road space—for a long time static at 6 percent – which is lower than most other metropolitan cities in India. At the same time, the narrow and congested roads are also a major argument in favour of auto-rickshaws, since they have high manouvability.

This is how auto rickshaw stands emerged in Kolkata. It was claimed by many that this substantial change took place only due to ‘public demand’³⁷. Although the new system and increasing number of auto rickshaws facilitated commuters, it posed a threat to mobility in the city, and the Traffic Police Department had to handle this challenge to maintain the mobility on roads.

This resulted in a tussle of interests between the Traffic Police and auto rickshaw drivers. During field interviews³⁸ conducted in 2014 and 2015, ‘*Poolishi Juloom*’³⁹ was common phrase often used by almost all drivers to describe the issue of harassment by the traffic police, which became an inseparable part of the sector for many years. According to drivers, the traffic police frequently charged them with various traffic rules violations, even when these were of minor nature.

It is essential to examine the status of auto rickshaws as a mode of public transport in the Motor Vehicles Act and West Bengal Motor Vehicles Rules. The Motor Vehicles Act 1988, which is a Central Act of the Government of India to consolidate and amend the law relating to motor vehicles in India, does not mention auto rickshaws. Legal experts suggest that the Motor Vehicles Act 1988 is only applicable for two-wheelers, four-wheelers, and above, and thus does not include auto-rickshaws. Instead, auto-rickshaws are included in the category of "motor cabs"

³⁷The then MIC, Transport Department, Government of West Bengal Shri Shyamal Chakraborty stated in an interview with Prof. Samita Sen and Saurabh Paul in September 2015.

³⁸Field interviews were conducted among the auto rickshaw drivers by researchers of Jadavpur University as a part of a research project on Labour and Gender funded by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

³⁹Police atrocities

in the West Bengal Motor Vehicle Rules 1989, which define a motor cab as a "motor vehicle constructed or adapted to carry not more than six passengers excluding the driver for hire or reward."

The MVA of 1988 identifies the motor cab as 'contract carriage'. The Act provides a clear distinction between contract and stage carriage. Stage carriage is defined as a transportation system that operates on a fixed route, with fares determined for each stage, and both the fare and route are regulated by the RTA. Bus is an example of stage carriage. Table 1 lists distinguishing features of contract carriage and stage carriage. Thus, we see that auto rickshaws are running with an amalgamation of features of both contract and stage carriage. For example, while on one hand it carries four to five passengers, it runs on specified routes, on the other. The RTA in Kolkata⁴⁰ had confirmed that 10,000 registered auto rickshaws were running in the city. In an interview in February 2014, the Vice Chairman of Public Vehicles Department also confirmed the number earlier stated by the RTA. Our findings have also revealed that the number of unregistered auto rickshaws running in Kolkata exceeds the number of registered vehicles. From our interviews with the government officials, journalists, trade union leaders and operators, we have arrived at the number of unregistered auto rickshaw in the range between 30,000 and 1, 20,000. An important daily of Kolkata reported that while the official count of auto rickshaws

⁴⁰ Director, 'Auto Rickshaws Laws: Duties and Rights of Operators and Passengers' – A Legal Handbook, The School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 700032, June 2014.

in Kolkata and its adjoining areas was 32,000, the actual count in the region was 62,000. The newspaper report indicated that although the RTA had registered 125 routes, there were actually 180 operational routes⁴¹.

Table 2: Determination of fare in auto-rickshaw sector*							
	Ministry of Transport	RTA	PVD	Unions	Drivers & owners	Don't Know	Others
DRIVER	0	0.8%	0	81.0%	17.4%	0.8%	1.7%
OWNER	3.3%	3.3%	0.8%	76.7%	10.8%	0	0.8%

*Source: Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers

The decision on routes and fare of auto-rickshaw in Kolkata is complex as well as unclear. As the nature of its operation in Kolkata is different, therefore auto-rickshaws fares cannot be compared to the fare structure of any other cities. The Motor Vehicles (MV) Act mandates that the Regional Transport Authority (RTA) determines the fare for auto-rickshaws, but in practice, various stakeholders, including organizational leaders, police, and government officials, may also have a say in this decision. Therefore, the fare for auto-rickshaws is often not directly or uniformly

⁴¹ *The Telegraph*, 25 January 2014 and 13 February 2014.

correlated with distance, and instead may be based on a slab system, similar to that used for buses.

Trade union leaders and auto-rickshaw operators have acknowledged that it is typically the trade union that determines the fare. When it comes to deciding on routes, many auto-rickshaw operators have stated that the police play a critical role in addition to the trade union. During the Left Front Government's formal declaration of routes, the CITU (give the whole name the first time and then use abbreviation—say that the trade union affiliated with the CPI (M)) held an absolute majority in the auto-rickshaw sector, and our findings indicate that the government relied heavily on CITU trade union leaders to make route decisions.

In 2011, the ruling party at the state level changed, and the CITU lost its majority in the auto-rickshaw sector to the Indian National Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress (henceforth INTTUC, the trade union of the Trinamool Congress). Consequently, it was the INTTUC that made decisions about fares and changes in routes. In interviews and discussions, auto-rickshaw operators and trade union leaders have acknowledged that the fare is either determined by a consensus of the operators in a particular route's union or by the union leaders themselves (see Table 2). Despite the Regional Transport Authority's (RTA) official routes, many of them are not actually used. This is due to police intervention, where the police intervene to prevent traffic congestion, or due to the operators' interests.

Our findings reveal that in the auto-rickshaw sector, the union has always been the authority in deciding the fares. Majority of the drivers (81.0%) and the owners (76.7%) admitted that the fare of auto rickshaw is decided by the unions. I found that 17.4% of the drivers and 10.8% of the owners said that fares are decided by the drivers and owners of auto rickshaw. Only 3.3% of the owners said that it is decided by the ministry of transport. An even lower percentage, only 0.8% of the drivers mentioned that the fare is decided by the RTA and 0.8% pointed out that they were unaware of any RTA decision. Only 0.8% of the owners mentioned that the fare is decided by PVD. There are fragmented routes popularly known as *kata route*⁴² found aplenty in the city, as admitted by The Vice Chairman of Public Vehicles Department (PVD), Colonel Sabyasachi Bagchi⁴³. These features add to the para-legality of the auto rickshaw sector. Like the previous government, the new government has not yet come up with any initiative to address the issue of para-legality in this sector. The only initiative of the state government in this regard has been to include auto rickshaw in the Motor Vehicles Act 1988 by formulating Motor Vehicles Rules 1989. This move, however, has been regarded as constitutionally invalid by senior advocates. Supriyo Roy Chowdhury, Senior Advocate, Calcutta High Court, said that the Motor Vehicle Act, 1988 was applicable for the 4 wheelers. Therefore, it could not include

⁴²‘Kata-route’ used in Bengali, which refers to the routes which has been fragmented by the drivers due to different reasons including, their own interest of getting comparatively more fare, police harassment or clash between two or more auto rickshaw unions

⁴³ Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 4 February 2014, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadvapour University – Rendered into English by the author.

the auto rickshaw.⁴⁴ These indicators of para-legality discussed above hinder auto rickshaw operators' demands for their legal rights as transport workers.

One of the areas of conflict between the administration and auto-rickshaw drivers was the issue of passenger numbers. Although permits allowed for four passengers (three in the back and one beside the driver), the police ignored violations for a long time. In the 1990s, there were no restrictions on the seating capacity of auto-rickshaws, and drivers took the risk of loading their vehicles with as many passengers as they could manage. One of our respondents, an owner–driver, who began driving in 1988, says that they used to take as many as ten passengers at one stage; the fine was a mere Rs. 40 and a few fine payouts still made it worth their while. Over the years, there was pressure to limit this to six or five. From 2011, in the KMA, there has been much greater pressure to restrict it to four and the higher fine amounts have been imposed strictly to discipline the trade.

Our respondents admit, however, that they still try and get five when they think they can get away with it, especially in early mornings and late nights or in by-lanes, which are usually devoid of police presence. Outside the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Police, the Bengal Police hardly get into any tussle with the drivers, allowing

⁴⁴ A consultative meeting was organised by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, in November 2013, where advocates expressed their views on the issue of para-legality in auto rickshaw sector.

them to carry at least five passengers. This seems to be the case in both the southern and northern end of Kolkata and its suburbs.

License and permit: Informality in the basic traits of the trade

Auto operators are required to interact with the PVD and RTA at three key stages: license acquisition, vehicle registration, and obtaining a permit. Every year, they must acquire a "certificate of fitness" following an inspection. Most drivers apply for a driving license, with motor training schools typically charging a fixed fee for lessons and license acquisition. However, not all drivers receive formal training from these schools. Many learn to drive through practicing with friends or relatives or have previously driven other vehicles before transitioning to auto-rickshaws. As a result, the training for the majority of drivers is informal. Some of these informally trained drivers later attempt to obtain a license directly from the PVD, through agents or through a driving school. However, these processes can be expensive and time-consuming. As a result, some drivers take the risk of driving without a proper license, despite the dangers of doing so. For example, one respondent who had been in the business for three years (interviewed in 2013) noted that the PVD had not issued licenses for three-wheelers during that time. Consequently, some drivers continued to drive without a proper license.

A few years ago, a proposal was made to require passing the class VIII examination as the minimum qualification for obtaining a commercial driving license. If implemented, this proposal would have disqualified nearly 37 percent of our respondents. During 2014 - 2015, new entrants were driving without licenses because the PVD wanted them to take the license meant for four-wheelers, which cost nearly Rs. 3000, whereas the three-wheeler license used to cost about Rs 800. Despite the risks, there were a large number of unlicensed drivers, even in 2022. One of our respondent drivers entered the business at the age of 13 years, five years before he was even eligible for a license. Even during our interview in 2014, when he was 32 years old, he was still driving without license. Clearly, though the risks seem high, some get away with it for many years. Many of our respondents started driving autos between ages 15-17 years, before they were eligible for a license.

According to the respondents, between 2013 and 2015, the PVD offices in Barrackpore and Barasat were not renewing licenses for three-wheelers. Despite applying for renewal in the proper format the only document drivers were given was a receipt for their application and they used that piece of paper in lieu of a proper license. An owner-driver noted that about 95 percent of drivers on their route were operating without a valid driving license, and questioned how drivers were supposed to renew their licenses if the government's office refused to issue renewals. Similar problems were reported by drivers within some other jurisdictions. However, those

with licenses from some other PVDs or those who held four-wheeler licenses were able to renew their licenses. Clearly there were concerted efforts by state agencies to keep the autos in a legal limbo.

An owner-driver among the respondents reported that those who had succeeded in renewing their licenses had to pay double the renewal fee as commission to middlemen. When asked about the reason behind the policy to suspend license renewals, a common response was, "Nobody knows why."

As a result, a situation developed where the PVD decided not to issue new licenses or renew existing ones, while the local administration did not crack down on drivers without licenses. When asked about the consequences of driving without a valid license and being involved in an accident, the respondents could not provide a clear answer. They knew that it was a risk they had to take, and the Bengal Police did not charge them for the offense.

Every driver must overcome two obstacles: registration and permits. Even those who do obtain them often need the assistance of an agent. However, given the large number of unregistered autos, it is clear that half or more do not bother with either. The cost of registration and permits can be quite high, sometimes equalling or exceeding the cost of the vehicle. According to a respondent who started driving in

1991, even when there was a Calcutta permit, the cost of the permit was equal to the cost of the auto-rickshaw, which was Rs. 30,000.

An owner-driver, who has been in the business since 1987, initially drove his own auto with a 'leased permit'. He drove his own auto for many years, but the permit was registered in someone else's name. Transferring the permit to his own name took him several years. Kolkata is known for its limited road space and slow traffic, making auto-rickshaws more suitable for the city due to their manoeuvrability in narrow and congested roads. However, the government has not only put a cap on permits but also refused to renew them in some cases. This situation has led to an increase in informality, where permits can only be obtained through 'connections'. It was only in 2018, with the implementation of the Auto-rickshaw Policy by the State Government that permits were assured for four-stroke vehicles under certain conditions.

Two types of permit systems, 'open' and 'closed' are found in auto-rickshaw sector. Studies show that closed permit system lead inevitably to an escalation of price pushing up operational costs in the trade⁴⁵. Several respondents stated that while they could arrange money to buy an auto, they struggled to gather enough funds to

⁴⁵In Chennai, the cost of a Rs. 325 permit has become Rs 70,000 to 100,000. In Mumbai, the cost of a Rs. 100 permit is about Rs 60 to 70,000. The same is true of Delhi. Sukanya Garg, Archana Sudheer Gayen et al., Study on the Auto-rickshaw Sector in Chennai, Civitas Consultancies Pvt Ltd for City Connect Foundation Chennai, 2010, www.chennaicityconnect.com. Emma Shlaes and Akshay Mani, A Case Study of the Auto-rickshaw Sector in Mumbai, May 2013, Embarq. http://wricitieshub.org/sites/default/files/Mumbai%20autorickshaw%20sector_Case%20study_EMBA%20India.pdf

obtain a permit. Consequently, they chose to take the risk of operating without a permit. In such cases, private financiers offered to purchase licenses and permits but charged significantly higher rates of interest than banks. There have been instances where a nexus was found between financiers, training schools, and the PVD⁴⁶. A respondent owner driver, who started driving his own auto in 1990, said that the official permit cost increased in 2000 from Rs. 150 to Rs. 1500 (one year). They were unable to protest against this: ‘Who will listen to us?’ The drivers complained that the fees for license, tax and insurance had been increasing exponentially. In 2014, drivers reported that permits were being sold on the black market for Rs. 240,000, and that the sudden rise in insurance and permit renewal costs were rendering the sector economically unviable.

Police and ‘other’ stakeholders

It appears that the auto-rickshaw drivers in West Bengal have to rely on middlemen to navigate the bureaucratic process of obtaining permits and licenses. The middlemen have strong political affiliations and are deeply entrenched in the PVD and other government offices. Few years before I was undertaking this research, there was an initiative to restrict the access of auto-rickshaw drivers to state government’s transport department officers. This move was followed by widespread protests and could not be

⁴⁶Dinesh Mohan and Dunu Roy, ‘Operating on Three Wheels’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 January 2003.

implemented. The state government's move does, however, indicate an effort to entrench and validate the role of middlemen. The middlemen in the government offices in West Bengal are deeply connected to the political party, which affiliates the major trade union of the auto-rickshaw drivers. Thus, there is some convergence between 'fixers' in government offices and in trade unions. Moreover, the mentality of the public servants toward the working class is well known. Drivers said that the transacting official business is costly and humiliating. Though the middlemen are also costly, they are effective and they save them harassment from the officials. An owner-driver, who had a registered auto-rickshaw, attempted to renew his license on his own but was unsuccessful. He and sought the help of a middleman. He ended up paying more than the amount stated on the receipt but at least the job was completed. Another driver reported that the actual cost of a Certificate of Fitness was Rs. 300, but he had to pay Rs. 1000— commission to middlemen but also probably bribes to officials. In government offices, drivers are caught in an unholy alliance between government officials, middlemen, and the ruling party.

Auto-rickshaw permits consist of two parts, A and B. Part A provides a detailed route description, while Part B records the permit-holder's information. Both parts must be kept in the vehicle at all times. Drivers face great difficulties if their vehicle is stolen or the police confiscate their vehicle. They lose all the papers for which they had paid hefty premium. Like other informal sector activities, operating

on the borderline of legality entails known and unknown costs. Auto-rickshaw operators pay a high price for working in the informal sector, as uneven regulations create hurdles for them and provide unrestricted opportunities for authorities and agencies to engage in rent-seeking. The role of the police in this respect is noteworthy, as 75 percent of respondents reported "police harassment." Drivers are fined for various reasons, such as traffic violations, collisions, and incomplete paperwork. In many cases, drivers settle hefty fines by offering smaller payments to police constables or sergeants. Bribes in myriad forms are how the auto drivers pay rent for the privilege of working at the margins of law.

During the workshops conducted by the SWS-RLS Research Project from 2013 to 2014, many drivers informed us that fines had increased in the past few years, individual drivers had been served notices for a large number of traffic infractions. If auto-rickshaw drivers take even one extra passenger, they can face fines of up to Rs. 3000. According to some seniors in the trade, many drivers invite police attention by violating rules, and fines are often imposed for overloading. However, upon pleading, the fine can be reduced to Rs. 500. Additionally, some fines imposed for traffic violations may be false. The police are aware that many drivers operate without a license or permit, making them easy targets for extracting fines and bribes. Most fines are imposed for minor violations and are charged on the spot at Rs. 100. This practice

of ‘spot-fine’ is not restricted to auto-drivers but imposed and realised by traffic police on all kinds of vehicles, including private vehicles.

According to a driver, approximately 50 drivers discovered a backlog of cases on the computer when they attempted to renew their permit. They had not received any notice prior to this discovery and had to pay large amounts as a result. In most cases, such issues are settled through mediation for smaller amounts than formally claimed. During my interactions with them, drivers argued that the Kolkata Police focused on extorting money from offenders rather than punishing illegalities. The regulatory framework is faulty and ineffective as a result. The government permits informality but creates regulations that trap informal drivers. As a result, drivers bear the cost of informality by higher payments. One can argue that these are also forms of regulation, though very different from the formal sector.

The government had consistently overlooked the most basic requirements for the trade; they discontinued renewing licenses and issuing permits. These ‘irregularities’ have persisted over a period of nearly a decade. There is thus a situation where illegalities and irregularities have been normalized. The state does not enforce the rules or punish the violations on any systematic basis, they clamp down in a ransom and arbitrary manner, which only results in a reinforcement of informality. There is no interruption in auto-rickshaws running on the roads of Kolkata—the police wink at infractions sufficiently for it to be possible and drivers focus on earning

their livelihood. Nevertheless, the situation is fraught — drivers are in a permanent state of fear and vulnerability. The drivers are fully aware that their very existence depends entirely on the government and the ruling party to be able to ply a trade which is not fully legal. Not only the state but a host of its agencies, the police, government officials, middlemen, who are formally or informally connected to the party and the government, enable the continuity of the trade.

Self-employment

An auto rickshaw worker was defined as ‘self-employed’ in the SESRU scheme of West Bengal in 1983. This was not applicable in case of auto rickshaws in the other states of India viz. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Tripura, etc. where auto rickshaws were not introduced under any ‘self-employment’ scheme. However, our interactions with different actors in this sector, namely passengers, trade union leaders, government officials, etc. revealed that gradually auto rickshaw owners in Kolkata started appointing drivers. The category ‘self-employed’ thereby lost its efficacy in describing auto rickshaw operators. The category of ‘auto rickshaw worker’ now consists of both owner-drivers and renter-drivers. Moreover, the Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989 prescribes the duties of auto rickshaw drivers only as self-employed individuals; there is no provision for workers’ rights. Neither do we see this included in the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 or in the Motor Transport Workers’ Act, 1961. Thus, the issue of the rights of workers in the auto sector in West Bengal is highly complex.

In the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Tripura, auto-rickshaw workers have been included in the schedule of minimum wages⁴⁷. In West Bengal, this may not be possible because there is no recognition of a wage relationship in the sector.

The West Bengal government has included auto rickshaw operators as beneficiaries in a social security scheme for transport workers called West Bengal Transport Workers' Social Security Scheme, 2010. This scheme was formulated under the provision of the State Social Security Board which was made on the basis of the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, passed by the Government of India. The Act defines 'transport workers' as those 'who are unorganised workers and, associated with the automobile sector, working in the vehicles which are used in commercial purpose.' The scheme includes auto rickshaws along with other vehicles such as bus, taxi, lorry, etc. This scheme covers not only the worker, but also the 'dependents' of the worker, which includes wife, son less than 21 years and the girl child, with no age bar for divorced and widowed daughters. The benefits of the scheme include pension, death benefits, medical benefit, maternity benefit and benefit for permanent disablement. Though auto rickshaw operators have been included in this act formulated by the state government, the number of beneficiaries is very low. In our qualitative study, drivers have admitted their failure in renewing their cards. However the large majority are not even registered for the scheme – 74.4% drivers

⁴⁷ Nandita Dhawan, 'A Feminist Action Research Project on 'Labour and Gender'', Newsletter, Volume 33, February 2015, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.

and 75.8% owners said they had no access to the scheme. Only 13.2% drivers and 16.7% owners are registered under this social security scheme. The state government has not taken much proactive steps to increase the coverage of the scheme among these categories of workers.

As already discussed above, auto rickshaws in Kolkata operate within a legal limbo; they are not quite illegal but nor are they fully legal. There has been virtually no attempt to improve their working conditions or to bring them under the protection of labour laws or provide them welfare measures. In case of existing schemes, coverage remains low. Our study has revealed a complex relationship between auto rickshaw operators, trade unions and political parties in Kolkata. Despite being a part of informal sector and placed at the edge of law, however, they have one of the strongest trade unions in the city as they have repeatedly demonstrated. The auto operators unions working in concert can bring the city to a standstill by blocking the roads. Chapter four of this dissertation will discuss in more detail the role of the formal organisation, trade union, in organising the informal sector.

Conclusion

The introduction of auto-rickshaw gave new hope to a huge section of the urban population especially a group of educated unemployed youths. The government in West Bengal successfully created an alternative source of income by introducing of a

range of transport alternatives. They began with private buses, then introduced minibuses and, finally, the autos. These initiatives benefitted the urban population, whose transport needs were met by these successive measures. The auto-rickshaw, however, faced an intractable problem because of the gap in the MVA. . The government experimented with the sector for several years but have not succeeded in fully legalising its operations. The sector continues to operate in a context of para-legality. State-promoted informality has further diminished the opportunities of the sector to develop. Working with para-legalities for decades has affected the construction of the social and cultural world of the auto operators. The question of informal politics would not have become so prominent if the sector had been legalised and brought under the usual regulatory net of the government. From this original problem, other difficulties have proliferated. In later chapters, we investigate some of the political implications of this contradictory situation. We also explore the interplay of interests of different stakeholders.

Chapter 3

Toto in West Bengal: Informal sector and informal labour

Since 2014, the 'e-rickshaw' has become increasingly visible in rural West Bengal and its districts, emerging as a strong competitor to other vehicles like cycle rickshaws, auto rickshaws, and 8-seater autos known as 'magic'⁴⁸. Locally called 'toto', e-rickshaws are currently not permitted in Kolkata, although they have become the most popular mode of transport in other cities such as Siliguri, Howrah, and KMC suburbs.

Para-transit or informal public transport, also known as last-mile connectivity transport, has a distinct concept in developing and third-world countries as compared to developed nations. In developing countries, para-transit serves as a replacement for conventional public transport, which is often lacking or poorly functioning. On the other hand, developed countries rely on para-transit for door-to-door or demand-responsive transportation services, especially for the elderly and disabled. In India, para-transit comprises mainly of three or four-wheeled motorized and non-motorized vehicles. Motorized vehicles like conventional auto-rickshaws, vikrams, trekkers, magics, etc., are driven by internal combustion engines, while non-motorized vehicles include traditionally hand-pulled or pedalled cycle rickshaws, which have now been replaced by e-rickshaws/totos⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Small 4 wheeler vehicles made by TATA, mostly used for public transport in suburbs and districts in West Bengal having capacity to carry 6 – 8 passengers.

⁴⁹ Shiv Priye, M. Manoj, Rajiv Ranjan, '*Understanding the socioeconomic characteristics of para-transit drivers and their perceptions toward electric three-wheeled rickshaws in Delhi, India*, IATSS Research, pp. 357 – 370, 2021.

Before the emergence of Toto, cycle rickshaws were the primary mode of transportation for short distances in districts, towns, and rural areas, while magic/three-wheeler auto-rickshaws (known locally as tempo or vikram) and buses were used for long-distance travel. Some people relied on motorcycles or scooters. However, the emergence and expansion of Toto demonstrated the need for a more efficient mode of transportation in these localities. Toto has proved to be the most reliable means of transportation, with their numbers increasing significantly. For example, in Chalsa, a small locality in Dooars under Metli Block, has more than 150 Totos.

The municipal administration of Siliguri has attempted several times to curb the growing number of Totos by scrapping those with "Made in China" bodies or issuing SMC⁵⁰ numbers. Unfortunately, these efforts have not been successful as "illegal" Totos continue to operate within the paras/localities or areas that are seemingly free from police surveillance. According to municipal restrictions, Totos without an SMC number plate are not allowed to operate on main roads such as Junction, New Jalpaiguri Railway Station, Bidhan Market, Air View More, Bardhaman Road, etc. Nonetheless, thousands of legal and illegal Totos operate daily throughout Siliguri city in a synchronized manner, indicating that either the administration is merely pretending to address the issue or there may be some

⁵⁰ Siliguri Municipal Corporation.

political equation within the administration that resists the implementation of strong policies despite several judgments and observations from the Calcutta High Court.

A new era in para-transit: Growth of toto sector in West Bengal

Unlike auto rickshaws in Kolkata, the toto did not originate as a result of government policy. It did not emerge from the political plane of a metropolitan city that was once the sole focus of the Left Front Government. Initially, the toto entered the social context unnoticed, at least officially, by the West Bengal Government. It was not until 2014 that residents of suburban localities saw this vehicle operating on the roads and lanes for the first time.

In the late 1990s, the Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute, a non-profit research and development institute based in Maharashtra, produced the first design for an e-rickshaw⁵¹. The introduction of battery-operated vehicles has been greeted with much enthusiasm due to their positive impact on the environment and pollution⁵². In West Bengal, e-rickshaws or totos emerged as competitors to other intermediate transports in the districts. These battery-operated vehicles were very similar to auto-rickshaws but were slightly larger, giving them a run for their money. However, cycle-rickshaws suffered the most due to the rapid intrusion of the battery-operated vehicle in West Bengal's districts. Although they were introduced without any formal

⁵¹ *The Statesman*, 'Regulation a must for electric rickshaws', 4 April 2018.

⁵² Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality: Auto-rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', Kolkata: SWS-RLS Working Paper, Jadavpur University, 13 June 2016.

process, they were banned in two districts by the Calcutta High Court on 6 June 2014. They were subsequently incorporated into the rules, similar to auto-rickshaws, in December of that year. Both are subject to similar legal contradictions. Known as e-rickshaws or totos, they have also appeared in other cities in India.

On October 8th, 2014, the Government of India's Road Transport Ministry issued a notification to amend the Central Motor Vehicles Act of 1988 to include e-rickshaws in the special purpose battery-operated vehicle category with three wheels. This amendment aimed to provide last-mile connectivity for passengers for hire or reward. The Lok Sabha subsequently passed an amendment bill, and the central ministry and state transport departments issued additional notifications. Tripura was the first state to take action and regularized battery-operated electric rickshaws through municipal bye-laws in 2014, which were later known as the “Tripura Battery Operated Rickshaws Rules 2014”. In 2015, the Central Government further amended the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988 and the rules to allow e-rickshaws, subject to their prototypes being cleared by central institutes such as the Central Institute of Road Transport (CIRT) in Pune. The rules stipulate specific limits, including a carrying capacity of five (including the driver), battery power of 2,000 Watts, a maximum speed of 25 kmph, and a luggage weight of 40 kg. However, in West Bengal, these rules are not being followed.

In West Bengal, on April 27th, 2015, the Transport Department issued a notification allowing district administrations to issue licenses to e-rickshaw/toto drivers and register their vehicles for the first time. The notification acknowledged the Central Government's Road Transport Ministry's October 8th, 2014 notification, which recognized the issue of illegal e-rickshaws/totos infiltrating rural and urban roads and the popularity of this mode of transport. I came across two other notifications from the Regional Transport Authority of North 24 Parganas referring to the state government's April 27th, 2015 notification.

On May 13th, 2015, the Joint Secretary to the West Bengal Government issued a letter [No. 268(135)/MA/O/C-4/2M-3/2014] to the Chairpersons of municipalities, the Commissioner of Municipal Corporations, and the Commissioner of KMC concerning the registration, taxation, issuance of permits, and driving licenses for e-rickshaws in municipal towns. The letter began by prohibiting any movement of e-rickshaws within the KMC area. The instruction letter allowed totos or e-rickshaws to operate within lanes and by-lanes of cities/towns with a population of more than 5 lakhs, small towns, and rural areas. It was evident from the letter that the state government intended for the toto to serve as a "supplementary transport mode." The government prohibited the plying of totos on National or State Highways, major roads, and sanctioned bus routes. Additionally, the government empowered the Regional Transport Authorities (RTAs) of the districts to finalize the routes in

consultation with the Police, followed by the issuance of permits and registration for new e-vehicles.

In September 21 and 22 of 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi distributed e-rickshaws to some youths in Varanasi as part of the Central Government's initiative to promote e-transport and Indian manufacturers, assemblers, and sellers of the e-vehicle across the country. Though later a report⁵³ claimed that the specific brand was disputed, the government continued to uphold e-rickshaws as the new brand of para-transit. In December 2015, Nitin Gadkari, the road transport and highways minister, announced that the Central Government would invite major Chinese manufacturers to set up shop in India and provide them with an ecosystem since the sale of these non-polluting vehicles would be enormous across the country. The government's move was part of its policy to convert 10% of all motorized road vehicles into hybrid or e-vehicles and provide livelihoods to over 20 million families by training 20 million e-rickshaw drivers. At that time, e-rickshaws had already been approved for compliance by the International Centre for Automotive Technology (ICAT)⁵⁴.

Parallel to the notifications discussed earlier, from governmental bodies in West Bengal, a series of judgment came from the Calcutta High Court, which challenged the status of e-rickshaw in this state. In September 2015, a Division Bench

⁵³ Suman Munshi, *IBG News*, 'License and registration of Existing E -rickshaw Elias TOTO as AB-Initio Is Now Illegal', 1 July 2017.

⁵⁴ *The Economic Times*, 'Government to invite Chinese e-rickshaw vendors for JV', 25 December 2015.

of the Calcutta High Court ordered the Transport Department and the Police to scrap the unregistered toto. It is clear from the report of Anandabazar Patrika in September 2015, that the Municipalities had already taken up the responsibility to control the toto sector. The High Court expressed its aversion on the fact that the municipalities were handling the process of registration of the e-vehicles while dealing with a PIL filed by an advocate, Rama Prasad Ghosh. The Court questioned that despite instruction from the State Government, how the municipalities could took up the charge for registration bypassing the RTAs. The PIL was against some municipalities including Howrah, who were registering the tolos. The litigation had a serious charge that in some areas such as Howrah, Domjur, Makardaha, Unsani, etc, the local leaders of the ruling party were seeking huge donation or rent while deciding the routes for the tolos. "The Bengal government had on April 26 issued a notification saying the tolos would be given licences. Soon after, municipalities, corporations and even panchayats started issuing permits to tolos. But they are not the appropriate authorities to issue such permits." Ghosh responded to The Telegraph. He also produced a document in support of his claim that a Trinamool Congress unit in Howrah had issued 'permits' to tolos on its letterhead where the routes and the rates were already mentioned⁵⁵. The public prosecutor, Tapan Mukherjee accepted that the Howrah Municipality had periodically issued registration to the tolos. The Court thereafter ordered that

⁵⁵ *The Telegraph*, 'Seize illegal tolos, high court tells state', 19 September 2015

unregistered totos should be identified and scraped. A comment, following this case was interesting. The Mayor of Kolkata, Sri Shovan Chatterjee, who was one of the five most important leaders of TMC, commented ‘with due respect, that the municipalities were autonomous and they had their own jurisdictions’. Such an important leader’s disappointment with the Court’s order was striking. It implied that whatever charges the municipalities were undertaking was nothing but the party’s decision. The party wanted to control the sector through the municipalities in urban Bengal. Hence, most of the municipalities during that time had boards of TMC.

The toto sector experienced rapid growth in 2015 and 2016, which coincided with the highly charged socio-political atmosphere leading up to the assembly elections. Given the promising prospect of political change, the young sector offered both employment and mobility, making it a safe bet for those seeking stability during uncertain times. Ultimately, however, the incumbent TMC party retained its absolute majority in power, with strong support from rural Bengal as reported by the Election Commission of India. Those working in the toto sector were among the party's most ardent supporters, given that it was under the first TMC regime (2011-2016) that the sector saw unprecedented growth within the state.

In the initial months of 2016, the Calcutta High Court once again directed the Transport Department of the state to specify their stance on the use of e-rickshaws on the roads of West Bengal. By May 2016, the issue of unregistered totos had become a

major topic with estimates of the number of battery-operated vehicles in the state ranging between 150,000 to 250,000⁵⁶. Reports suggested that the Calcutta High Court had raised serious concerns about their legal validity and the informal nature of their operations. A significant portion of the totos on the road were unregistered, causing a loss of approximately one billion rupees to the state exchequer. A team of three scientists from the CIRT, Pune, found that the majority of totos operating in Kolkata and nearby areas were not complying with rules or safety regulations. In June, the state government agreed not to permit additional totos on the road but requested for jobs and livelihoods to be taken into account before a crackdown. It is believed that their hesitance is due to the involvement of the ruling party, which echoes the controversies surrounding auto-rickshaws⁵⁷.

The Principal Secretary of the State Government issued a notification [2367(42)-WT/3M-56/2013], dated 20 June 2016, in compliance with the Calcutta High Court's order in May. The High Power Committee constituted by the court had addressed the issue of registering unauthorised totos. The notification announced that the state government would not encourage the registration of totos that were not recognised under the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and its subsequent rules. It was further decided that totos would be identified and listed by the B.D.O.s of Blocks and E.O.s of Municipalities, with the assistance of the police. The municipalities and

⁵⁶ *India Blooms News Service*, 'Calcutta High Court orders to form high-power committee to ban unauthorized Toto', 6 May 2016.

⁵⁷ *The Telegraph*, 'Govt brakes on new totos', 4 June 2016.

B.D.O. offices in rural areas were given the charge to enlist and register totos as a measure to map and manage the sector. In the meantime, on 30 August 2016, the Central Government issued a notification exempting e-rickshaws from requiring a permit to ply on roads⁵⁸. According to the notification ‘the Central government hereby orders that the provisions of sub section I of section 66 of the said Act (Motor Vehicles Act, 1988) shall not apply to any transport vehicle of the category e-cart and e-rickshaw...for the purpose of carriage of goods and passengers with their personal luggage’. The sub-section required that ‘no owner of a motor vehicle shall use or permit the use of the vehicle as a transport vehicle in any public place whether or not such vehicle is actually carrying any passenger or goods save in accordance with the conditions of a permit granted or countersigned by a state or regional transport authority’. According to the notification, the state governments could impose restrictions under appropriate traffic laws on plying of these vehicles in specific areas or specific routes.

Between 2016 and 2018, leading Bengali and English newspapers in the state regularly reported on totos. These reports mostly focused on issues such as illegal totos, the challenge of registering and obtaining permits for them, and road congestion due to the excessive number of totos on not only the small roads and lanes but also on main roads and highways. At the same time, newspapers also documented the

⁵⁸ *The Economic Times*, ‘No permits required for e-rickshaws, govt issues notification’, 30 August 2016.

struggles of toto drivers to improve their livelihoods. Print media featured unique stories of some toto drivers who transported students during the Madhyamik Pariksha⁵⁹ in different parts of the state, and deployed their vehicles as ambulances, among other things. *Anandabazar Patrika Online*⁶⁰ reported such cases throughout the mentioned timeline. Although the first and second phase of the lockdown were the prime time for the sector, during which time ambulances were scarce even in Kolkata, tolos became the lifeline for the people of West Bengal. At that time, people realized that life would be impossible without the battery-operated vehicle. The media portrayal of women drivers and young educated male drivers is noteworthy, and stories of their hardships often generate sympathy. It is important to note that since 2015/2016, several PILs have been filed against different issues related to the sector.

During the initial days of the toto, incidents of clashes and violence were reported between toto drivers and their trade rivals, such as auto-rickshaw drivers or rickshaw pullers. However, the media's representation of the toto gradually took a different turn. Totos were usually not portrayed as the villains of the roadways, as happened in the case of auto-rickshaws in Kolkata. What I have understood is that the media representation through those series of reports gave a positive vive for the sector, such as 'well, it is problematic, but better than the rest, let's accept it'. An article from The Telegraph titled "Buses off road to protest auto raj" dated 10 January 2023 highlights

⁵⁹ Final examination of West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

⁶⁰ '<https://www.anandabazar.com/topic/toto-driver>'

an interesting development⁶¹. The article reports that 800 buses plying on nearly 100 routes went on strike to protest against illegal auto and e-rickshaw services that they claimed created a livelihood crisis for them. The leaders of Bus Unions in Nadia District expressed their discontent against the Police and local administration for being inactive in tackling the two intermediate modes of transport. The reason why this article is noteworthy is that the protest was against both toto and auto, but the print media house chose to use an old tag 'auto raj', which was frequently used by them during 2011-2014 for reporting on the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. Toto has not yet been adversely represented by the media as happened in the case of auto drivers in Kolkata.

Gradually, society has become accustomed to the two factors associated with toto: the reliability of the vehicle and the traffic congestion caused by an unrestricted increase in the number of vehicles. However, by 2022, this unprecedented growth began to threaten the existence of other modes of transport, including cycle-rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, and magics. Even private buses went on strike in 2020 to protest against the dominance of totes⁶². The rapid expansion of the toto industry is challenging the existence of those who have been in the trade since its inception. The daily income of a toto driver has gradually decreased as the number of totes plying

⁶¹ *The Telegraph*, 'Buses off road to protest auto raj', 10 January 2023.

⁶² *Anandabazar Patrika*, 'Auto-toto douratto, bus bondho', 24 September 2020;
Anandabazar Patrika, 'Auto-totor oshanti theke mukti kobe, proshno', 2 September 2020;
Ei Samay, 'Ranaghat Bus Strike', 9 December 2022;
The Telegraph, 'Buses off road to protest auto raj', 10 January 2023.

within a particular zone has abruptly increased. This increase is evident throughout the state.

On 8 March 2017, Tarun Goswami reported⁶³ that the state government had taken an ‘unprecedented step’ of introducing e-rickshaw to replace toto. According to the report, Mamata Bannerjee visited Germany in 2016 and requested the BMW to open a factory for battery-operated vehicles in West Bengal. The Principal Secretary of State Transport department said that a massive awareness drive would be held at Barasat in North 24 Parganas soon, where around 1,000 toto owners would surrender their vehicles to get new e-rickshaws in the presence of the State Transport Minister Suwendu Adhikari and Food and Supplies Minister Jyotipriyo Mullick, Trinamool Congress MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar and other senior officials of the department⁶⁴. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced a policy that no one should lose their jobs but altering their toto with authorised e-rickshaw with registration number. The scheme would help people as well because e-rickshaws were legal and they would get insurance in case they met with road accidents. The e-rickshaw manufacturers would provide the toto owners, a concession on the battery and other spare parts of the toots which will vary to anything between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000 depending on their condition and will help them get loan facilities from banks. The toto parts were

⁶³ *Millennium Post*, ‘Soon, e-rickshaws to replace toots in Bengal’, 8 March 2017.

⁶⁴ *The Economic Times*, ‘West Bengal government to convert toots to e-rickshaws’, 13 March 2017.

manufactured in China and assembled in India. The scheme would give impetus to the 10 e-rickshaw manufacturers in the state. The totos are not at all safe for the passengers till date. The body has been examined as too light that the passengers could get overturned easily. The state government had a plan to launch a campaign throughout the state to create awareness among toto drivers. The government hoped that the e-rickshaws would be a comfortable, safe and cheaper means of transport and was likely to become popular shortly.

In December 2017, a report on the Howrah municipal area revealed that despite the local administration's initiative, not a single toto driver enlisted their name to surrender their vehicle and receive a registered e-rickshaw. Although the local administration organised several camps for months, their efforts went in vain. Even the Police tried to control the totos by providing a 'Temporary Identification Number,' but the drivers managed to evade this initiative by using the same TIN for multiple vehicles⁶⁵.

In August 2018, the Calcutta High Court ordered the State government to either take appropriate steps to register e-rickshaws by following the existing provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act within three months or stop their operations entirely in West Bengal⁶⁶. The order was passed after several Public Interest

⁶⁵ *Anandabazar Patrika Online*, 'Toto paltey e-rickshaw, millo na sara', December 2017.

⁶⁶ *The Telegraph*, 'Register totos or stop them: HC', 18 August 2018.

Litigations, where the State Transport Department was directed to ensure that all e-rickshaws plying in West Bengal were registered with the Regional Transport Authorities. These vehicles must comply with Rule 126 of the Central Motor Vehicles Act, 1989. If an e-rickshaw did not satisfy the conditions mentioned in Rule 126, the authority would not register the vehicle, and it should be banned from plying on roads. The division bench headed by Chief Justice Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya added that in case of any road accident, the e-rickshaw owner of the respective vehicle would pay compensation to the victim. If the owner could not be identified, the state government would be responsible for the amount. The order was a response to a public interest litigation claiming that thousands of totos were plying across the state illegally, and the authorities had failed to take action against the vehicles.

“According to a rough estimate in March this year, more than 42,000 e-rickshaws are now plying across the state. The number is increasing every day. In remote areas also, this particular vehicle are the only mode of transport. So it is very difficult for the state to stop plying of these vehicles. On the other hand, it would also be difficult for the government to give registrations to e-rickshaws without amending the Motor Vehicles Act,” an officer in the transport department said.”⁶⁷

The court expressed its dissatisfaction over the fact that even after three years, the state government failed to implementing the guidelines it had framed in 2015 to bring e-rickshaws under the purview of the Motor vehicles Act. Advocate Amal Sen, on behalf of the government Said that ‘in many municipal areas, the guidelines had

⁶⁷ *The Telegraph*, 18/08/2018.

been implemented, where the e-rickshaws had been brought under the control of civic authorities'. But unfortunately, as per the report, he could not specify any such case. The tension between the executive and judiciary of the state had been persisting for years on the issue of toto. The former had been visibly dodging every tough direction of the later. On the issue of conversion in auto-rickshaw sector of Kolkata, such an undefined situation did not arise. Accepting chances for serious political loss, the Left Front government implemented the conversion. But the scenario has changed completely in the TMC regime. Number has played the most important role in the case of toto.

Even in 2018, the number of active totes in West Bengal was estimated to be more than 1 lakh, and thousands of families relied on the sector for survival, while crores of people used the vehicles for mobility. It was difficult to find a square kilometer in the state that was beyond the reach of totes, excluding hills and forests. However, as of November 2022, it is impossible to estimate the total number of vehicles plying in the state, and it may be challenging for the state executive to register every vehicle and map the entire sector. Despite this, the court has not directly banned the sector but has been pressuring the government to regularize the trade.

During a public interest litigation hearing on August 5, 2019, the division bench of Chief Justice T.B.N. Radhakrishnan and Justice Arijit Banerjee observed that the court could not interfere in the state government's decision to allow the plying

of totos since they were not manufactured by registered companies with the patent to produce e-vehicles. As the court declined to issue any order, the interim order of the division bench of former Chief Justice of the Court, Justice Jyotirmoy Bhattacharyya, and Justice Arijit Banerjee, in August 2018 remained in force. According to a newspaper report, the State Counsel mentioned in court that e-rickshaws were manufactured by small units that operated without licenses and registrations. The division bench held that until the vehicles were manufactured by registered companies, they would not come under the provision of the law, and no claim of compensation would be entertained in the event of a death involving such a vehicle until e-rickshaws were brought under the law.

On one hand, the court's decision and on the other hand, the state government's inaction have jeopardized passenger safety. Despite a series of orders and directions from the judiciary, the apathy of policy makers has become remarkable. This is not remarkable in the sense that the sector has grown so much that it could be called "omnipresent" in West Bengal, but remarkable in the sense that the government has flawlessly promoted informality in the sector. Even litigation against "contempt of court" has not helped to improve the situation. In February 2022, the Division Bench of Justice Arijit Bannerjee and Justice Kaushik Chanda wanted to know the state government's policy on toto by February 22, 2022, while hearing a PIL on "contempt of court." Unfortunately, no clear policy of the state government regarding the toto

sector has been presented yet. Chapter four of this thesis discusses the apathy of the state government and tries to find the reason(s) behind it.

While discussing the growth of the sector, it is important to mention the Electric Vehicle Policy 2021 of the Government of West Bengal. In view of the climate change commitments made by the Government of India during COP21 Summit held in Paris to reduce emission intensity by 33% - 35% within 2030 from 2005 levels, and in the context of rapid urbanization, minimizing the exhaustion of non-renewable fuel and CO₂ emission, the state government has promised to promote electric 2 wheelers, 3 wheelers, 4 wheelers, e-trucks, and e-buses. E-rickshaw has been included under the 3 wheelers category. The state has planned to provide incentives for these new variants of vehicles. The policy outlines a number of objectives, targets, and strategies, including setting up charging stations, battery swapping units, research institutes, training programs in ITIs for technicians, and making model towns/cities for e-vehicles. The policy is optimistic for those who aspire to have careers in e-vehicles, including toto drivers. At least, the policy indicates that the state government is not adverse to the sector. However, the question of formalizing or regularizing the sector, which is exclusively political in nature, remains unaddressed. Especially for a sector like toto, which has already grown significantly, it needs mapping, not promotional initiatives from policymakers. A report from 2021 claimed that only 35,999 e-rickshaws were plying in West Bengal.

However, unofficial sources claim that several lakh totos are operating in the state. The government needs to map the sector to formalize or regularize it; otherwise, the nature of growth of the sector is enough to be a prospective threat to the future of e-vehicles in the state.

From being unnoticed to ruling in-roads: Expansion of the toto sector

It is evident from the notifications and other actions taken by the transport department that policy makers are aware of the current state of e-rickshaws and totos on rural and urban roads in West Bengal. Acting primarily as intermediate modes of transport, e-rickshaws have greatly increased in number on suburban and rural roads, and their popularity among the people justifies their increase in numbers. These e-rickshaws have provided connectivity to areas that were previously inaccessible by conventional modes of transport such as buses and taxis. Furthermore, the infiltration of e-rickshaws has provided a livelihood to a large number of people in rural, suburban, and urban areas of West Bengal. Due to their low maintenance cost and ability to function as both contract and stage carriages, with a minimum fare of Rs. 5 - 10/- per passenger (in the case of acting as stage carriage), e-rickshaws are becoming more popular in West Bengal than auto rickshaws plying on the roads of Kolkata and its suburbs.

In 2014 and 2015, totos in parts of North Bengal such as Balurghat and even outskirts of Siliguri had a minimum fare of Rs. 5. However, presently, the common lowest fare for an individual passenger in toto is Rs. 10 throughout West Bengal. Although policy makers, who rely on votes, are hesitant to restrict the movement of e-rickshaws, the judiciary is taking a stand against them due to their absence in the Motor Vehicles Act, Rules, and guidelines prescribed by the Central Government. Consequently, there is a limbo regarding the fate of e-rickshaws in West Bengal. Despite these complexities, e-rickshaws continue to operate on the roads without any traditional organization such as a trade union, which auto-rickshaws have had for decades. The political party in power, which is the legitimate authority to formulate policies for the welfare of citizens, is both depending on and avoiding the orders/judgments of the high court, while the local representatives of the party/parties are benefiting from the operation of these e-rickshaws. The fate of e-rickshaw drivers is still undecided, and although they earn money on a daily basis, they lack legal safeguards. They are trying to legitimize themselves with the help of local political power, which gives rise to a new equation of informal politics regarding the toto sector and the Trinamool regime. In the previous left regime, the politics of informality existed through a strictly disciplined party hierarchy, and the flow of outputs and inputs was vertical. In the current phase, however, informal politics exists through different layers, and the flow of outputs and inputs, while not always, is

sometimes horizontal. Chapter five of this dissertation discusses this phenomenon in detail.

It is surprising that despite being informal and experiencing a rapid increase in numbers, the e-rickshaw sector has been operating "normally" for more than eight years without being in the headlines of state news for any uncomfortable reasons. This is an instance of the vehicle becoming an obvious part of life outside Kolkata. Even the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal has mentioned 'toto' in its 'How to Reach' page, while describing the 'Road'⁶⁸ section. In an interview⁶⁹ with the Times of India, Prof. Partha Pratim Chakrabarti, the erstwhile Director of IIT Kharagpur stated that was toto was the biggest invention happened in recent times transforming the transport paradigm in small towns and districts with an offering that is uncomplicated, inexpensive and green.

"We need a Toto kind of innovation that is sustainable and meets the Indian requirement. The low-cost electric three-wheeler is cheap to operate, carries enough people to generate a decent income, does not cause pollution (air or sound), is perfectly suited for narrow streets and is not a threat to others. The Toto has defeated all giant auto companies working on electric vehicles. We need to learn from such innovation. It is important to know the life of people for whom we are seeking innovation to create the appropriate product," Chakrabarti said on 1 January 2016 at an international symposium on Liveable Habitat & Sustainable Infrastructure organized by IIT-Kharagpur⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ https://wbtourism.gov.in/home/how_to_reach

⁶⁹ *The Times of India*, 'The invention of toto a stellar achievement', 2 January 2016

⁷⁰ Reported by *The Times of India* on 2 January 2016

On 5 February 2021, Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Bannerjee said that ‘only 29,706 kilometres of road had been constructed till 2011. Since 2011, have been constructing 89,574 kilometres of new rural road. The government has aimed to connect rural roads with state highways in the next five years.’⁷¹ On July 2021 Construction World⁷² reported that the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal was preparing to launch the third phase of the *Gramin Sadak Yojana*, aiming at strengthening and widening rural roads which were built at least ten years back. Apart from completing the remaining work on the first two phases of the project, the government led by Mamata Bannerjee had initiated plans for the third phase, which aimed to redevelop 1,000 km of roads up to a width of 5.5 metres. The third phase followed the successful completion of a significant portion of the first two phases of the project, which saw the construction of 25,190 km of rural roads in Bengal since May 2011. Despite the nationwide lockdown, approximately Rs. 1,516 crore and Rs. 1,465 crore were spent on rural road improvement in the financial years 2019-20 and 2020-21, respectively. The program resulted in the construction of 2,180 km of new roads in the state, which was the highest achievement in India against the budget. In February 2021, just before her landmark election, the chief minister proposed that her government "would construct

⁷¹ Monideepa Banerjee, *India News, NDTV*, ‘Days After Centre's Budget Promise, Mamata Banerjee's Bengal Road Bonanza’, 5 February, 2021

⁷² *Construction World*, ‘Gramin Sadak Yojana: West Bengal to redevelop 10 year old roads’, 16bJuly 2021

46,000 km of new rural roads in the next five years, within which 10,000 km of new rural roads would be constructed and repaired within 2022 under the 'Pathasree' scheme, for which she allocated Rs. 500 crore." Such developments in rural road connectivity have facilitated the rapid growth of toto. Those who are residents or regular visitors to rural North Bengal can recall the change in road connectivity and the improved condition of roads since 2011.

Thus, toto received a suitable milieu to grow as fast as possible changing the nature of para-transit in rural Bengal and generating huge source of self-employment in the state during the TMC regime. A study⁷³ revealed that in 2018, 6000 – 7000 tolos were operating in Burdwan town only. During 2016/ 2017, roughly 10000 – 15000 tolos operated in Siliguri. The number of tolos has increased rapidly since independence and surpassed the growth of any other para-transit system in India. Based on my field survey, it appears that hardly any drivers have left the sector, as tolos have become indispensable for people in their respective localities. Hooghly Motors, a West Bengal based company claimed in their website that they have the capacity to build 1.5 lakhs e-rickshaws every year. According to a report⁷⁴, the pan-Indian electric rickshaw market had been valued at \$786.2 million in 2019 and is

⁷³ Goswami P, 'Awareness and practice regarding road safety among toto (e-rickshaw) drivers in Burdwan Town, West Bengal', *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health* Goswami P et al. *Int J Community Med Public Health*. 2018 Jul;5(7):3090-3095 <http://www.ijcmph.com>

⁷⁴ P&S Intelligence, 'India Electric Rickshaw Market Outlook by Vehicle (Passenger Carrier, Load Carrier), Motor Power (<1000W, 1000-1500W, >1500W), Battery Capacity (<101Ah, >101Ah) - Industry Revenue Estimation and Demand Forecast to 2030, January 2023.

expected to reach \$1,394.2 million by 2025, advancing at a compound annual growth rate of 33.3% during the forecast period from 2020–2025. Increasing government incentives to boost the adoption of electric vehicles and the implementation of stringent environmental policies in view of the growing concerns over rising air pollution are driving the e-vehicle's market growth. In their work in 2017, Das and Rohatgi⁷⁵ noted that in 2016, officially 1868 totos were plying through Cooch Behar Municipality, Cooch Behar Block 1 and Block 2. But in 2017, unofficially the number estimated around 10,000 within an area of approximately 725 square kilometer which had a population of 5,83,000⁷⁶. They mentioned 2013 as the year of totos introduction. Another work⁷⁷ showed that in 2017/ 2018, in Chakdah Municipality which has an area of 15.36 sq. Km. had 268 totos in 9 stands. The 'flying totos', i.e. the totos which were not associated to any stand was beyond the mapping. Those were initial years when the stands were under the process of formation. Even at 2021/2022, in rural West Bengal, a huge number of totos ply outside any stand. They do not feel any need to get associated to any stand.

⁷⁵ Das, Biswajit and Rohatgi, Sushma, 'Impact Of E-Rickshaw On Sustainable Urban Mobility And Livelihood : A Case Study Of Cooch Behar Town Of West Bengal', *Geo-Analyst* , ISSN 2249-2909 December, 2017

⁷⁶ Official Website of Cooch Behar District, Web Link: <https://coochbehar.gov.in/administrative-blocks/>

⁷⁷ Sarkar, Dhiraj, 'Impact of Toto Vehicles upon the Socio-Economic Condition of Van, Rickshaw Pullers & Auto Drivers: A Case Study on Chakdah Municipality of Nadia District, West Bengal', *International Journal for Research in Engineering Application & Management (IJREAM)* ISSN : 2454-9150 Vol-04, Issue-05, Aug 2018

The cost of informality: Rent seeking in toto sector

Aside from questions of registration and legality, there are three key attributes that define the toto sector by the end of 2022: the stand, fare, and route. Litigations regarding route and fare have already reached the court room, and local administrations have issued notices and instructions against some stands in busy urban areas. However, the absence of any formal organization, such as a trade union, has led to local toto stands becoming the centre of unity and operations for e-rickshaw drivers, providing security and assurance. During fieldwork, it was observed that a significant number of drivers in North Bengal are not associated with any stands. Instead, municipal councillors or local party leaders typically manage and control the sector through these stands. The entry procedure into toto stands varies by region. Apart from these important issues, there is another aspect called "rent," which can be understood as the cost of informality. Seeking rent from labours has become a common phenomenon in informal sectors, although it is invisible and not formally mentioned as an attribute. Kar, Mandal, Marjit and Mukherjee have identified two kinds of payments made by the labours of informal sectors. The first one is that the public officials seek in order to keep the informal activity operational, and the second kind of rent seeking involves collection of rents by the agents or agencies of political

parties - a fairly stylized mode of political extortions and display of power in the developing world⁷⁸.

During our project on the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata, we have come across two types of rent in the trade – i) one time donation while entering the stand and ii) daily rent for plying the vehicle from a specific stand. According to Sen⁷⁹, a political party gains access to a group of informal workers over whom they exercise exclusive control by virtue of being in government, not only by regulating entry but also by exerting critical influence over key elements of the labor process. This control includes the scope of rent-seeking activities, but its primary aim is to maintain control over the workforce. Despite this, in 2017, a senior leader of TMC and INTTUC disowned the sector, terming it as "illegal," and therefore denying any chance of unionization. The government and the party have never claimed any connection or attachment to the sector. However, based on the experience in the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata, I began my research on toto with some basic questions related to rent-seeking in the sector: a) Is there a common way of rent-seeking in the toto sector of West Bengal similar to the auto-rickshaw in Kolkata? b) When traditional trade unions have not yet developed, then who is seeking the rent? c) How does rent-seeking shape this sector?

⁷⁸ Saibal Kar, Biswajit Mandal, Sugata Marjit, Vivekananda Mukherjee, 'Seeking Rent in the Informal Sector', IZA Institute of Labour Economics, IZA DP No. 12068, January 2019.

⁷⁹ Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality: Auto-rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', SWS-RLS Working Paper, Jadavpur University, 13, June 2016.

Despite being a sector with a huge annual turnover, no clear picture of rent-seeking has emerged from my field surveys in Siliguri and its surrounding areas such as Balurghat, Panihati, and Narendrapur. Instead, I have come across contradictory opinions regarding rent-seeking. One striking feature is that the sector is informal and generates enormous revenue, but most of the drivers I interviewed denied the existence of rent-seeking in their sector. During my field survey, no one admitted to rent-seeking. Some drivers in both North and South Bengal acknowledged that there was a practice of contributing to a common fund, but they discontinued it due to the lack of a common bank account. Respondents from both regions denied any involvement of third parties, such as trade unions or local political party leaders, seeking rent from them. Even ethnographic experiences with some drivers in Siliguri, Narendrapur, and Panihati did not yield any specific information about rent-seeking.

Some of the drivers even abused the ruling party during our '*adda*'⁸⁰, but refrained themselves from accusing any local ruling party leader/s 'taking care' of the stand. I noticed that the drivers had a mentality of – "*ja hocche hok, amake porishrom kore khete hobe*", which means 'let it be as it is', because they were earning their livelihood almost peacefully or without any notable hazard. Respondents, who were not associated with any stand denied any case of rent giving but admitted that they

⁸⁰ Tania Banerjee, 'Adda: The secret to Bengali conviviality', BBC, 14 August 2021 – The article defines adda as 'a beloved pastime that's unique to Kolkata. Markedly different to small talk or chatting, it is best described as an informal group conversation that's long, fluid and relaxed in nature.'

had heard such instances among drivers associated to any stand. Every independent toto drivers, I met, accepted that they have heard about ‘rent seeking’ by local authority, probably the local leader of the ruling party. Respondents who are founding members of any stand similarly said that they had ‘started from the scratches’, therefore had never been into any case of donation for getting membership of their stand. Drivers of some stands in Siliguri, Malbazar and Chalsa admitted the case of donation while getting membership of their stand. But the amount they mentioned had always sounded like ‘*olpo kichu taka*’, i.e. a little sum of money. Senior drivers⁸¹ of toto stands accepted that daily rent seeking existed in their stand for a few months, but presently there was no such practice in their stands. Whereas, the new members had usually been silent in regard to such questions on rent seeking. Similarly the drivers of the Elachi stand in Ward No. 26 of Rajpur Sonarpur Municipality have mostly denied any case of rent seeking till 2021.

In 2022, some toto drivers in Narendrapur informed me that the Sonarpur Railway Station toto stand charged over Rs. 35,000 for a vehicle's membership in their stand, which was a one-time payment. Drivers in popular toto stands in Siliguri also reported instances of donations for membership. Across the extensive stretch of West Bengal, contradictory stories can be found regarding rent seeking in the toto sector. In contrast, auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata openly talked about the regular

⁸¹ ‘Senior’ in terms of both of their age as well as tenure of their working as a member of that stand.

rent seeking they experienced. During the Left Front regime, trade unionism had normalized the practice of rent seeking by justifying it. Rent seeking from the auto-rickshaw sector was regular and systematic, and drivers, even during the TMC regime, confidently accepted that the accumulated money was for the benefit of auto drivers. Auto unions had helped drivers in various situations using the collected money. However, the expenditure of the entire sum, which counted in crores, collected from auto drivers in Kolkata, in a month, has always been difficult to justify. It is evident that the entire rent collected could never be used exclusively to benefit the drivers due to the 'cost of informality' and caretaking charged by the political authority. Nonetheless, the leadership of the auto sector in Kolkata always had a certain level of clarity in both Left and TMC regimes.

In North Bengal, I wanted to know why they stopped the fund generation process. Although a senior driver used to maintain the fund personally, there were issues, and since the toto stands could not register themselves as a trade union or at least an association, they were unable to open a current account in any bank. Therefore they had to call off such fund generation. Even the toto stand of Chalsa admitted that a few individuals associated with the ruling party took care of their stand. Due to the opposition's strong hold in North Bengal, the incumbent TMC leaders cannot exert strict control over the toto stands. However, the situation in South Bengal is different, as the incumbent party is omnipotent and omnipresent, and the

toto sector is more united. In such a situation, taking care of the totes within a locality is easier through the local stand, and local leaders are pursuing that perfectly.

In December 2022, I asked the same drivers in Narendrapur about rent-seeking, and they informed me that drivers in their stand had started paying Rs. 300 per month or Rs. 10 per day. When I asked them who they paid the sum to, they replied without specification that they paid "those who are taking care of the stand." When I asked who was taking care of their stand, they replied that "*dada*"⁸² and other seniors, whom we have chosen in our meeting in September 2022." However, they also mentioned the Rs. 35000 one-time donation/rent for membership of new totes at Sonarpur railway station toto stand. After the meeting, some toto drivers got portfolios such as "treasurer," "secretary," "assistant secretary," etc., but the '*dada*' (husband of the local councillor) was their actual guardian. Decisions regarding fare, booking a toto as contract carriage, daily rent, etc. were made under the supervision of the "*dada*".

Although Toto has been frequently and positively represented in the media, very few cases of 'rent seeking' have been reported, revealing a commonality in the sector⁸³. None of the drivers clarify the rent-seeking process of their stands. Even if some drivers may provide information about the daily rent, questions regarding donations for membership of a stand, the maintenance of the fund, whether any

⁸² In Bengali, an elder brother is addressed as *dada*.

⁸³ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 'Aadesh palon na korlei suspend koren dada', 10 July 2020.

political party leader is directly handling the fund, and so on, remain unanswered. Although the government wanted the municipal and block officers to take care of the sector, in a society where politics is the driving force and the ruling party is omnipotent, the actual care is taken by the councillors rather than municipal officers, and local/zonal leaders of the party rather than the B.D.O.

Over the course of 8/9 years, the nature of care-taking and control has changed from time to time. In 2022, a sudden pro-activeness was noticed among local leaders to guide the local drivers. The case of the Toto stand beside the right outlet from New Jalpaiguri Railway Station is interesting. Due to the increase in the number of Totems, in 2015, some Toto drivers began to park their vehicles where the series of shops ends by the right outlet of the railway station. Very soon, that Toto parking area became a Toto stand, which was maintained by the drivers themselves. In 2017/2018, the stand lost its integrity and looked fractioned and without any management. However, Toto continued to increase its influence on the road space. Again in 2019, the stand was reorganized, and this time, a TMC party office was found established just adjacent to the stand. Yes, it was not a usual office room of the INTTUC, but of a local office of the party (TMC) itself.

The process of managing the sector by local administration or leaders has been inconsistent, resulting in inconsistent rent seeking. Over the past four years, particularly after the assembly election of 2021, care-taking or controlling of the

sector has become more systematic. However, neither of the stakeholders is clarifying the entire process of rent seeking, and this lack of clarity is shaping the sector. Although regular rent seeking exists, every local authority is unwilling to clarify or justify the process. If we consider the total number of totos plying in West Bengal to be 4 lakhs and Rs. 500 as the daily average income, the daily generated revenue is 20 cr., and the monthly revenue generated from the sector is 600 cr. Although the state government receives a minimum amount as tax from its estimated 35000 registered e-rickshaws, the amount charged by the 'politics' or the political authority remains hidden. Such ambiguity in a sector that spans the entire West Bengal and generates huge daily revenue is alarming in terms of the cost of informality and corruption at the grassroots level.

Labour practices in the sector: Narratives of toto drivers

As a child from an urban middle-class household, I became familiar with the phrase "toto company" long before the arrival of the toto in the lanes and byways of our districts. The phrase referred to those young individuals or groups who roamed around aimlessly throughout the day. However, I imagine that in the nomenclature of the vehicle, the "roaming around" factor must have been significant rather than "without any specific motive." Nowadays, one can find toto vehicles in maximum numbers compared to other modes of para-transit in the in-roads, lanes, and even the main roads of any locality, be it a village or town in the districts of West Bengal. Can

any tourist or daily commuter to any district even imagine a day without toto vehicles? Therefore, the most striking thing is the growth rate of the vehicle and the sector.

During my work in three districts of North Bengal and three districts in South Bengal, I met 70 toto drivers and had conversations with them. These conversations ranged from 15 minutes to 1½ hours. However, some conversations with toto drivers in Siliguri, Narendrapur, and Panihati were ethnographic accounts. Some of these conversations are referred to in this chapter, though all the interactions have helped shape my understanding of the sector in these areas. The interviews of drivers in Siliguri and Chalsa were conducted between October and December of 2021.

Bhola Sarkar⁸⁴ is a 30-year-old Toto driver from Siliguri who has been driving for four years. Prior to this, he worked as a salesman for Cadbury Company and VVC Construction⁸⁵ Company, earning approximately Rs. 15,000 per month. During our conversation, it became apparent that he was no longer satisfied with the typical salaried job that came with a work schedule and target meetings. Most Toto drivers were previously employed in various sectors, with their dissatisfaction with their former professions motivating them to enter the Toto sector. Furthermore, they were seeking self-employment that was flexible, with less pressure to meet targets. This trend of seeking flexibility and ease of work has attracted many men and women to

⁸⁴ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

⁸⁵ A local Real Estate company in Siliguri.

the Toto sector in both North and South Bengal. This shift marks a change in class expectations, distinguishing it from the urban youth of Kolkata in the 1980s who sought "*chakri*" (a job) but were forced to enter the auto-rickshaw sector, from the men and youths of rural and suburban West Bengal who voluntarily became Toto drivers as a means of earning a livelihood.

Like many other toto drivers, he also owns a house in the eastern part of the city, Shantinagar in Siliguri, but his house falls under Jalpaiguri district. When he purchased his toto, Siliguri Municipal Corporation had already stopped issuing number plates for the city, so he had to settle for a '71' series number plate designated for Jalpaiguri district. However, this prevented him from driving his toto on the main roads of Siliguri, as the guidelines of SMC and Siliguri Police Commissionerate require tolos to have a '73' series number plate to ply in Siliguri. This system is still in place until further rules are enforced.

Unlike auto-rickshaws in Kolkata, where the route is considered as a formal arrangement, in the toto sector, it is decided casually by the toto stand. In both South and North Bengal, the initial drivers who started a stand usually fixed the route based on two criteria: the existing routes for 4-seater auto-rickshaws, magic, 8-seater auto-rickshaws, and cycle rickshaws, and the needs of local people and commuters. As a newer mode of in-road transport or more of last-minute connectivity, toto drivers have started many new routes based on the convenience of local dwellers.

When asked about the importance of working with a stand, he replied that toto drivers working with stands are bound to ply within certain routes and usually wait for passengers. In contrast, he is relatively free to ply through inner roads and lanes. Suburban drivers in South Bengal are more likely to join stands compared to drivers in North Bengal.

Since 2015, I have noticed that toto drivers in Siliguri always have passengers with them and hardly spend a half day without one. However, due to the rapid increase in the number of totes, each driver is now getting fewer passengers than before. Nevertheless, many families in the city are optimistic about employment opportunities in the toto sector. The uncontrolled expansion of the sector is a significant threat to toto drivers in West Bengal. The absence of any formal control is the primary reason for this expansion. Local bodies have made short-term policies to control the sector, but the State government has yet to create any policy for the sector.

The driver is not convinced of the necessity of "Organisation"/ "Unionisation" in the informal sector. He believes that there is neither any harassment from the police outside the main roads, nor is there any pressure from any authority. Therefore, a toto driver can handle any confrontation with another vehicle or passenger individually. He is also not interested in being part of any stand because, apart from an ensured location to get passengers, stands do not seem beneficial to drivers in any other way.

Therefore, collective bargaining and benefits do not seem to be an essential part of his profession and location.

Police harassment has been a significant concern for auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata and its suburbs, as mentioned several times in this research. However, as of December 2021, drivers in the districts of North Bengal have not considered "Police Harassment" as an issue to talk about in the context of their sector. One can easily sense how police control gets diluted as one moves away from Kolkata in West Bengal. Although there is some police control on the roads of cities such as Siliguri, Durgapur, Midnapore, etc.

Asish Dey⁸⁶, a 34-year-old driver, has been operating a toto since 2015 while someone else drives his 8-seater Magic. Asish has an SMC number and will be paying his road tax for the first time in 2022. In 2021, he purchased his "Indian Toto" from a showroom in Siliguri, where he was charged for annual insurance, fitness, road tax, etc. During purchase, he had to pay Rs. 1,03,000 to the showroom, excluding the cost of the battery, which is around Rs. 40,000. He will be paying for annual insurance, fitness, road tax, etc., by the end of 2022. The battery of the toto lasts for one year or more. SMC paid each driver Rs. 28,000 during the scrapping of their Old and Chinese totos in 2019 and 2020. The electricity bill for charging his toto for a month amounts

⁸⁶ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

to Rs. 1,500. Asish regularly gets a loan from Bandhan to buy a battery or other significant expenses.

Debasish Halder ⁸⁷, a 32-year-old who worked in a garment shop in Champasari Market during the initial year of the lockdown, received Rs. 14,000 (plus food) from his previous job. His former employer paid him Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 3,000 per month during the lockdown's initial days. This compelled Debasish to look for a better job. In 2021, he bought a toto from his brother's friend and currently earns approximately Rs. 14,000 per month from it. He confirmed that he earns an average of Rs. 600 to Rs. 700 per day. He is not associated with any route but doesn't go beyond Pradhan Nagar because his vehicle has no number plate and falls under the rejected criteria of SMC.

Debasish purchased his toto from its second owner, who had possessed the vehicle for 3 to 4 years. Debasish estimated that the first owner must have used it for a similar duration. He obtained a loan from Federal Bank for the purchase of his toto, which lacks a number plate and thus cannot be driven on main roads. Although Debasish plans to operate the toto for several years, he intends to acquire a four-wheeler for commercial purposes. The cost of maintaining his toto varies from month to month; in December 2021, he spent Rs. 2400 on maintenance, whereas for the three

⁸⁷ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

to four months prior, he only had to pay between Rs. 200 and Rs. 300 each month. He purchased a Dutch or Das battery for Rs. 27,000, which has a one-year warranty.

Debasish has some ideas about membership at toto stands, but he has never been a member himself. He knows that the initial membership requires contributing a one-time fee to the stand's authority, in addition to monthly dues. However, he is unaware of whether these stands are affiliated with any political parties or have presidents or secretaries.

Pariman Ghosh⁸⁸, a 58-year-old toto driver, has been driving a toto for the past six years. He is associated with the Siliguri Court More Toto Stand, which is one of the oldest stands in the city. Unfortunately, his vehicle is without a number plate, which restricts him to drive only in the "pocket routes." He is aware of the Rs. 700 road tax and Rs. 6000-7000 insurance for toto in a year, and he is eagerly waiting to get a number plate from RTO, Paribahan Bhawan, Matigara, Siliguri, which would enable him to move even on the main roads.

Pariman Ghosh regrets the lack of interest of any political party in the toto sector. Unlike Kolkata, trade unions are not forming in Siliguri's toto sector, and he does not know why. He describes some police atrocities and periodic threats from the SMC, which have made their lives uncertain. Court More is at the heart of the city and

⁸⁸ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in November 2021.

one of the busiest spots. This could be the reason why the police order them to remove their vehicles on a periodic basis. Despite all these difficulties, drivers like Parinam babu are not in a position to leave the space at Court More because it is one of the most profitable spots for toto drivers in the entire North Bengal region. Thousands of commuters crowd this place from early morning to 8 - 9 p.m. at night.

During fieldwork, it was observed that toto drivers in densely populated areas face more challenges and threats from the Police, Municipality, and other vehicles. This is why they strongly feel the need for organization and unionization. In suburbs like Panihati Sodepur and Narendrapur in South Bengal, tolos are mostly organized under a stand consisting of 10 to 100 vehicles. The main reasons for their organization are the limited number of roads and lanes in comparison to the population, which leads to tough competition for passengers. In the early days, toto drivers had to compete with pre-existing cycle rickshaws and auto-rickshaws for passengers. Additionally, political control by the ruling party (TMC) is more prominent in South Bengal districts, as opposed to North Bengal, where opposition parties like BJP have a stronger presence. The topic of political control is discussed in the fifth chapter of this work.

He informed that, if a driver drives a toto of an owner, in such case the former pays Rs. 320, daily as the 'Kisti' to his owner. The 'kisti' amounts to Rs. 400 for a toto with number plate. In case, a driver cannot drive for 7 days due to illness he

either has to keep on paying the ‘kisti’ to his owner or may handover the vehicle to any other driver. But generally no driver usually chooses the second option, as there lays chances of not getting the toto back after 7 days.

He has not paid any amount to the Police or any leader while joining the stand. His stand has 4 routes – 1. Court More to Ashi Ghor, 2. Court More to Hatia Danga, 3. Court More to Shanti Nagar Bow Bazar and 4. Court More to Shanti Nagar Sporting Club. The drivers of this stand have some surety of roads and passengers as they are associated with this stand. Apart from this, they can rest themselves and their vehicles in this stand. Moreover, Court More always has huge flow of passengers, from morning to night.

The drivers at the Siliguri Municipal Corporation maintain their own stand, with a designated serial number for getting passengers on four specific routes. Additionally, they manage the portion of road where they park their vehicles, ensuring smooth mobility for themselves and others. Their stand is situated just outside the corporation's premises, and the drivers are careful about managing crowds in the area. Due to their efficient handling of the situation, the Traffic Police rarely bother them. According to Parinam Babu, these are some of the benefits of being associated with a stand.

Umesh Pal⁸⁹, a 47-year-old toto driver, drives a vehicle with a newly issued number plate from the showroom, which allows him to drive anywhere in Siliguri. Unlike other drivers, he has chosen not to be part of any stand, as he believes that the nearest Champasari stand charges a significant amount of Rs. 3000 during enrolment and a weekly payment of Rs. 70 or Rs. 10 per day from every driver. Though he could not provide the exact number of totes associated with the Champasari stand, he knows that it's a massive stand with totes from Champasari, Debidanga, and Pradhan Nagar.

Being an independent driver, he enjoys the freedom of movement and does not face any loss. With his registered vehicle, he can even drive outside the city (although not legally⁹⁰). The control of police and traffic agencies outside Kolkata is less strict in comparison to Kolkata Traffic Police. The governmental control is minimal, especially outside the corporation areas of West Bengal. This informal relaxation from the government helps toto drivers sustain better than auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata.

Madan Ghosh⁹¹, a 47-year-old resident of Surya Nagar Dabgram in Siliguri, works as a contractual laborer in the office of Public Health Engineering. For the past 23 years, he has been working as an agent of a contractor in that office and currently earns around Rs. 11,000 to Rs. 12,000 per month. As he suffers from orthopedic

⁸⁹ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

⁹⁰ Totos with number plate issued by SMC or RTO, Siliguri are permitted to move within the area under SMC and Darjeeling district.

⁹¹ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

problems due to a past accident, he cannot do any laborious job and has chosen toto as an alternative. Throughout the day, he drives a toto and earns an average of Rs. 9,000 per month from it. He is attached to a stand at TMC More (Bakul Tala) in Dabgram Suryanagar, which has recently decreased from 14 to 8 totes.

Madan Ghosh usually works in the evenings and moves throughout the city and even outside as a contract carriage. Sometimes, he accepts contracts for traveling long distances of 15 to 20 km and earns Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 per day. Toto drivers in Siliguri charge more in the early morning and at night. He mentions that some drivers have sold their totes during the lockdown, but he does not have proper information regarding this. However, from his conversation and other interviews, it can be inferred that most of them sold their old totes to purchase new ones with a number plate. One individual who owned five totes in their stand is now operating those totes independently throughout the city, which is why the number of vehicles in the stand has decreased.

Singh⁹² conducted one of the initial studies on the operation of e-rickshaws in Delhi and explored the employment background of drivers before entering the e-rickshaw/toto profession. According to his report, during 2013-2014, 45% of the e-rickshaw drivers in Delhi were previously cycle-rickshaw pullers, while 15% worked in factories, 6% were daily wage labourers, 15% were unemployed, and 22% worked

⁹² Shashank Singh, 'A Study of the Battery Operated E-rickshaws in the State of Delhi', Researching Reality Summer Internship 2014 Working paper: 323, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2014.

in other informal sectors. Similar observations were made in the selected areas of the study. In contrast, the toto has been an avenue for job satisfaction, professional comfort, and social status for drivers. However, the number of former rickshaw pullers who have become toto drivers is relatively lower than in Delhi, at less than 30%. Instead, workers from various backgrounds, such as those in factories, technicians, workers in different service sectors, and other informally employed workers, have found comfort in the toto sector. More than 50% of the total workforce in the toto sector comes from such professional backgrounds.

In West Bengal, vehicles originated from rural areas and extended towards urban and suburban spaces, which was the opposite of Delhi's process. In October 2014, Balurghat town had around 100 totes, while Panihati Sodepur, a suburb near Kolkata, had barely any in its lanes. However, by 2016-2017, totes began to appear in scattered locations in Panihati Sodepur and neighboring areas, with no clearly fixed stands, and the initial few vehicles operated exclusively on a contract carriage basis. Initially, the nature of the contracts was quite flexible, allowing anyone to book the entire toto for just 10 rupees to travel a distance of 3-4 kilometers. However, the majority of passengers still preferred cycle-rickshaws and auto-rickshaws, making it a trial phase for drivers who were uncertain about the vehicle's future.

Unlike Kolkata's auto-rickshaws, totes in West Bengal now operate as both stage and contract carriages. Drivers associated with a stand which has fixed routes

can also make a contract with any passenger. Furthermore, the passenger's choice, rather than an informally determined route from the stand, determines the toto's destination. As previously mentioned, a stand in Narendrapur with approximately 70 totos decided in a meeting in August 2022 to maintain a strict line of vehicles during working hours, not to accept bookings that ignore the stand's line (which usually come from residential complexes), and to contribute an amount for the development and upkeep of the stand, which can be paid weekly or monthly.

Narayan Saha⁹³, a 62-year-old driver, reveals that many of his former cycle rickshaw colleagues have switched to other professions, mostly toto driving, within the past 5-6 years. The number of cycle rickshaws at his stand has dwindled from 10-12 to just 2-3 as of December 2021. He currently operates an owner's toto, working 8-9 hours a day with an afternoon break. On December 28, 2021, he earned only Rs. 500, including his share and the rent (kisti) he pays to the owner. The previous day he earned Rs. 650. From his daily wage, he pays Rs. 300 to the owner, and if he takes the day off, he has to pay the kisti for that day. As his toto is unregistered, his kisti amount is lower. For registered totos, the kisti amount is Rs. 350-400. He considers earning Rs. 500 in a day without kisti to be good. During the winter season, toto trade is worse than the rainy season since locals prefer to stay indoors in the evenings.

⁹³ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

Suvojit Bardhan⁹⁴, a 48-year-old driver, has been driving a toto for 5 years after previously working as a driver for commercial 4-wheelers. He used to own a TATA Magic vehicle, which he had to sell along with his house 8-9 years ago to pay for his son's medical treatment. He now owns his toto and mentions that most toto drivers work for 12 hours a day to earn enough for monthly family and vehicle maintenance. The minimum fare on his route is Rs. 10. He spends an average of Rs. 1000 per month on maintenance for his toto, which adds up to an annual maintenance cost of Rs. 12,000-13,000 without any significant repairs. Additionally, periodic expenses such as tire replacements and overall repairs may amount to Rs. 10,000-12,000.

Rahul Mohammed⁹⁵, a 31-year-old man, began driving a toto in 2018 after working as a construction worker. His maternal uncle, who also drives a toto, recommended the profession to him, citing the difficulty of continuing as a construction worker as he grows older. Rahul acknowledges that driving a toto is more profitable than his previous job, earning him around Rs. 600-700 per day, with the potential for up to Rs. 1000-1200 on some days. He purchased a used toto from a friend, and obtained a loan from Bandhan Bank during the transaction. The cost of a new toto in Chalsa is currently approximately Rs. 1,70,000.

⁹⁴ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in November 2021.

⁹⁵ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

During my interviews with toto drivers in North Bengal, I found that they all have connections with Bandhan Bank for micro loans. This relationship is ongoing and frequently renewed every one or two years to meet new needs. The Bank is currently expanding its micro-loan sector with its Srishti Loan scheme, ranging from a minimum of Rs. 15,000 to a maximum of Rs. 1,00,000 with a 19.45% interest rate and a loan tenure of 1 or 2 years. The processing fee is low, and the loans are typically processed with minimal documentation from applicants. Middle-aged drivers have had a relationship with the Bank for 10 to 15 years and are able to apply for new loans by repaying their previous loans on time. Bandhan Bank has a close relationship with these borrowers, knowing them personally. Therefore, toto drivers in North Bengal rely on Bandhan for micro loans in case of significant family investments. In contrast, drivers in the suburbs of South Bengal rely less on Bandhan.

Initially, Rahul had purchased a new toto and a second-hand toto. However, after his brother-in-law had an accident while driving the latter, Rahul sold his new toto and began driving the old one. The administrative move to scrap Chinese-made totes in 2018-2019 led many drivers to replace their vehicles with Indian-made ones. Rahul's brother-in-law was unable to maintain the toto properly, leading Rahul to sell his new vehicle. When asked why he didn't keep both totes and hire a driver, Rahul stated that he couldn't trust anyone else to maintain the vehicle. Most toto drivers in North Bengal hesitate to purchase a second vehicle and hire a driver.

Unlike the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata, where drivers commonly sustain themselves on an owner's vehicle for decades, toto drivers claim that their vehicles are not as durable. Observing as an outsider, it appears that toto drivers are able to operate their vehicles recklessly due to the reluctance of traffic police in the city and a complete lack of police surveillance outside urban areas. Since drivers are usually not attached to the owner's vehicle, careless driving is more likely to occur. Suvojit of Siliguri had a similar experience when he lent his vehicle to a driver for 7-8 days, only to find that it required repairs upon its return.

Rahul, besides carrying passengers, also transports woods and ply-woods from the jungle and saw-mills, as carrying goods in a public vehicle in their area is not checked by the police. He earns more by transporting woods and ply-woods. When he applied for a loan in Bandhan Bank in 2018, he thinks the interest rate was 17%, but he is not certain. Currently, he pays Rs. 2495 per week for his loan of Rs. 1,20,000. He drives his Mahindra-manufactured toto regularly and seldom takes a week off, which is common for most drivers in North Bengal.

In the four years that Rahul has owned his toto, he has replaced the battery three times, and the last time he had to replace it, it cost him Rs. 21,000. He operates from the stand in Chalsa More, which is the only stand in Chalsa. They charge Rs. 20 per passenger for a two-kilometer ride from Chalsa More to Mahabari, and the fare drops to Rs. 10 for more than one passenger. Rs. 10 is still the lowest fare in North

Bengal. Although there is no organization or authority to regulate the toto fare throughout West Bengal, each area has its own fare structure that is in line with cycle-rickshaws, magic, and buses.

During the interview in December 2022, Rahul said that earlier, the tolos in Malbazar town were given a municipality number, but now the RTO provides registration numbers for all the tolos in the district. The showroom provides the number plate and insurance for four passengers and one driver. Beyond Siliguri Municipal Corporation, the toto drivers in North Bengal are reluctant to accept number plates and insurance for road safety, even though NH 17, 717, 27, etc., are prone to accidents, and some parts run through forest zones. The formalization process is entirely absent in this area regarding these intermediate transports.

Toto has revolutionized mobility in the entire North Bengal region, where the lack of public transportation and low population density has been a major issue. Even in Siliguri, a well-known city, people relied on cycle-rickshaws for transportation within the city limits. Currently, even the poorest person can hire a toto and reach the hospital in an emergency. Furthermore, the toto's presence in every locality provides assistance during times of crisis, even without money. In this way, the toto has connected societal space with road space and become the most popular form of transportation in non-urban areas.

According to Rahul, the showroom charges an additional Rs. 37000 for number plates, insurance, and a license. In 2016-2017, Malbazar Municipality began categorizing totos by providing number plates. In this case, toto drivers had to submit their and the vehicle's documents to the municipality. Like in Chalsa, toto drivers protested in front of municipalities and BDO offices in many places. Since their inception on the road, toto drivers have faced challenges from cycle-rickshaw pullers and magic drivers, who were not ready to share road space with them, as toto was encroaching directly on their share of passengers. Cycle-rickshaw and magic drivers had unions and were well organized to resist the entry of unorganized vehicles such as totos, resulting in clashes⁹⁶ that had become a common phenomenon throughout West Bengal. Cycle-rickshaw drivers were the toto drivers' strongest opponents.

Rahul and his *mama* (uncle), Mustafa Ahmed⁹⁷, provide an accurate account of the "natural transition" that led to clashes between cycle-rickshaw pullers and toto drivers. They explain that the stands for both types of vehicles were located on opposite sides of the road, with prime locations typically going to rickshaw pullers. When the resistance was high, the rickshaw pullers would not allow toto drivers to get passengers, leading to confusion among potential riders. Factors such as comfort, speed, time, and mobility (totos could even ply through forest areas) often swayed

⁹⁶ *India Today*, 'South 24 Parganas: Auto stand turns battleground over ferrying of passengers', 01/01/2017; *Siliguri Times*, 'Shocking!!! Toto and auto-rickshaw drivers openly clash in Sevoke Road, Siliguri, passengers hurt', 22/04/2017.

⁹⁷ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

passengers toward the toto. Additionally, passengers may have preferred younger toto drivers over older rickshaw pullers out of compassion. This resulted in a drastic shift of passengers from cycle-rickshaw to toto within a year or two. As a result, 70% to 80% of rickshaw pullers either chose a new profession or bought a second-hand toto, with the latter being the easier option. In fact, 30 rickshaw pullers from Chalsa More became toto drivers during this time.

Singh shows that 37% of his respondents in NCR region were either cycle-rickshaw puller or unemployed. He argues that battery operated e-rickshaws are becoming an obvious alternative to the cycle-rickshaws. He mentions the case, *Hemraj vs. C.P. Delhi* (2006), where the Delhi High Court observed that the cycle rickshaws offended human dignity and the state would make attempts to find an alternative of the trade altogether⁹⁸. The case of North Bengal is similar to Singh's observation of NCR region where the numbers of cycle-rickshaws have considerably decreased due to the operational increase of e-rickshaws. Since 2014/ 2015 till June 2022, there has been 70% – 80% decrease in the number of cycle rickshaws in Siliguri and surrounding towns. A decrease of cycle rickshaws is constant in all the areas of my field work. Another phenomenon is coexisting in the areas, which I have covered in South Bengal. In Sonarpur – Rajpur – Narendrapur area, the earlier paddled cycle rickshaw owners have attached battery operated motors for the operation of their

⁹⁸ Shashank Singh, 'A Study of the Battery Operated E-rickshaws in the State of Delhi', Researching Reality Summer Internship 2014 Working paper: 323, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2014.

vehicle. They have kept the traditional design of the cycle rickshaw intact but added a motor by which they can avoid paddling and reach a speed similar to the totos. Though this transformation of qualitative up gradation of cycle rickshaws has enabled the owners to get rid of their physical labour of pulling the vehicle, but un-alteration of basic structure has not allowed them to carry as much as passenger as are carried by a toto e-rickshaw. The leg space, comfort, ease of riding due to height from ground level, seat arrangement, etc. have always given an upper hand to the toto to be the new champion of last mile connectivity.

Rahul Mohammed's maternal uncle, Mustafa Ahmed, provides insight into the natural transition that led to clashes between cycle-rickshaw pullers and toto drivers. According to Rahul and Mustafa, the cycle-rickshaw pullers and toto drivers had stands on opposite sides of the road, with most prime locations being occupied by the rickshaw pullers. This led to resistance from the rickshaw pullers, who did not allow the toto drivers to get passengers. Passengers were often confused about whether to hire a rickshaw or toto, with factors such as comfort, speed, time, and mobility driving them towards the totos. Additionally, thoughts such as "it is better to hire a young toto driver than an old rickshaw puller" favored the totos. Young people often avoided old rickshaw pullers out of compassion, according to Rahul. This shift resulted in a drastic change within a year or two, with 70% - 80% of rickshaw pullers either

choosing another profession or buying a new or second-hand toto. 30 rickshaw pullers from Chalsa More became toto drivers during this time.

Mustafa Ahmed, who is 35 years old, motivated Rahul to enter the toto sector. During the lockdown, Mustafa provided delivery services in his locality, delivering vegetables, fish, groceries, and other commodities. He also started a mobile vegetable shop and used his toto to sell vegetables in his locality, buying from distributors in Maynaguri and selling in Chalsa. This shift was observed in many places in North Bengal during the lockdown, with many toto drivers selling commodities by plying their toto from one locality to another. Mustafa used to sell umbrellas and torches in his grocery shop, which Bandhan Bank helped him to buy a toto. He now wishes to buy a new Mahindra toto, stating that a well-maintained toto can last for 15 years. He is concerned about the increasing number of totos in his locality, which is reducing the income of drivers who have been plying since 2015. He currently earns Rs. 500-600 per day from his toto, with more earnings during *haat bar*⁹⁹ / day of weekly market.

According to Mustafa, a certain amount of money is collected from all toto drivers at the Chalsa toto stand, and the fund is managed by the stand's secretary and president. The stand does not have a bank account, and the fund is not used for

⁹⁹ *Haat bar*, is the day in a week when all kinds of sellers come together to sell their commodities in a rural area. Before the era of permanent shops, these *haat* (weekly market) was the only option for people in rural areas.

commercial purposes but supports every toto driver during emergency or crisis periods. Drivers ply as both contract and stage carriage, and neither the government nor they can stop anyone from buying a toto. Formalizing the sector through regulations and a registration process may restrict the rapid growth in numbers. However, the trend of one individual buying five totos and appointing drivers for them is not common in North Bengal, where individuals mostly buy totos to drive and earn a livelihood.

The fare in this sector is highly localized, with each toto stand fixing the fare for its locality. Even totos that ply in the locality but are not associated with a stand generally accept the fare because it is determined by the existence of passengers. The localised fare is one of the reasons for the cordial relationship between drivers and passengers.

Aurobindo Roy¹⁰⁰, 50 years old, is driving toto since 2015. He is a graduate from Mal College. Earlier he served as Panchayat Pradhan during the Left Front's regime. Later on he took up a contractual job in the same Panchayat. Due to inadequate remuneration, he had to buy a toto in 2015. He confirms that presently Chalsa has 90 totos, not all of them are associated with the stand. He is the present in-charge of the stand. 3 toto drivers started this stand in 2014. Initial days were challenging as they had to face severe objections and challenges from the cycle-

¹⁰⁰ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

rickshaws and other public carriages. Gradually the situation changed as the numbers of toto increased at per with the decrease of cycle-rickshaws. He was a part of the movement of the toto drivers, mentioned earlier by Rahul and Mustafa. First 24 totes of this stand got number plate from the BDO office (Metli Block).

Their stand has a Secretary and a Treasurer. Both of them are toto drivers. This stand has a fund collected during the entry of every toto driver in it. This fund is used to support any member driver during his financial crisis, for example, sudden damage of any parts of the vehicle. The driver who has been helped must return the money which is without any interest. These drivers do not have any bank account, as it needs a registered trade union to open an account. They have a repairing centre at 8 kms (Batabari Farm) from the stand. Replacement of a battery costs approximately Rs. 40000, whereas Rs. 6000 is the charge to replace a motor. Rs. 500 is the average daily income of a toto driver in Chalsa. Aurobindo earns Rs. 500 to Rs. 700, a day, on an average. Usually they do not take any weekly off. They cannot drive till late evening as the entire zone is surrounded by forest. An average toto driver returns home by 7 pm.

Samir Debnath¹⁰¹, 45 years old, is driving toto for last 5 years. Before entering in toto sector, he worked as a wholesale supplier of grocery items. He used to travel within a radius of 10 kilometres. Later on he could not collect money from the

¹⁰¹ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2021.

retailer shops. As a result of which he had to look for a new profession. This was the time when he bought toto. Presently he owns a grocery shop near Chalsa Hospital for last 1 year. He and his wife jointly manage the shop. Earlier he had a shop in rent. By the end of 2016, he bought his first toto from a showroom which cost him Rs. 90000. Presently he uses his toto for carrying both passengers and commodities. He claimed that around 200 totes belong from Chalsa Mahabari region. Though, not all of those totes ply in Chalsa. Though, a good number of those totes are not associated with any stand. The Toto stand/ Union in Chalsa has social contributions too. During 26th January, they have distributed fruits and sweets among the patients of Chalsa Hospital. Toto drivers, associated with the Chalsa stand, regularly confirm their presence in the stand, at least once a day.

During the lockdown, drivers managed to survive through various means. Conversations with 70 respondents in North and South Bengal revealed that most of them sustained themselves with their existing jobs. Interestingly, the number of totes reportedly increased in Siliguri, Malbazar, Narendrapur, and Rajpur areas. None of the respondents reported any drivers selling their totes during the lockdown.

When asked how they managed their households with almost no income in the initial days of the lockdown, drivers responded by saying that they somehow managed to use their domestic funds. Women in households traditionally save some money for future use, which helped wage earners during the crisis period. Financial help from

relatives, friends, and loans from money lending agencies also helped drivers during this time. Some respondents even mentioned that local vendors allowed them to pay later for essential commodities. The Central and State governments provided rice, wheat, pulses, etc. free of cost to a large section of the population, and local organizations and political parties also helped wage earners from time to time.

Madan Ghosh of Siliguri, however, said that he could not avail of the help of local organizations in his area due to his "self-respect." He did not want to project himself as needy in his locality, and owning and driving a toto helped him earn a better position than a rickshaw puller or a common laborer in his area. During the lockdown, he mostly got contracts for good amounts of rent, such as Rs. 200 to Rs. 300 for a travel of 10 kilometers. One or two such contracts could get him a good wage in a day during the lockdown. According to him, most of the passengers and his neighbors preferred contracts during the lockdown, as middle-class or even lower-middle-class people preferred toto-rides to avoid the crowd in buses or 8/10 sitter autos. Booking a toto from their locality, which moved faster than a cycle rickshaw, had always been the better option for everyone during the lockdown phase.

Debasish Halder of Siliguri said that some drivers sold their totos during the lockdown, although he did not have proper information regarding this. From this conversation and other interviews, the researcher has learned that most of them sold their old totos to purchase new ones with a number plate. A series of initiatives from

the Siliguri Municipal Corporation since 2018 has compelled many toto drivers to buy topos with a number plate.

Rahul Mohammed of Chalsa survived on their saved fund during the initial days of the lockdown. After the first few months, he started getting contracts for carrying oxygen cylinders from Chalsa Hospital and the Youth Hostel of Tiabon, which has been converted to a Covid Care Centre. Mustafa Ahmed of Chalsa completely shifted to a delivery service in his locality during the lockdown, using his toto to deliver commodities such as vegetables, fish, and grocery. He also started his mobile vegetable shop, a common shift in the nature of the job among toto drivers in the selected areas.

Lockdown days were hazardous for Aurobindo Roy of Chalsa and his colleagues. Since September 2021, the police had been harassing toto drivers. During that time, most of the toto drivers at their stand sold vegetables or fish in their toto instead of carrying passengers. Those who sold fish would bring it from Maynaguri, which is almost 40 kilometers from Chalsa, and roam through villages with vegetables and fish. They could not pay the interest on Bandhan's loan and had to take personal loans from local lenders (Mahajan) with a 10% interest rate. Gadan¹⁰², a 42-year-old from Sodepur, started selling flowers in the morning as a source of alternative earning, which he is continuing. During a conversation in September 2021,

¹⁰² Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in September 2021.

he said that not just for lockdown days, but he would continue his alternative income as his income from toto has decreased. The decrease in income is a consequence of increase in the number of totes in Gadan's stand in Sahid Colony, Panihati.

Prasenjit¹⁰³ and Prasanta¹⁰⁴ of Narendrapur, started driving toto during the lockdown phase. Both of them live in Naskarpara, a locality of Naskars, a schedule caste community of South 24 Parganas. Prasanta had worked in different factories before the lockdown. Even in the post lockdown phase, Prasanta has resumed his earlier job. As a common phenomenon, his company had gone through a temporary shut down during lockdown and Prasanta had to take up a job for bread winning. Toto was the easiest option according to him. Three residential complexes in his para could provide him with prospective passengers. Prasanta's para is of a lower middle class population, where some of the families have earned money by selling their land to the real estate builders or taking up jobs in the builders' company. Prasanta being a popular figure in his locality never hesitated to take up toto driving as a means of livelihood. Prasenjit, on the other hand, was an electrician also became a full-time toto driver during lockdown. His family bought two totes before lockdown and has sold one by the end of lockdown. His father, 64 year old, is no more in a position to drive toto regularly.

¹⁰³ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in June 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in July 2021.

Those are accounts of toto drivers in Siliguri, Chalsa, Narendrapur and Panihati. In course of further development, Uber¹⁰⁵ started its venture¹⁰⁶ with the toto sector in November 2020. Initially the app based company deployed 500 e-rickshaws in Barasat and Madhyamgram, northern suburb of Kolkata and Rajarhat and Salt Lake in east Kolkata. In Narendrapur, I have noticed few totos with placard of Uber attached to the vehicle. Though, totos were not available for booking in Narendrapur location even in 2021. During an interview in December 2022, Shahbuddin Mandal¹⁰⁷ and Prabir Raul¹⁰⁸ had shared their experiences of working with Uber. Shahbuddin had travelling a maximum distance of 15 kilometres to drop his passenger. Even before the Puja in 2022 (October), the uber was offering good incentives to attract the drivers. But after few months, the provision of incentives was removed. According to Shahbuddin, since that time, many young drivers took interest to work with the company. As a result of increase in number of vehicles, availability of passengers decreased and the company simultaneously stopped special incentives. In the South suburban areas, passengers mostly rely on the toto stands in their locality. Commuters from outside of the locality mostly use uber toto. The drivers in the stand have developed a new way to ensure daily earning. They have created a passenger network

¹⁰⁵ Uber Technologies, Inc. (Uber), based in San Francisco, is an smart phone application based mobility service provider allowing users to book a car/ vehicle and driver to transport them in a way similar to a taxi.

¹⁰⁶ *The Economic Times*, 'Uber launches 500 e-rickshaws in Kolkata to make urban commutes more sustainable', 19 November 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in December 2022.

around their locality. Senior citizen, office goers, women with kids, usually book a toto of their locality over phone. In case, if the driver is not available, he sends another driver. Such trips on contract system contribute the major share in their daily earning. According to Prabir, a toto driver in their area cannot sustain only from the trips from 'line'¹⁰⁹. Shahbuddin used to pay Rs. 1500 per month to the Patuli Police Station because he used to enter into the KMC area with passenger while working for uber. That sum was paid to Police as an informal settlement as toto is not allowed within KMC area. Prabir, being the secretary of his stand in Narendrapur has allowed his drivers to work for uber, but the drivers needed to visit the stand at least once in a whole day. Such visits were to conform their attachment to the stand. The drivers in the stand usually did not confront with uber toto of different locality but restricted them to get passenger within a radius of 100 metres from their stand. Uber has a good chance to outnumber the toto stands if driver can get frequent 'booking' (hiring any uber vehicle is locally called booking) passengers, but the availability and network of the drivers in their locality are their secret of survival. Still, there are chances for the Uber in future to tighten its grip over such areas. The informal organisation of the drivers in their stand is not a certain feature. There are ample chances of change in the nature of the stands with change in political regime. Existence of a centralised formal organisation, such as trade union, would have safeguarded the interest of the drivers.

¹⁰⁹ Queue maintained by the drivers in their stand to get a trip.

Conclusion

Both auto-rickshaw and toto are informal sectors, with the former operating within para-legality while the latter being entirely illegal. A registered e-rickshaw is the only legal vehicle allowed to operate on lanes and in-roads. Auto-rickshaws have been around for decades and have developed through a complex setup created by the government, politically controlled by the ruling party and its trade union, and officially regulated by the police and government officials. The sector has been entangled in issues regarding permits, licenses, registration, routes, and fares since its inception. During the Left regime, the trade union formally organized the sector and protected it in many ways. However, in the TMC regime, the major trade union was not very protective of the drivers due to a lack of organisational coordination, leading to harassment. Despite this, the drivers have sustained themselves in the trade. The toto, on the other hand, was declared illegal by the court, except in some areas such as the Siliguri Municipal Corporation, where it has experienced massive growth under the patronage of local leaders of the ruling party. In its initial years, the ruling party and the government did not acknowledge the trade, and there were no regulatory mechanisms in place. Permit and license were never essential attributes for the vehicles as they existed beyond the scope of the law. Drivers offered their allegiance to the local representatives of the ruling party to sustain themselves in the trade, but

unlike auto-rickshaws, they could not get a formal agency to organize them. Thus, informality is more prevalent in the toto sector than in auto-rickshaws.

Currently, the toto sector is financially more beneficial as expenses for licenses, permits, fitness, and fines due to traffic rule violations have not yet affected it. However, uncontrolled extortion of rent by local leaders and informal regulators, coupled with a rapid increase in the number of totes in every locality, poses an obvious threat to the earnings of individual drivers. The politics of informality shapes both sectors, and drivers are left with no choice but to sustain themselves in the trade to earn a livelihood for their families. Most auto-rickshaw drivers have spent many years of their lives driving the vehicle, while those driving toto in West Bengal either could not sustain in their previous job or could not find any suitable job but wanted to stay within their localities. Although they sometimes talk about looking for other jobs out of disappointment, in most cases, that does not happen. They try to fit themselves within the system so that they can support their families and facilitate their children in finding something better, something formal. Their effort to deal with informality and fit themselves within the system shapes their outlook and aspirations. The fourth chapter of the study aims to understand the social world of these drivers.

Chapter 4

Family and masculinity: The social world of informal labours

Though similar in the nature of trade, auto-rickshaw and toto have been different in the nature of the two sectors, organisation and their socio-political contexts. In the previous chapter, we have discussed the growth and nature of these two sectors. But exclusive pictures of these two sectors are incomplete without their politics, because, both the sectors are informal as they lack legal safeguards. Therefore whatever happens is the outcome of the politics of either stakeholder. Political, social and economic concerns are intermingled in the discussions of every chapter of this work.

This chapter will discuss the social expectations of these workers and try to understand how those expectations shape the nature of their politics. As discussed earlier, auto-rickshaw was introduced in the 80s of 20th century for the unemployed educated youth of erstwhile Calcutta. Obviously their expectations were similar to the urban middle class of Bengal. Youths who could neither get a job nor succeed in business, took up auto-rickshaw as their profession in the city. While interviewing the auto-rickshaw operators during 2013 to 2016, I always felt that the Bengali resident drivers of the city have the same aspiration and expectations as any other man who is educated and salaried employee. They were trying to continue the education of their children and expecting them to get a job, preferably in government sector, after their education, which the drivers could not achieve in their youth. At any situation, they were against allowing their male children to take up auto-rickshaw driving as a profession. Drivers were not willing to allow their wives for jobs such as domestic

help which are usually looked down upon. But professions such as private tutor, beautician/ makeup artist, networking business such as Amway/ Oriflame/ Tupperware, etc. were acceptable. Visibly they were in a dilemma. On one hand, it was their role as single male bread winners while on the other hand, it was the urge to improve their living condition by working of both the husband and wife of the family.

Toto emerged as an easier alternative job sector. People working in other sectors bought and started driving toto as a comfortable alternative source of income in the rural and semi-urban areas. A better life in terms of physical labour and economy was the unique selling point of toto as a job sector. Terms and conditions of life were already improved for those who were driving tolos. Therefore aspiration for upward class mobility was not noticed among the toto drivers. The passengers and drivers were from similar locality and hardly had prominent class distinction. Moreover, to be ‘middle class’ in rural and semi-urban West Bengal, an individual hardly needs any exclusivity in apparel or any other external attribute. Dressing sense, spoken language, tastes are generally not in stark contrast. As a result, conflict of class interest has never been an issue for the toto drivers. In addition, domestication of toto, within the *para* / locality, absorbed any expected social tension among this sector.

Gendering of the workers must be an important part in course of understanding them in their social context. The class expectation of the educated Bengali auto-rickshaw drivers, their strong political organisation and coexistence with

other vehicles and the Police in the road space made them tough for the sake of their existence. The usual softness or politeness of the middle class Bengali youths was absent in those drivers' life, who had to indulge themselves in constant bargaining for political and professional necessities of their sector. In course of periodic protests and movements as outcomes of their regular bargaining with stakeholders, at a point of time, they came to be represented as 'rough and tough', 'rowdy', etc. by the mainstream media of West Bengal.

Politically auto-rickshaw sector and the incumbent Trinamool Congress have a similarity in regard to their protest and movement. Both entered into another phase through massive protest and movement. At the end of the movements by TMC, when the party could grab the governmental power, the auto-rickshaw drivers joined the party's trade union as an obvious political destiny. Before TMC's victory in the State Assembly Election, in 2009, the auto-rickshaw drivers had to face a transition. Their two stroke vehicles were banned due to an order of the Calcutta High Court. New four stroke auto-rickshaw was introduced through massive movement of the drivers. TMC, as an unstoppable opposition, supported the drivers' movement. This was the time, when the drivers and the 'would be' ruling party were in proximity. Finally, there was an over-night shift in Union membership of the drivers (shift from CITU to INTTUC) owing to the victory of TMC in May, 2011.

Few years after the party's victory in the Assembly Election of 2011, the charged up party workers of TMC came in the news for their pro-activeness. Though, the media described them as 'hooligans'¹¹⁰, the energised party workers kept on reaching every corner of the society to share the joy of victory over '34 years of Left Front rule'. Auto-rickshaw drivers, who, by that time had become members of the INTTUC (Trade Union affiliated to TMC), could not detach themselves from the energy wave. Their energy wave could be seen as their stronger claim on the road space of Kolkata and its suburbs.

The mainstream Bengali and English Media of the state started to portray the auto-rickshaw sector and drivers with adjectives such as 'auto-raj'¹¹¹, goons¹¹², hooligans¹¹³, etc. since the transition period following the periodic protest, demonstration, strikes, etc. On 13 December 2013, the SWS-RLS Research Project Team organised a Consultative Workshop on Media Representation which was attended by 20 well known senior journalists of Kolkata and more than 30 auto-rickshaw drivers and Trade Union leaders. Trade Union Activist Naba Kumer Dutta was the host of the session. Though announced as an awareness workshop, but for the first time the auto-rickshaw driver and their leaders got a chance to face the journalists

¹¹⁰ India Today, 'Mamata Banerjee storms police station, demands release of 2 party workers', 21 November 2011.

¹¹¹ The Times of India, 'Minister talks tough on auto raj', 29 July 2014.

¹¹² The Times of India, 'Arterial roads turn death traps', 8 August 2010.

¹¹³ The Hindu Business Line, 'Auto rickshaw drivers take to streets, protest over LPG hike', 4 April 2012.

in such an organised session within a University Campus¹¹⁴. The workshop, within a few minutes, turned into a zone of heated discussion. The drivers were visibly charged to against the journalists because of the nature of media representation of them. Naba Dutta mediated the heated debate beautifully. Such mediating or awareness generating or coordinating agencies from civil society¹¹⁵ are almost unavailable in such societies as in Kolkata.

This chapter has addressed the media representation of the auto-rickshaw drivers as an attribute to the upward class aspiration of the auto-rickshaw drivers. Though, that aspiration was noted for a section of auto-rickshaw drivers. In the later days, when some of drivers were no longer owners of their vehicles, this aspiration for upward class mobility was hardly noticeable among them due to obvious economic reasons. Some drivers hired other drivers to drive their vehicles under the contact of ‘*batchit*’, the monetary amount to be paid by the driver to the vehicle’s owner at the end of the day, which ranges from Rs. 250 to Rs. 500 (as per the prospect of the route). This has been discussed in the previous chapter. Some individuals who were nowhere connected to the sector also invested by buying auto-rickshaw/s. They could hire drivers through the union.

¹¹⁴ Anita Bannerjee Memorial Hall, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 32.

¹¹⁵ Manali Desai, ‘Party Formation, Political Power, and the Capacity for Reform: Comparing Left Parties in Kerala and West Bengal, India’, *Social Forces*, Vol. 80, No. 1, pp. 37-60, September 2001.

In auto sector, those who were only drivers, in most of the cases lacked the urban Bengali upbringing. They were mostly from economically weaker section and were in search of such laborious jobs. Therefore, the middle class aspirations were absent in their cases. Some of them were regular commuters to Kolkata and some lived in the outskirts. Many Hindi speaking drivers entered the sector during this time. They were usually migrants from Bihar. The relationship between auto-rickshaw drivers and passengers has also been discussed in this chapter. The second part of the chapter has tried to understand the toto drivers in their social milieu. Domestication of toto has been its principal strength despite absence of any legal safeguard. The toto, as a mode of intermediate transport, filled up the gap between the existing other modes such as cycle-rickshaw, vano, eight seater auto-rickshaws, etc. Moreover totos were housed in every locality, i.e. almost every para/locality has toto drivers with their vehicle, and were available even in the doomed days of lockdown.

Further, the chapter explores the sectors possibilities to provide jobs for women. Understanding toto sector through gender lens is important as it is unique, till date, in regard to women's employment in public transport. Its counterpart, auto-rickshaw in Kolkata and its suburb could not yet include women as drivers whereas toto has been successful in doing so within 5/6 years of its genesis. Domestication or in this case, proximity to the society has been one reason for this. Though, organisation has an important role to play in this regard. The politics of this sector

takes shape through its societal acceptance, its '*localness*'. It stands different in regard to organisation from the auto-rickshaw sector, but it tries to organise itself in some way or other. In other words, it can also be said that the political environment has also been eager to have a control in this sector. Despite that, yet, no organisation in formal sense has taken place, but the sense of '*localness*' among the drivers, which is also a part of their identity, plays significant role to unite the drivers at local level. The chapter also discusses the aspirations of the drivers regarding their socio-economic condition which looks more like '*confidence*' than an expectation of upward class mobility.

The auto-rickshaw operators: A group aspiring for upward class mobility

During the field interviews and workshops with auto-rickshaw operators and other stakeholders, the operators had frequently said that '*amrao apnader moto poribar thekei asa chele*', which can be translated in English as 'we have also come from such families as yours'. That sentence was primarily directed to the other section of the audience who were mostly the middle class passengers, researchers, scholars, teachers, journalists, etc. In the beginning, during the Left Front regime, auto-rickshaw permits were given to educated unemployed youth who were mostly Bengalis. Education, during those days also had been as a signifier of 'cultural

capital'¹¹⁶ of the middle class in Kolkata as it is in present Indian context. The ethnic composition of the operators/ drivers has undergone a visible change in last two decades, as men who have mostly migrated from Bihar have entered this profession. Still in most of the routes, except few route in central Kolkata the Bengali drivers are in majority. These men, who have acquired some education, lives in middle class localities since the time of their fathers have the aspiration to be seen as respectable middle class men by their passengers.

In West Bengal and Kolkata, a prime attribute of the middle class is that the people of this class are not much into physical labour. Clerical job, teaching, etc. which do not expect individual's physical labour rather than brain work are seen as middle class profession. Even

Table 3: Mother tongue of the auto-rickshaw drivers*					
	Bengali	Hindi	Urdu	Bhojpuri	Others
Drivers	79.30%	16.50%	0.80%	1.70%	0
Owners	83.30%	8.30%	2.50%	0	1.70%

*Source: Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

¹¹⁶ Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller, 'Hegemonic Aspirations, New Middle Class Politics and India's Democracy in Comparative Perspective', *Critical Asian Studies* 38:4, pp. 495-522, 2006.

people who are working in government factories with high salary and other benefits generally prefer to refer their work place as ‘office’ instead of ‘plant’. Naba Dutta, a trade union activist of Kolkata has confirmed this fact. It has been argued by several scholars that the Bengali middle class has always found its comfort in proximity to ‘office-work’ or ‘*chakri*’ rather than work involving physical labour. Tuhina Ganguly has observed that ‘office-work’ or ‘*chakri*’ is an inalienable aspect of Bengali middle-class life and lifestyle¹¹⁷. Ganguly described the word ‘*chakri*’ as a work which involves salaried work under an employee-employer relationship, and moreover exempted from physical hardship. Brain work, education, etc. are criterions of ‘*chakri*’ which further conform the sophistication or softness embedded in the Bengali Bhadrak identity. The nomenclature of ‘*bhadralok*’ has originated from the word, ‘*bhadra*’ which means respectable, and the office work / *chakri*, which excludes any form of physical labour and mostly concentrate on paper work, such as teaching or clerical jobs further strengthens the identity. In this way, the auto-drivers, who even own their own auto-rickshaws but work as driver in public transport hardly fit in the ‘*bhadralok*’ identity, until and unless the massive expansion of middle class, where the class is characterised less by the kind of work rather than capacity to purchase comfort and an apparently good life style. Fernandes and Heller have shown that the middle class ‘(New Middle Class) as a consumer based group benefiting from

¹¹⁷ Tuhina Ganguly, ‘Conceptualising Work/Employment in India: A Study of Chakri in Colonial Bengal (19th-20th Centuries).

economic reforms and the contours of the class can be understood only as a class-in-practice, that is a class defined by its politics and every day practises through which it reproduces its privileged position¹¹⁸. Fernandes and Heller has classified the middle class into three segments, starting from people with advanced professional credentials to lower level employees in public and private sector. The third category, which is most numerous, can be interesting in this context. The Third category, according to Fernandes and Heller, includes middle and lower level employees of public and private sector, and people of various low authority professions, who do not occupy position of significant authority over other workers. In the view of Pavan K Varma, anybody who has a home to live in and can afford three meals a day for the family, with access to basic health care, public transport and schooling, and some earning to buy a fan or watch or bi-cycle, mobile phone, etc. can be said to have moved to the lowest strata of the middle class¹¹⁹. Thus a person who himself drives his own auto-rickshaw, has an average income of Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000 per month and maintains a nuclear family in a city, such as Kolkata can easily afford some comfort to aspire for a middle class identity. Moreover, as per the data provided in Table 3¹²⁰, mother tongue of more than 79 % of drivers and more than 83 % of owners is Bengali.

¹¹⁸ Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller, 'Hegemonic Aspirations, New Middle Class Politics and India's Democracy in Comparative Perspective', *Critical Asian Studies* 38:4, pp. 495-522, 2006.

¹¹⁹ Pavan K Varma, *The New Indian Middle Class, The Challenge Of 2014 And Beyond*, Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2014.

¹²⁰ Table 3 is based on the quantitative data collected from the interviews of auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata and its suburbs, conducted by the researchers of SWS – RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 201

Despite financial constraints due to decreasing income, these are certain aspects based on which the drivers prefer to identify themselves as '*Bhadralok*'.

A respondent auto-rickshaw operator, Babu Naskar says that he has gifted his daughter, a laptop and expects that she will pursue MBA after her graduation. Table 4¹²¹ shows that 51.7% of the owner-drivers earn up to Rs. 10000 per month and 29.2% earn up to Rs. 15000 per month. Though, less in number, there are owner-drivers, whose monthly earnings range from Rs. 15,000 – Rs. 25,000. Whereas, most of the renter – drivers earn below Rs. 15,000 per month. But there is another data that somehow indicates toward a comfort zone for the operators, as 61.7% of the owner drivers own the house where they live and 43.0% of renter-drivers own their house. 52.9% drivers and 30.0% owner drivers live in rented house.

The rest numbers in the either cases live in a joint family and the ownership of their residence lies with the head of the family, which is either the father or the mother in most of the cases. Though the data about the monthly income of the operators is not at all promising, but a large number of the operators do not have to pay house rent for staying in the city. Moreover, as long as they work, they earn. Abstinence from the work indicates, loss in daily wage, which is similar to other informal sector workers.

¹²¹ Table 4 is based on the quantitative data collected from the interviews of auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata and its suburbs, conducted by the researchers of SWS – RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

But as long as they work, they are able to provide some comfort to their family, education to their children, and expect for inter-generational mobility.

Table 4: Monthly income of the Household (Auto-rickshaw drivers)*								
	Up to	Rs.	RS.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
	Rs.	5001 to	10001 to	15001 to	20001 to	25001 to	35001 to	55001 to
	5000/-	10000	15000	20000	25000	30000	40000	60,000
Drivers	12.4%	58.7%	17.4%	2.5%		0.8%		
Owners	1.7%	51.7%	29.2%	1.7%	1.7%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%

*Source: Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015

Men working in auto-rickshaw sector are either self-employed or driving the owners' auto-rickshaw. At the end of the day, the identity they derive from the virtue of their work is of a 'driver' who earns his bread by driving a vehicle for public transport. The political party's expectation from them, as I have discussed earlier is not that of as a general party member or common voter. Rather, the political party has always expected these drivers to work as a tool of the party to ensure its strong hold on localities and perform as cadres during elections. Thus, instead of softness, the

drivers were expected to show their roughness in public sphere. The issues such as informality, uncertainty, intense police harassment, hardly allow these drivers to remain calm on roads. Almost all the drivers accepted that an amount of 'rough and tough' attitude is essential to sustain in their profession. When asked about the misbehaviour of drivers towards passengers, Sri Kumar Rabidas, exclaimed that "how do you expect us to be cool throughout the day, with immense pressure of meeting the amount for '*bat-chit*', ensuring a proper earning for ourselves, police harassment, passengers' expectations, etc." Therefore the two identities, '*bhadralok*' and 'driver' or '*auto-wala*' as they are called in local parlance are in stark contrast in respect of their masculinities.

'The bhadralok are also defined by a distinctive masculinity. These men were not warriors..... their gender ideology was primarily one of respectability. For the bhadralok – the gentleman – this means not doing menial labour, being educated, having independence of means and maintaining a genteel and cultured life. Hegemonic masculinity in Bengal has little to do with strength and virility.'¹²²

Raka Roy has shown that the sense of masculinity associated to the 'bhadralok' identity is more of being educated, and having the capacity to maintain a refined and cultured life style¹²³. On the other hand, the auto-rickshaw drivers hardly have the choice to sustain in their profession giving up their rough and toughness.

¹²² Raka Ray, 'Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Points of Departure: India and the South Asian Diaspora (Autumn, 2000), pp. 691-718.

¹²³ Raka Ray, 'Masculinity, Femininity, and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Points of Departure: India and the South Asian Diaspora (Autumn, 2000), pp. 691-718.

During the qualitative interviews, when the auto-rickshaw drivers were asked, whether any man or boy with either softness in behaviour or femininity could exist in the profession, all most all the drivers negated the chance. According to them, the sector, expects a certain amount of toughness to deal with the everyday turmoil with the police, passengers, uncertainty of the profession, competition with other drivers or other vehicles on road, etc. Therefore, this sector looks forward to a specific masculine behaviour. Display of physical strength and ‘rough and toughness’, which is common for other transport sector workers, trapped in informal labour practise, is a feature common among the auto-rickshaw operators, which contradicts their claim for upward class mobility. Still the maximum number of my respondents, who were mostly Bengali, have claimed themselves as ‘*bhadralok*’. They have said that, they had always felt insulted when they were addressed by the passengers in a disrespectful manner, such as addressing the drivers as ‘*tui*’ or ‘*tumi*’ instead of ‘*aapni*’¹²⁴.

“In this line I do not get respect. If a stranger is above 18 years, I address him as *aapni*. If he says *tumi* and sometimes even *tui*, I get very angry. This happens quite often. I tell them: ‘Brother, you are my son’s age. I am addressing you as *aapni*. Look at me, look at my face and talk to me. You are addressing me as *tui*? It seems as though you are educated. You should know these things! Is this modern civilisation?’ – View of one of the respondent owner-driver¹²⁵.

¹²⁴ ‘Apni’, ‘tumi’ and ‘tui’ are synonyms of ‘you’ in Bengali. ‘Apni’ is to address any unknown or senior individual, where as ‘tui’ and ‘tumi’ are generally for addressing friends, juniors and inferior persons in Bengali.

¹²⁵ Quoted from Sen. 2016.

But unlike the other informal workers in transport sector, the auto-rickshaw drivers prefer the single male bread winner model. Most of the auto rickshaw operators (72.7% of drivers and 73.3% of owners) mentioned that their wives are engaged in household activities (see Table 5¹²⁶). However only 5.0% of the drivers and 3.3% of the owners mentioned that their wives are self employed. Only 0.8% of the drivers and owners mentioned that their wives are engaged in private firms, with 0.8% owners said that their wife work as government employee. On the contrary, about 48% said they would allow women to work outside the home, 42% percent said they would not. Whereas, nearly 60% agreed that women working outside the home led to the neglect of the family. 60% of our respondent said that they contributed to household work, while 30% said that they did not have the time or inclination to do so.

Table 5: Occupation of spouse (auto-rickshaw drivers)*					
	House wife	Self employed	Private firm employee	Govt. employee	Others
Drivers	72.7%	5.0%	0.8%		5.0%
Owners	73.3%	3.3%	0.8%	0.8%	3.3%

*Source: Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

¹²⁶ Table 5 is based on the quantitative data collected from the interviews of auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata and its suburbs, conducted by the researchers of SWS – RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

It is mention worthy that 65% respondents believed that domestic work should be done by women. If we take a look at the operators' response about their children's future, there are visible numbers of aspirants for inter-generational mobility. Most of the respondents said that they try to educate their children and did not allow them to enter into paid work, though many of the respondents themselves entered paid work at a very young age, starting from thirteen years.

Only 5% of the drivers and 4.2% of owner-drivers were willing to allow their sons to enter their professions; 57% of drivers and 59.2% of owner-drivers did not want their sons to take on their profession. May be the reason behind unwilling numbers are not only expectations for better jobs such as office work, but also dissatisfaction of the drivers with their own trade. In this context, I would mention the case of one of our respondent, an owner-driver, who was disappointed as his son did not want to join him in the profession. The son had passed school and was working for a company at a low salary than what our respondent used to make out of his profession.

According to the respondent, his son used to look down at his driving profession¹²⁷. However, as Raka Roy observes that '*Bhadralok* are men of culture and education, and they do white collar jobs. If they are successful, they are professionals and if unsuccessful, clerks, but *bhadralok* never work with their hands..... Finally,

¹²⁷ Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality, Auto-rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 13, Kolkata: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, June 2016.

bhadralok earn enough to support an establishment, so their wives can remain protected and not have to work', our respondents hardly fit in the first criteria but in the case of supporting non-working wives, they are quite clear of their position.

Nowadays, the fact of remaining as single male bread winner is under considerable change. The feature of becoming a consumer with more efficiency is becoming the mark of the new middle class. Though not included in the interview, I would like to mention the case of two families of my vicinity, Jadavpur, which is a well known locality of South Kolkata. The first case is an operator lives with his wife and son in a flat, which they have got as the wife's paternal property. His wife teaches in a kindergarten school in the area and also works as a private tutor to some students. Their only son studies in an English medium school and the mother sometimes talks to the son in English. The man is the head of the family and drives his vehicle in Jadavpur – Ranikunthi route. As a young couple, they sometimes opt for a night out by their own auto-rickshaw. In this case, 'working wife/woman' enhances the economic capacity of the family.

The second case is also of an owner-driver, Manas Saha. Though Manas himself has studied only up to secondary, his recently married wife, who is a graduate and was working at IBM prior to her marriage. As a spinster, his wife was a member of a theatre group in Kolkata. Manas is the only son of his family and lives with his mother and wife in his paternal house. He has given two floors of the house for rent.

The monthly income of the family is Rs. 30,000 to Rs. 40,000. But when I have asked him, whether he would allow his wife to resume her work career, he denied that option. He thinks that the family is not in need for more money. Then he says that, his wife may resume her career but she has to fulfil her domestic duties in the house – ‘If she can balance both, her job and responsibilities in the house, that will be well, and I will accept that’.

Auto-rickshaw operators and passengers; a relationship in turmoil

Naba Dutta, in his paper¹²⁸ on auto-rickshaw operators, says that 23% passengers of auto-rickshaw earn Rs. 10000 – Rs. 15000 per month, 22% of passengers earn Rs. 15000 – Rs. 20000 per month and 17% of passengers earn Rs. 20000 – Rs. 30000 per month. The greater portion of the rest amount is covered by the youths who are studying in schools, colleges and universities. Thus the economic capacity of the passengers as presented by Naba Dutta is not far above from that of the operators as we have seen in the earlier segment. Samita Sen in the beginning of her paper observes that, ‘Meanwhile, students and younger colleagues assumed that an auto strike meant a holiday. When I asked, they were puzzled: How will we come to work? From Park Circus to Jadavpur is a busy bus route, I replied stating the obvious. It was not at all obvious to them, they do not travel by bus, they said. Apart from conflict sizzling on Kolkata streets, it amused and interested me to learn how completely a

¹²⁸ Naba Dutta, ‘Auto-rickshaw, Jukti Totthyo Motamot’, SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 8, Kolkata: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, October 2015.

segment of Kolkata passenger traffic had shifted to the auto from the bus¹²⁹. This is what arrived in her mind when Sen was planning to pursue a research on the auto-rickshaw sector, most probably during 2010-2011, when the city was experiencing regular turmoil due to the frequent auto-rickshaw strikes against the conversion from two stroke engine to four stroke engine¹³⁰.

During the research project, in February 2014, at a conference with auto-rickshaw drivers and passengers, Dilip Halder, a veteran transport economist, who was chairing the session, remembers, as Sen too does, a visible shift of passengers from bus to auto rickshaw. The operators, in describing the advantages of auto-rickshaw, have always mentioned points such as, i) comfortable journey, ii) assured seat for all the passengers, iii) faster movement than bus, as the private buses in most of the time make delay to get more passengers, iv) as a smaller vehicle, auto-rickshaw can easily bypass larger vehicles such as bus, to make its way out during a traffic jam, v) there are chances for passengers to get into and get down at any place according to their will, vi) auto-rickshaw provides last minute connectivity and most of the routes are corresponding to the railway stations, metro stations and important bus routes, vii) auto-rickshaws mobility into by lanes, etc. The numbers of auto-rickshaws have abruptly increased in last two decade in the city. Though the Kolkata Police had an

¹²⁹ Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality, Auto-rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 13, Kolkata: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, June 2016.

¹³⁰ It will be mention worthy that, the research project, which I have mentioned earlier in this paper is a brain child of Samita Sen and she herself has guided the research.

estimation of 9258 auto-rickshaws in 123 routes in Kolkata in 2014, but the media reports reveal a huge number which range from 70000 to 120000 only in Kolkata. This increase in number must have taken place owing to the availability of passengers on roads who can pay 5 to 10 rupees more in comparison to the buses, for each trip.

An obvious question arises, why has there been so many instances of passenger - auto driver clash in the city, as reported by the media. Auto-rickshaw drivers, who themselves are also trade union leaders, have accused the media for over sensitising the issues related to clashes. They have argued that why the media does not make any news on how the auto-rickshaw drivers help aged persons, children and students. They have mentioned about their policies of favouring students during secondary and higher secondary examinations in the city. There are instances where the driver had escorted a woman, Alpana Roy¹³¹, to her house at 11.30 pm. Still, the mainstream media had been able to come up with news of atrocities made by drivers. From 2013 to mid of 2014 had been a time when such reports were regularly visible on the news paper. Samita Sen has mentioned a number of such incidents in her research paper¹³².

Most of those mentioned incidents were with women passengers. Samita Sen recalls that when most of the middle class passengers used the buses, similar incidents used to happen, between the passengers and the bus conductors. The massive shift in the

¹³¹ Name Changed, she participated in the Workshop with Auto-rickshaw drivers and Passengers in February 2014, organised by the SWS RLS Research Project team.

¹³² Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality, Auto-rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 13, Kolkata: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, June 2016.

choice of middle class passengers has brought such conflicts in the realm of auto-rickshaw. Moreover, in auto-rickshaw there are more chances to address discontent from the passengers as the vehicle can carry 4 or 5 passengers at a time. The close proximity with the drivers has made it easy for the passengers to come up with their problems which, in many cases invite conflicts. Issues reported by news papers and which came to us during our conversation with passengers are, i) availability of change money, ii) reckless driving, iii) sudden hike in auto-rickshaw fare, iv) *kata-route*, etc.

Responding to those problems during interviews and conferences, the trade union leaders and drivers have come with some points. It is not possible for them to give change to all the passengers. Really tough situation comes when passengers offer them a note of 50 or 100 rupees for a fare of 6, 8, or 10 rupees. According to the drivers, there are options to get coins of 80 rupees for every 100 rupees note, from some places in central Kolkata, but it is not possible for them to visit those places regularly, give up 20 rupees for every 100 rupees note and finally to meet the expectations of every passenger to get change. Drivers have talked about various cases where they had informed the passengers that they could not be able to give them change for 6 or 8 rupees, but the passengers despite of the warning got into the vehicle and at the end of the trip handed them a note of 50 or 100 rupees which created problem to the drivers in the time of rash in traffic. Such incidents worsen the driver-

passenger relationship. According to the drivers, as there is no minimum wage for these drivers, therefore maximum number of trips helps them to increase their daily wage which can be seen as a reason for reckless driving, which on the other hand defies the issue of passengers' safety on roads.

Unlike the bus or taxi, as I have earlier mentioned that the decision of fare in auto-rickshaw sector is made by the trade union and not by the government rules, therefore at many times, the passengers miss any prior information of hike in fare of auto-rickshaws. It can be seen from the operators' side that the passengers who mostly belong from the urban middle class have lots of expectations from the auto-rickshaw drivers. Deviations from those expectations bring turmoil in the relation. As a researcher, I find it as the embedded nature of the people (passengers) of this class to 'want more'. May be it is an effect of growing confidence of the people as good consumers. This might have led them to expect more from the people, whom they consider as inferior to them. One of the trade union leader, had asked us in a conference that why the passengers did not fight with the railway or the government offices on not meeting up their expectations as frequently they did with the auto-rickshaw drivers. In my view, most of the middle class individuals, who aspire to have a car and employ a driver to drive that, can hardly find the auto-rickshaw drivers at their 'level' and hardly care to understand the drivers' limitation.

As I have mentioned earlier, inferior tones of addressing amounts discontent among the drivers for their passengers. The comparatively young drivers who are working hard to fulfil their aspirations hardly bear such misconduct which again invites complexity in the driver-passenger relationship. This attitude of the middle class can be well explained in their obsession to maintain a clear cut line of separation between themselves and the inferior class¹³³. Mina Saavala mentions an incident which supports this behaviour of the middle class passengers. She describes how her friend Lata expressed her discomfort due to physical proximity with the working class women travelling in the same bus. Fernandes and Heller have also shown how the middle class (new middle class) project their class identity by distancing themselves from the lower classes. In October 2016, I have again talked to a number of women in Jadavpur. Most of them were either middle aged or senior citizens. Among the two localities in Jadavpur, one was a colony dominated by mostly middle class people and the other was posh, dominated by prosperous families. Some middle aged women of the colony area said that they have seen passengers, mostly women to misbehave with the drivers. On one hand, a middle aged woman said that ‘the drivers are also from families like us, and we are supposed to pay at least some respect in dealing with them. They are also *‘bhadralok’*, as we are’. On the contrary, another woman, who worked at an office, said that, she had always avoided any argument with the drivers

¹³³ Minna Saavala, *‘Middle Class Moralities; Everyday Struggle over Belonging and Prestige in India’*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.

in case of any disagreement as she thought that the drivers were never at her 'level'. Here the word 'level' clearly indicates a class hierarchy. The second respondent was a resident of the posh locality.

'Lata, a young and unmarried woman, and I had to take a bus on our way home after visiting one of her relatives. Lata mostly made use of more expensive and consequently less crowded express/metro city buses. None of these materialised, however, and we decided to enter the bus available, whatever kind it was. When our already jam-packed bus picked up a group of sinewy, dark skinned labour women on their way home from work at a construction site, Lata got restless and very uneasy, although she was not a finicky kind of person. When she was pressed against the labourers in the crowd, she ostentatiously lifted her *chunni*, the scarf, against her nose, showing her disgust and commented aloud in English, "We should have waited for the first class bus; now we have to stand with these *piccippi* (silly, eccentric, stupid) people here". She found it difficult to tolerate the physical proximity of the labourers; Now Lata, an educated, neatly-dressed, English-speaking city woman, found the physical contact and the smell of the labourers so repugnant that she was openly passing insensitive comments and gesturing disapprovingly.'¹³⁴

A segment of the news on auto-rickshaw drivers' atrocities are dominated by incidents of their clash with women. Middle class women, studying or working in the city avail auto-rickshaw as easier mode of transport. They are claiming the public space, which was earlier dominated by men. As I have said earlier, these operators try to maintain the single male bread winner model for their family but cannot succeed always due to increasing informality of their sector, serve these women, who mostly

¹³⁴ Minna Saavala, '*Middle Class Moralities; Everyday Struggle over Belonging and Prestige in India*', Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2010.

belong to the middle class, a status of the operators' aspiration. Hence, the operators and the women, who dress differently, speak differently, at least in the sense of these operators often get into conflict with the operators, who try not to let their women go for work and prefer women to be 'modest' and 'sober'¹³⁵.

The female passengers' language of class superiority and authoritative speech are generally received negatively by these working class men. 71% of respondent operators have said that women passengers had become aggressive than before. Are those increased aggressiveness, language of confident, etc. of those women passengers discomfort the working class men who try to support single male bread winner model in their domestic space? Media reports suggest that conflicts over the issue of behaviour, availability of change money, dropping at preferred destination etc. are common reasons for conflicts between the operators and women passengers.

"Where are really well-behaved women? It is not about dress; their attitude and behaviour are terrible—because we are auto drivers, they don't think of us as human beings. There are a lot of young women and also older women, who treat us with a type of contempt. We have to handle oil and dirt if the auto breaks down.... But you see this [the dirt]." – View of one of the respondent renter-driver¹³⁶.

¹³⁵ In most of the qualitative interviews collected, the drivers wanted women to be 'modest' and 'sober'. They have a typical idea of 'Indian women', which, in their views, is in stark contrast to 'new urban women' – dressed in western clothes, speaking English, travelling in late night, drinking alcohol, etc. They have asserted that, though they want their daughters to pursue higher studies and job, but would never allow them to become 'uncontrolled'.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Sen. 2016

“Oh dear! Women do not hesitate to raise their hands. They are ‘fast’ now and they are advanced in every matter, so they do whatever they like. The problem is not with their dress but with their behaviour.....” – View of one of the respondent renter-driver¹³⁷.

The informal labour practice and para-legality of the sector are reasons for enormous pressure on the drivers. The government is however not willing to relieve the pressure on the regulatory side, reducing license and permit costs, or the enforcement side, reigning in rent-seeking behaviour of agencies or in controlling the fuel prices. Rather, the government has abandoned considerable regulatory space in favour of the unions, there by seeking surplus in various forms from the operators. The unions offer support and services in return, but there are limits to their representational influence. Increase in fare can be seen as an immediate action for the relief of the drivers but the ruling party hardly toes that way for electoral benefit. The ruling party does not disrupt the ease of the passengers who are in majority in comparison to the smaller group of operators. The government keeps on neglecting the issues related to the trade, including unregulated employment condition. The state government does not wish to acknowledge the problems of unregulated employment conditions as it is easier to focus on the behaviour of the drivers. By projecting the problems of the sector as an issue of law and order, indiscipline and greed of individual drivers, the state continues to ignore the tensions.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Sen. 2016

Media and ‘auto-cracy/auto-raj’

The auto-rickshaw became visible in regular media reports on two issues: first, pollution and second, harassment of passengers. An elite section of the urban middle class raised the issue of pollution by the auto-rickshaw. That was obviously a valid issue taking in consideration of the health of urban population. But why did the activists target the auto-rickshaws mostly? Why did the judiciary make a decision against the two-stroke auto-rickshaws without considering the resources necessary for the operators to bear the conversion? At last it will be better not to ask the role of the state government who had done almost nothing to exclude the informality and para-legality from the labour practise since the genesis of the sector.

Now, the question is who are benefitted from the minimised pollution on road earlier created by the two stroke auto-rickshaws? It is true that everyone living in the city is befitted. But the middle class, who have a visible representation in the media, have been vocal about the issue of pollution. Otherwise there are a number of issues which affect the poor living in slums areas within the city. How many times the media has addressed the unhealthy living environment of the slum dwellers? Though I do not want to come to any conclusion but somehow the movement of environmentalists and media was an outcome of middle class expectation.

On one hand the two issues which mostly came in the media reports since 2008, pollution and harassment of passengers were affecting the middle class. On the other hand, the mainstream media mostly have its base in the city among the educated middle class, who read and buy news papers, watch the news channels and serve the media as journalists. Though it may appear as an oversimplification, but it can be considered as a reason behind the media's stand about the auto-rickshaw operators and sensitising the middle class.

Another reason is political. By the 2007-2008, anti-incumbency factor had already started to discomfort the erstwhile Left Front. The ruling left front was gradually becoming unpopular among the urban population. Initially the result of the general election of 2009 and finally the result of assembly election of 2011 were the proofs. The auto-rickshaw sector, which had already proven itself as highly lucrative in terms of raising funds and providing manual support for the ruling party, might have been targeted by the media due to its visible proximity with the ruling front. Though, the media had completely overlooked the issues like informal labour practice of this sector and adversities the operators faced due to the labour practise of the sector. At our workshop with operators and media persons, senior journalists such as Asish Chattopadhyaya and Subhasish Moitra had admitted that the media had never focused on issues such as a large number of auto-rickshaw operators are suffering from tuberculosis. Still they had to work to earn their bread as the other informal

labours. At the same occasion, Subhasish Mitra had accepted that media should have never highlighted issues such as how an informal sector such as auto-rickshaw had been victimised by the absence of legality, welfare policies, etc. which further amounted to the drivers' outburst. But the media, whose bases are the readers and spectators, have always found its comfort in reporting issues which could touch the majority overlooking the issues of a comparatively smaller section of people such as auto-rickshaw drivers.

There are controversies over the style of reporting of a section of the media. Though serious issues of drivers' atrocities have taken place on the roads of the city, some incidents were also been presented by the media in a wrong way. Sri Kumar Rabidas remembers one such incident where a young male passenger was involved. Sri Kumar claimed that the young man misbehaved with the auto-rickshaw driver and threatened to drag the latter to police station. The auto-rickshaw driver left the place and the man filed an FIR at the Jadavpur Police Station. By that time, a section of the city's media started to broadcast the issue as 'a young man severely injured by an auto-rickshaw driver', which was actually not true. Later on the police arrested the driver and latter suffered loss of income for next few days. Serial reports of a section of the print media during the time of conversion can said to have over sensitised some issues which was later on pointed by the operators during their conversations with the research team. An interrogative sentence, for example, 'what are you doing?' can be

asked in different ways depending on the voice modulation. Excess stress on the word ‘what’ can easily change the intension of the question. Therefore, words such as ‘auto-raj’, ‘auto-cracy’ or ‘auto-crazy’ which has been used by the media for innumerable times have not depicted the situation of the drivers in totality. As the operators, till date, have a very strong organisation/ trade union, usually backed by the ruling party, can bring the city into standstill, but cannot do away with the serious problems which are still affecting the sector and the labour practise. Drivers, who prefer to be ‘rough and tough’ in their trade lead a vulnerable life due to the informal labour practise and further policy deficit in the sector.

A comfortable and inclusive alternative: Domestication of the toto sector

The toto sector has developed from the rural and suburban Bengal during the initial years of the Trinamool government. Unlike the auto-rickshaw sector, it is not an outcome of *urban aspiration*. During an interview for this dissertation in September 2015, Trade Union leaders and ex-MICs of the Left Front Government, Shyamal Chakravarti and Anadi Sahu said that the government had introduced auto-rickshaw to meet the aspirations of the city dwellers. This includes the aspirations of the educated unemployed youth of the city as well as passengers. In the case of toto, the non-urban population, both the aspiring drivers and passengers were trying to get an easier way for bread winning and commuting through the toto (e-rickshaw). Regulations, judgements and governmental notices came few years later toto got introduced in

common non-urban life. It was a spontaneous growth in the common space of the society which went on expanding vigorously within few years without any planning and policy. The State Government also wanted to portray the growth as spontaneous.

Unlike auto-rickshaw, toto was hardly a government's option for generating employment or to meet the expectations of rural/ urban unemployed folks. After the initial success in terms of wage/ revenue generation by the early drivers, unemployed youths started to get into this sector which resulted in a rapid expansion. Interest of the youth and their stability might have later inspired the State Government to highlight this sector as a source of employment. The instances of distribution of number plate or registration number from the municipalities in 2016, 2017 could be seen as the policy makers' interest in this sector. That is how, the government tried to map a fraction of the sector.

Toto, as a vehicle revolutionised the public space in both rural and urban Bengal. Though auto-rickshaw, van, cycle-rickshaw were already active in urban space, but the rural and sub-urban spaces had scarcity of transport. Rapid growth of toto has proven that the population was expecting better in-road connectivity. This part of the chapter tries to understand two questions, on one hand, how do the localities or societies have shaped the growth and strengthening of the toto sector and on the other hand, how the drivers as a class have claimed their space in the social strata.

During initial days, rather than unemployed youths, people who were looking for a new opportunity had bought toto which was less hazardous from other vehicles of para-transit. During initial conversations with toto drivers in 2014 and 2015 in districts of North Bengal, I noticed that most of the drivers had other occupation before buying toto. They were looking for self employment or any other job with less physical labour. In the initial years, not even 1 lakh was needed to buy a toto which had no issue of registration or license. Miscellaneous costs such as maintenance, enrolling in a stand, etc. were not needed. So, who were the people to buy a toto? Those who could afford 60 to 70 thousand rupees and had place to charge and park the vehicle. Therefore, usually every toto drivers had been found to own a house, where they could park the vehicle and charge the battery.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the speed and comfort of the vehicle attracted the local people. More than cycle-rickshaw and less than auto-rickshaw, people found toto as close to them. The drivers even apart from a few contract for long distance travel, usually remained within their vicinity. Totos came to be identified by their localities or para. This condition paved the way for, first, strengthening the base of toto and second, made the sector inclusive for women to work. Partial organisation in the form of 'toto stands' developed much latter, approximately 2/3 years after the introduction of the vehicle. Even after the growth of those stands, many male toto drivers have preferred to work without being associated

to any of the stands. This kind of confidence that they can work comfortably without any organisation/ stand might be another reason which separated it from other traditional public transport or vehicles of para-transit.

Even auto-rickshaw in Kolkata took too much time but could not make space for women to work in the sector. The uniqueness of toto attracted women who were looking for a source of earning. Women are traditionally found more than men in informal labour sectors excluding the transport sector as either the sector as a whole need physical labour such as in cycle rickshaw or the sector is hazardous such as in auto-rickshaw and taxi. Moreover pre-existing male organisations in those sectors might be another reason for exclusion of women¹³⁸. With a toto, a woman had the freedom to move independently within her locality. In most of the cases in Siliguri¹³⁹, women who are driving toto have non-earning husbands or are separated or widowed. They needed a suitable and flexible sector to work. Male drivers by the end of 2021 had understood the compulsion of those women driving toto. Though the male drivers usually were not willing to allow their wives, sisters or daughters to drive toto, at the same time they were not totally unwilling to accept their fellow female drivers in their stands.

¹³⁸ Samita Sen, *'Organised Informality: Auto-Rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata'*, Kolkata: SWS-RLS Occasional Paper13, 2016.

¹³⁹ I could not find women toto drivers in Panihati Sodepur or Narendrapur. Balurghat has a few women where as the number is noteworthy in Siliguri.

Approximately more than 30 women were driving toto in and around Siliguri by the end of 2021 without being permanently attached to any toto stand. I have been able to meet 2 of them, though the interactions were brief. Men in auto-rickshaw and toto sector in West Bengal had talked from 30 to 45 minutes on an average, whereas those women, whom I met in Siliguri were not accustomed yet to identify themselves as 'toto drivers'.

Public transport sector in India is traditionally dominated by men. Speed, promptness, toughness, domination, etc. on one hand and organisation on the other hand have been defining the transport sector in this country. Historically men have been perceived as the only choice to be in transport sector with those 'virtues'. Interactions with auto and toto drivers of diverse zones varying from Metropolitan area to Panchayats, have showed that such masculine attributes are expectations of public transport sector. Though some drivers did not see any problem of women joining transport sector, but could not find a solution for the issues raised by those who opposed the entry of women.

Toto, which i) moves more in the in-roads and lanes, ii) devoid of strong male dominated organisations and iii) without the typical sense of physical labour and hazard, have been able to make space for women. Mostly women, who are in toto sector in Siliguri are either driving their husband's or their brother's vehicle for the continuation of earning for the family. As their context is Siliguri, not South Kolkata,

they are not applauded openly, but they are better known than male toto drivers in their localities. Even if there is any question of the security of these female drivers, that is lessened because local people are supportive. Female drivers usually avoid travelling distant places after the evening. Unlike some of their fellow male drivers, toto is not comfort, rather compulsion for them. Women drivers have to do something more, they fight with gender stereotypes on road and transport sector. But, now-a-days (December 2021), they are quite at home in their sector. They earn mostly equal to their male counterparts. Though, in case of contracts for longer distance, they are still lagging behind the male drivers. On an average, Rs. 500 is their daily earning.

The two female drivers spoke on behalf of women drivers said that they had two roles to play which acts as a hindrance, more than any other issues. The role of mother and homemaker, which is obvious for them, limits their prospect in the sector. This might be a reason for them that they are not yet habituated to spend time in groups of other toto drivers or face any interviewer for half an hour. They usually take a day as week off. Moreover their daily working hours in the sector is lower than the male drivers. Women labour force in North Bengal is another reason for their confidence to work in the sector. Women dominate the Plantation work force in the entire Dooars and Hills of North Bengal. That is undoubtedly an inspiration for these handful women in toto trade.

Most of the male drivers, who own ‘pucca houses’¹⁴⁰, lands, have sources of earning, send their children to school, they and their wives are educated, consider themselves to be included in the middle class. They claim themselves as *Bhadraloks*. Affinity toward ‘*Bhadralok*’ as a standard of identification is common among the toto drivers of Siliguri, Balurghat, Panihati and Narendrapur. In regard to women’s labour in transport sector, especially in toto sector, they are modernised to accept that. On the contrary, their class consciousness does not allow their women to take up toto driving as a profession. Opinions of male drivers in Siliguri in this regard help us to understand the context of female toto drivers.

Madan Ghosh’s view regarding women’s entry in toto sector reflects his class consciousness. He does not consider toto driving as suitable for the women. In his view, any other jobs, such as office job or teaching job, better suits a woman. He believes that women driving for livelihood may face a number of atrocities or threats on road and they should not step out to face such challenges. In his view, men are only suitable even if they are physically compromised such as Madan. This feeling for women is common among the auto drivers of Kolkata too. Both kinds of drivers have appreciated such hard work and determination of women but are not ready to let women of their families to step in the same shoes. Madan has used the word ‘*kharap*’,

¹⁴⁰A *pucca* house is made up of substantial, hard-wearing materials including stones, bricks, and concrete.

meaning bad¹⁴¹ for the situation where women are compelled to drive toto as sole bread winners. He has seen some of those women drivers in his vicinity but is not connected with any of them. He is sceptical about the question whether his stand would allow the entry of any women drivers. He passes the responsibility of decision making on other members in this regard. Even when the women are willing and the passengers have no problem as such, the masculine mindset of the sector is not ready to accept them in their ghetto.

According to Panchali Ray, women's employment has always been interlinked with sexual control, violence, and honour; and working women almost always marked as carnal, promiscuous, and sexually available. West Bengal, often hailed as the intellectual capital of the country, and celebrated for its disapproval for capitalism and consumerism, has a long history of anxiety over women's sexuality¹⁴². The social reform movement of the 19th century constructed the 'new woman' or the *bhadra-mahila* (respectable woman) as one who is capable of emotional as well as physical labour to serve the family. Women's education (particularly English education), therefore, prepared middle-class, upper-caste women to enter into the ideal marriage of companionship, however, conservatives needed reassurance of women upholding

¹⁴¹ He has used the term '*kharap*' in the sense of 'not acceptable'.

¹⁴² Panchali Ray, 'The Anxiety Of The Bengali *Bhadralok* And The Modern Woman: Why Does The Body Matter?', *Kafila* – Collective Explorations Since 2006, 23 August 2022. Link: <https://kafila.online/2022/08/23/the-anxiety-of-the-bengali-bhadralok-and-the-modern-woman-why-does-the-body-matter/>

traditional cultural practices which preserved the family and did not question existing gender relations.

The traditional transport sector, in West Bengal, is mostly ‘men’¹⁴³ dominated, as it is a space of exposure for a different kind of masculinity, better to say, a hyper masculinity, which stands as a deviation to the traditional image of *bhadra-lok* constructed on ‘*buddhibal*’¹⁴⁴ (intellect) instead of ‘*bahubal*’ (muscle power) . The masculinity is built on the attributes of physical labour for the trade and the capacity to counter ‘others’, physically and verbally, on road. The ‘others’, in this case, may include drives of other vehicles, passengers, police etc. The transport labours has been noticed to favour single male breadwinner model and therefore do not welcome the entry of their women in transport trade. Further, men in toto sector are different. Men who could not sustain in laborious jobs have taken refuge in this sector. Driving toto is easier than even small motorised vehicles such as vano and auto-rickshaw. As of now, toto drivers have not emerged as a group of fearless labours exposing their strength to bring the roads on stand still. It is obvious that they would be uncomfortable in welcoming women as drivers, in their trade but the nature of the trade itself is welcoming them. Toto sector is reversing the traditional nature of transport sector in terms of employing women. Ray, in her article, refers to Satyajit Ray’s two movies – ‘Pratidwandi’ and ‘Mahanagar’, while describing middle class

¹⁴³ Used as a cultural construction.

¹⁴⁴ Sayan Chattopadhyay, ‘Bengali masculinity and the national-masculine: Some conjectures for interpretation’, *South Asia Research*, Vol. 31 (3), 2011.

Bengali women coming out for job due to economic constraints of families. Sutapa, the female protagonist of *Pratidhwani*, questions the ‘new’ femininity that stretched itself to absorb middle-class women who apologetically worked outside the home due to financial distress, but carefully conformed and maintained middle-class gendered ideologies. Sutapa, in the film, being a member of a respectable Bengali family exacerbates the patriarchal tension that occurs when economic independence opens up spaces for autonomy and female agency that call into question the demarcation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ woman, licit and illicit sexual behaviour. Another woman, Arati, of *Mahanagar*, is portrayed as a modest but poor housewife, who must find employment to help and support her family faces societal anxiety regarding changing gender norms. Arati fits to be traditional yet modern, empowered yet conforming to all gender norms, placating her husband’s growing anxiety over her perceived transgressions. This included a curtailing of desires that purportedly reflected aspirations of a materialistic and modernised woman— one who would abandon her duties to home, family, and the nation. Stories of women in toto sector is similar in the sense that they do not belong to typical labour families, once guarded by their earning fathers or husbands. Due to their inability to support the family anymore due to poor health or demise, situation of those families has compelled the women to drive toto and perform alongside feminine responsibilities for their families.

In course of talking about a nearby women toto driver, who sometimes sales fruits in her toto, he compares her physical appearance with demon – ‘*asurer moto chehara*’, which seems to be non-womanly for them. Debasish Halder appreciates women driving toto in Siliguri as he believes that any kind of labour for better living is appreciable. But he will neither allow his sister to drive toto as he himself is in this profession, nor will get into a relationship with any woman driving toto. Another driver from Siliguri, Asish Dey says that women are visible in toto sector of North Bengal mostly due to compulsion. The nature of this sector allows women to sustain in it without major hurdles. Though, he did not want to talk much about women toto drivers.

Till date, women are miniscule in Toto sector, but the nature of the trade gives them the ‘opportunity’ to be a part of the sector. In this case, question of class consciousness and upward mobility seems irrelevant as survival through the ‘opportunity’ is the only reason in the case of these women. Similar to Siliguri and Jalpaiguri, women are getting into toto sector in Chalsa. A tribal woman drives toto in their locality. She is driving her father’s toto after his demise. Aurobindo Roy and his colleagues are ready to allow any woman driver in their stand if she is from their locality/ Block. Two different pictures of Siliguri and Chalsa are notable. Even educated drivers of Chalsa, which is mostly rural, moreover close to forest, seems parted from the urban view in regard to women’s participation in the sector. The

construction of *bhadralok* originates from the urban reaches the rural West Bengal with substantial changes. The urban space remains as the centre for the identity. Drivers of Chalsa, whose income and property are similar to the drivers in Siliguri, do not use '*bhadralok*' frequently to identify their class position. Rather they are more into '*elakarlok*' i.e. peopling of this locality, '*lekha pora jana*', i.e. educated, '*sadharon moddhobitto*', i.e. general/ normal, middle class to identify them. Despite the sense of masculinity in their trade, they visibly negate the chance or talk about challengers for women in this profession. Thus in such a situation with diverse reactions from their male counterpart, some women are successfully driving toto. Organisation and government's support, in such a context, is necessary to ensure an alternative trade for women.

During my field work, two senior drivers in Sodepur said that – '*ekhon toh meyera sob chalcche, toto chaltei pare....*', which means, 'women can obviously drive toto as they are driving almost every vehicle nowadays'. Primarily this is an affirmative statement, but it is casual in approach. The drivers are not serious about women's entry in toto sector. Moreover in South Bengal, totes are mostly attached with a stand. This is because they have strong organised counterparts and less area to travel. In comparison to South Bengal, transport for in-road connectivity is poor in North Bengal, therefore toto has a huge gap to fill in the public space of North Bengal. Due to higher density of population, the competition is high in South

Bengal's Suburban and semi-urban areas. Hence, to sustain for substantial passenger share, the toto drivers, usually, have organised themselves under a stand. Independent drivers are much less in number in South Bengal than the North. These organisations are purely for 'men driving toto'. They bear the same masculine essence similar to the auto-rickshaw stands. Those stands are exclusive spaces for men, contradictory to their household. Discussions, chatting, behaviours, light moments are exclusively for men, according to them. They are not yet accustomed to mix up with women as friends. Accepting women in any of their stands is quite unthinkable for them, though they, in none of the interviews clearly confirmed this. Women driving toto, therefore, has not yet become a feature in the toto sector in South Bengal, at least the areas covered during the field work for this research.

The term 'masculinity' in the title of the research is tricky in the sense that it may initiate a binary that – auto-rickshaw is masculine and toto is non-masculine? Or feminine? Pierre Bourdieu¹⁴⁵ in his work has emphasised the deep-rooted character of patriarchy, which produces and reinvents itself through not only social relations and cultural media but also embodies habits and practices of everyday experience. In his account, masculinity and particularly the habit of masculine domination, has been hard to challenge, because it has been bound so closely both to social power and to "just how things are". Historians of masculinity have rightly drawn upon cultural

¹⁴⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *'Masculine Domination'*, Stanford University Press, 2002.

representations of manhood, masculinity, honour and the like, as research perspectives. They have tried to locate masculinity within trans-historical categories of analysis. Masculinity cannot be abstracted out of the social complex, because it only has meaning in relation to other identities of sexuality, class, age and religion. In other words, masculinity can be understood as socially constructed configurations of gender practice, created through a historical process with a global dimension¹⁴⁶. According to James Staples¹⁴⁷, men are conceived of as relatively bounded and, therefore, more impervious to risks from moving and working outside the home, physically stronger, sexually dominant, etc. In course of a random survey of the Indian men affected with leprosy in Mumbai (2006), Staples' experiences supported this list of male attributes. When he asked his respondents, what 'made a man a man', they also added 'potency' (the capacity to father children and to satisfy a woman sexually), the capacity to 'develop their families' (both financially and by directing their offspring into suitable educational opportunities and jobs), and decision-making as head of the family. Thus, the attributes he located were aspirations to hegemonic masculine ideals rather than accurate reflections of their own gendered positions, which were shaped, among other factors, by the level of their impairment and by their relative caste positions. Masculinity for most men – even middle class,

¹⁴⁶R. W. Connell, 'Change among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena', *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Spring 2005.

¹⁴⁷Staples James, 'At the intersection of disability and masculinity: exploring gender and bodily difference in India', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 2011.

upper caste, Hindu, heterosexual men – does not feel like power. Rather masculinity is experienced as an entitlement to power¹⁴⁸.

Masculinity, as used in the title, refers to certain behaviour, in the respect of power relation on the road space. The auto-rickshaw drivers survive on collective bargaining with the government and the Police. The government is usually willing to allow fare hike as per the inflation in market for the sake of middle class vote bank in the city. Though, fare in auto sector is decided by the trade union, it is evident that the trade union of the ruling party never crosses the party line. Demand for fare hike, inflation in the market which influences fuel and maintenance cost, ‘Police atrocities’¹⁴⁹, competition with other vehicles, are regular components of a driver’s life in auto-rickshaw sector. Therefore, to sustain, as claimed by most of the drivers, they become ‘rough and tough’. They abuse¹⁵⁰, they agitate, they protest, they drive rash to reach the stand at earliest, due to their context. Moreover, they have the confidence of unionisation. The organisational support is very important reason for which they can act ‘rough and tough’ on the roads. Organisation has always been an attribute of masculinity, as it stands as an indicator of power. Otherwise, the auto-rickshaw drivers are caring fathers, loveable husbands, obedient sons in their personal

¹⁴⁸Michael Kimmel, *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2005.

¹⁴⁹As claimed by the auto-rickshaw drivers during field interviews and workshops conducted by the SWS – RLS Research Project Team, from 2013 to 2015.

¹⁵⁰As claimed by several passengers during the field interviews and workshops conducted by the SWS – RLS Research Project Team, from 2013 to 2015.

sphere. They are, in fact, working in the adverse condition to support their families which is common for every informal worker.

It may be asked why the expression ‘male’ is not substituted for ‘masculine’ in the title of this dissertation. Both the sectors in fact are male dominated. Auto is exclusively male’s space, whereas toto sector, now a day, has a considerable number of women drivers in some of the districts in West Bengal. Toto, as a new sector in para-transit is yet developing and going through continuous changes. Even it is expected that the changes would differ as the sector, instead of being centralised, operates locally. But more importantly, the behavioural differences which shape the identity and nature of the sectors are the points of my interest. Clearly the work does not focus on the personal identities of the drivers being male or men. ‘Male’ is the biological identity of a human body, whereas ‘man’ is considered as a socio-cultural construct. In course of the work, I have understood that the behavioural difference of the drivers in their profession is what separates the drivers of these two sectors. The difference is mainly due to the context of their work and the organisational factor. An organised group is always prone to fight back if they are restricted for a reason which they feel unjust. Moreover, unlike other vehicles, drivers of toto in West Bengal know well that the entire trade has been tagged as ‘illegal’ as per the court’s order. Some toto drivers who mostly confine themselves within the in-roads do not need to confront other vehicles on the main or the high roads. Though, every toto driver is sustaining

through stark competition with other modes of para-transit. Now a day, that competition is more with their fellow toto drivers as the number of vehicles is multiplying rapidly throughout the state. My work hardly analyses or looks into the masculine attributes in the personal lives of the drivers of any of the sectors.

As a part of ethnography in both the sectors, I have noticed that drivers of both the sectors sustain with similar insecurities about their families. Health issues of their parents, time and care for wives, regret for their lack of higher education and salaried job, money for the education and other requirements of their children, etc. are the most common concerns of the drivers (both auto and toto). In figuring of the emotional parameters with reference to their families, drivers of both the sectors are similar. ‘Masculine labour’, as it is in the title refers to the transport work force in general as the entire transport sector is predominantly occupied by ‘men’. It goes perfectly well with the auto-rickshaw trade. Now it is the toto’s turn. There is a constant watch on how the sector develops itself. In course, it has been noticed that the sector has been able to accommodate female drivers too, which is unique.

The strength of being local: Understanding the drivers in their localities

Incidence of migration is negligible among those people. Neither any of the respondents for this research work has migrated to any place for driving toto nor any driver commute a long distance to reach his stand. Since the beginning, people

driving toto were from their localities. Relationship between the drivers and their localities has defined the sector. Auto-rickshaw was introduced in the streets of erstwhile Calcutta for the local unemployed youths. Initially when they used to travel as contract carriage, they could move to distant locations within the city. Thereafter, with the consolidation of routes and auto-rickshaw stands, auto drivers got attached with one route and stand. Many of them could not get the nearest stand from their residence and some others had chosen beneficial routes even if that was far from their residence. When some drivers started employing others to drive their vehicle, many of those new auto-drivers were not from the localities. In most of the cases, they were regular commuters from outskirts of the city.

Later more men entered into auto-rickshaw trade as drivers (not owners) who had to commute from the suburbs to reach the owner's auto stand. Even cycle rickshaws in Kolkata were mostly operated by migrants. Migration was usually from neighbouring districts and a particular state. Cycle rickshaw pullers in districts and suburbs were not always commuters or migrants. But they were not even residents of middle class localities. Rickshaw pullers were very well known to the paras or localities, but were not one of the members of the para/ locality.

Table 6: Nature of toto drivers' accommodation*				
Owns his house	Stays in rented accommodation	Stays in a Nuclear Family	Stays in a Joint Family	Stays jointly in a house with separate rooms and kitchen.
97%	3%	45%	8%	47%

*Source: Interviews of toto drivers conducted by the researcher from 2019 to 2022.

Toto drivers, in most of the cases are permanent dwellers of their para/localities, mostly owning a house. Table 6¹⁵¹ shows that 97% of the respondent drivers own their house. 45% of them live in nuclear family setups, whereas 8% live in joint family. 47% drivers live in joint family, but they have separate living room and kitchen within a single courtyard. Such a variant – living in joint family setup with separate living room and kitchen, is found more among the drivers in North Bengal. Owning a house is an important criterion of the drivers in this sector. If not, they have enough space to park the vehicle, but owning a house in a locality is necessary. It develops the sense of some amount of ownership in the driver even for his locality, as he happened to be a permanent resident for years. It helps the driver to park his vehicle somewhere around his street, if he does not have a courtyard.

¹⁵¹ Table 6 is sourced from the quantitative data of the field interviews of toto drivers, conducted by the researcher, from 2019 to 2022.

In this way, the man who drives a toto belongs to the locality. In most of the cases, the driver is a resident in his locality for years. He naturally has a claim over the locality as a resident. Since buying toto, he usually drives around his locality, excluding contracts for long distance travel. His neighbours too have developed the habit to rely on his toto for any nearby travel and emergency. These emergency situations include reaching hospital, pick-up or drop at railway station or bus stand, etc. All these have become mutual habit for the driver and his neighbours, who presently are his passengers. Even political control through agencies is always careful in interfering in spaces of such social sensitivity.

Now it is clear that though the toto drives are not unionised as their counterpart auto-rickshaw drivers, but their domestication has been their prime strength which has further facilitated the entry of women in the sector. Now an obvious question comes, if they are not unionised, are they scattered, or are they working on some other form of organising themselves? It is clear even in the initial months of 2023 that the Trade Union of ruling party has not been able to formally organise the sector. The 5th Chapter of this dissertation has discussed the politics of organisation elaborately. In South Bengal, the ruling party has been controlling the sector through its representatives in local self government, either municipality or panchayats. In Siliguri of North Bengal, this model is not at all visible, though local leaders of the ruling party have constant connections with the important toto stands.

But these are partial measures, not inclusive for the sector. Domestication of these drivers in a way has helped them to develop an identity, which is a blend of their localness and nature of profession, i.e. toto driver. Thus, a toto driver, even if he is not associated to any stand, is identified with his/ her locality by other drivers. I have noticed this among drivers in Siliguri and Narendrapur. Now, not just within own locality, but in adjacent localities too, one is identified by the other driver. Toto stand in a locality is common now a day, though every driver is not associated with a stand. Free moving drivers are more in North Bengal than the South. Therefore, on one hand, the drivers maintain their stand as they have an authority in their para. On the other hand, those who are not a member of a stand are also familiar due to his/her locality or para. Thus, not only the society has domesticated the vehicle and the drivers but also has enabled them to have a sense of bonding. Though, this is not at all formal or tangible as Union, but this bonding makes sense for which the sector is successfully surviving despite severe informality. Domestication of toto has been an intangible aspect which has partially supplemented the absence of formal unionisation.

Media representation: Toto drivers and their society

Role of media has also been significant in the development of any sector of public transport. Now a day, there are too many pages in social media promoting flights, luxury vessels and trains. Print media in West Bengal has always been wide awake in

reporting on the public vehicles. Those reports and documentations on toto drivers in West Bengal, placed chronologically, give a historical trajectory of that sector. The first part of this chapter has narrated the media representation of auto-rickshaw and the relationship of the sector with media. The second and fourth chapters have discussions of media representation of the toto sector and their politics respectively. From the experience in auto-rickshaw, it can be said that media representation capable of affecting a sector tremendously, even more when the sector is illegal or para-legal. Media have reported on the rapid growth of toto causing severe traffic congestion, clash between auto-rickshaw and toto drivers, rickshaw and toto drivers. The issue of ‘illegal toto, legal e-rickshaw’ has been reported frequently. But in this case, media has not been able to clarify the qualitative difference between the two. Mostly the difference between toto and e-rickshaw have been reported in such a way that a common reader would understand both as similar only with or without government’s authorisation. The fourth chapter discusses how the media has imposed a stereotypical ‘trade union’ in toto sector, when the sector is not yet organised formally. But, it is the media reports, which gives a picture about the existence of uncontrolled and localised rent seeking. But frequent news of the vehicle has introduced the vehicle with those who had never travelled by a toto. For example, tourists who travel other places in North Bengal, apart from the hills, now a day, always search for tolos, because it is cheaper and easily available. The lockdown phase has been a boon for the toto

drivers. When almost every sector has experienced loss of labour force, toto sector increased its volume in the state. The media has been supportive to the sector in a sense that reports of individual toto drivers serving their localities have made headlines. Mostly the stories of female drivers got obvious attention as their entry in public transport sector is a new phenomenon. News of young job aspirants driving toto, female drivers, aged drivers have got attention. Such news reports usually develop sympathy among the citizens for a trade. Media reports informed us how people are entering this trade to sustain their families. We have been informed that most of the young drivers who could not find a suitable job have chosen to buy a toto for a respectable living. We have come to know that they are not just drivers but aspiring students, helpless daughters and wives, lonely aged men who have taken up toto driving as their livelihood. Though, in an intellectual system where the intellect flows from Kolkata, the capital city, which itself is not congested by unauthorised totos, can be sympathetic toward the toto drivers. But in case of auto-rickshaw members of the civil society had to get into those vehicles regularly or sometimes, they drove through the roads jam packed by auto-rickshaws and lastly inhaled the emissions caused by the burning of '*kata-tel*' (fuel) in two stroke auto-rickshaws. Those might be reasons; some of them went to the court against the vehicle and the judiciary and executive ensured the ban simultaneously. Though, the issue of increasing pollution level due to '*kata-tel*' was undeniably serious. As described in

the first chapter, toto was hit by the directions of lower courts within a year of its introduction. Gradually, the High Court also wanted the government to ban toto. But by that time, people in the districts started to depend on toto and thousands of families had found their livelihood in the sector. Apart from reports on the working of the sector, the media represented stories of hardships of the drivers.

Sheela Banerjee, a journalist settled in the West, returned to her home town, Chandannagore and took a toto trip to revisit the places of her childhood but discovered changes everywhere. Her memoir of the trip was published in *The Guardian*¹⁵². During the trip, she recalled the conditions of cycle-rickshaw pullers – ‘a thin, wiry man, sweating and probably tired from pedalling all day to earn a living’. She was amazed to see toto in the city, which was a battery operated, pollution free vehicle and perhaps a reliable way to counter climate change. She noticed that totes had become ‘part of the economic setup of a place such as Chandannagar’ and were used by every commuter irrespective of their class. In the memoir, she narrated how a group of young men were struggling to revive their future by driving toto. According to her, toto had set forward a new era by changing the nature of intermediate transport.

Ah, so that’s what these electric vehicles are called: Totos. We clamber onto one: the driver is in the front and we are on cushioned benches facing one another at the back. My daughter loves it. Soon we

¹⁵² *The Guardian*, ‘Taking a Toto trip in West Bengal: an electric rickshaw adventure ride’, 1 August 2019.

are weaving through the streets, just like I used to as a child on an old-fashioned rickshaw. She loves the open sides and we look out onto the wide expanse of the brown-grey Hooghly River, go past fuchka-wallahs selling snacks of puffed wheat balls and spiced chickpeas. We hang on with a sense of fairground thrill, as the driver rides perilously close to some open drains at our side.¹⁵³

During lockdown, ‘Munia Di’ had become a familiar name in print media. Even ANI reported how the ‘first female toto driver in Siliguri’ ferried COVID patients free of cost during the lockdown¹⁵⁴. Even she did the same to those who wanted to reach health centres for vaccination. *Anandabazar Patrika* made a report on her on the eve of Women’s Day and described her as the first female toto driver in Siliguri as well as a social activist¹⁵⁵.

Case of a veteran female driver of Jalpaiguri, Putul Raut, was reported during the initial days of lock down¹⁵⁶. Earlier she worked as an agent in Sarada, a micro finance company. Not only the job, she even lost her savings in the Sarada scam. She had been driving toto since 2014 to support her family consisting of seven members. The news story was about the severe uncertainty of toto drivers during the first few weeks of lockdown. In general, toto drivers, during lockdown, were active in serving people of their localities in different ways. Another toto driver, Birju Shau, from

¹⁵³ Sheela Banerjee, *The Guardian*, ‘Taking a Toto trip in West Bengal: an electric rickshaw adventure ride’, 1 August 2019.

¹⁵⁴ ANI, ‘Munmun Sarkar, first woman e-rickshaw driver in North Bengal, provides free service to COVID-19 patients’, 7 June 2021.

¹⁵⁵ *Anandabazar Patrika*, Women’s Day Special, 8 March 2022.

¹⁵⁶ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 3 April 2020.

Durgapur appeared in the news, whose son was appearing for higher secondary examinations. He too offered 24x7 free services to the COVID patients¹⁵⁷.

Even before the lockdown phase, in 2019, Times of India reported similar news¹⁵⁸. 38 year old Biren Das, a driver, became popular in Naihati (North 24 Parganas) as 'Toto Sanyasi'. Apart from driving for livelihood, he used his vehicle to transport 'elders, pregnant women and sick' free of cost. In his locality, his vehicle became famous as 'toto ambulance'. All those news, apart from reporting social contributions, described the financial struggle and insecurity of these drivers.

Not only social activists, even educated drivers got media attention. The Indian Express reported a young driver from Liluah in Howrah district. Sankalan Sarkar who had to discontinue his formal education due to financial difficulty, was offering free rides to those passengers who could answer his questions on general knowledge. Anandabazar Patrika reported Bisnupada Mandal, a toto driver from Hasnabad, who had started a nursery school with two teachers and an attendant¹⁵⁹. His initiative facilitated those children from poor families in his locality, who earlier, could only dream for nursery school. According to the news, 50 children were studying in the school. Bisnupada, a graduate of Taki College, got assistance from his fellow drivers and the ex-chairman of Taki municipality to develop the school.

¹⁵⁷ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 30 March 2020.

¹⁵⁸ *The Times of India*, 'Toto Sanyasi: Man who runs e-rickshaw ambulance in Bengal', 17 October 2019.

¹⁵⁹ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 27 December 2019.

Media reports on female toto drivers are mention worthy. People in the state got to know about many women, who became toto drivers mostly due to financial crisis. In 2016, a 23 year old student of Katwa College, Supriya Roy, appeared in the news. She was driving toto since 2014 due to sudden illness of her father who was a day labour¹⁶⁰. She faced rejection of passengers in the initial years when toto itself was new on the roads. She was left with no choice other than driving toto to support her sister's education and father's illness. According to the news, 'secretary of the local toto union, Gautam Das' (not sure what the report meant by toto union) appreciated her effort and expected more women to take up the profession. Undoubtedly the report on Supriya was remarkable.

A disheartening report in Uttar Banga Sambad was about a toto driver, Krishna Kanta Das, who could not support his daughter's further studies. His daughter, Mampi Das was a second year student of Geography Honours in Chanchal College in Malda. Though she qualified for the admission in a nursing training college, but her father's income was not adequate to support her. Another report was on Anjali Das, a female driver from Uluberia¹⁶¹. The report narrated the condition of Anjali's family in the aftermath of COVID lockdown. She started driving a rented toto since lockdown and had to pay Rs. 200 daily to the owner of the vehicle. She could earn Rs. 5000 to Rs. 6000 per month. Her husband lost his job during lockdown

¹⁶⁰ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 6 September 2016.

¹⁶¹ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 2 February 2021.

and mother was suffering from mental illness. Her sister, who lost her husband during COVID was staying with them with her son. Her family survived in a single rented room which was not even a proper house.

Putul Rajwar, female toto driver from Purulia entered the profession due to the demise of her husband¹⁶². She was widowed with two children. She received a toto from a NGO in her town. The District Magistrate himself took the first ride in her toto. Putul had to charge the battery of the vehicle in the NGO office because there was no electricity in her house. Anandabazar Patrika also reported a case where a female toto driver was molested by a policeman at Netaji More in Siliguri¹⁶³. The same Bengali daily reported the case of Tama Dutta. She was a student of B.A. third year, in Bengali Department of Srirampore College, a renowned under-graduate institution in South Bengal¹⁶⁴. She had opted for the profession as her father, a vegetable seller, was no longer capable of working. These are a few among the series of media reports on female toto drivers. Undoubtedly, series of such reports was successful in documenting a new phenomenon in the history of public transport of the state.

Some other stories of responsible drivers were also highlighted by the media.

Dardis, a veteran driver from Beldanga, offered free ride for handicapped

¹⁶² *Anandabazar Patrika*, 25 December 2018.

¹⁶³ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 24 May 2015.

¹⁶⁴ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 17 November 2022.

passengers¹⁶⁵. Najmul Sheikh of Naoda had returned a bag full of money to one of his passengers¹⁶⁶. Another driver, Tutun Dutta, from Jalpaiguri, returned a money bag to its owner¹⁶⁷. In Raiganj, Nitai Rabidas has been felicitated by the local administration for returning a female passenger's jewellery, mobile phone and cash¹⁶⁸. Instead of demonstrating against the Zila Parishad, a group of toto drivers in Meteli Block, Jalpaiguri district voluntarily took the charge to repair a road in their locality¹⁶⁹. That road with several potholes had become disastrous for every commuter. When involvement of ruling party leaders in various scams have become a regular topic in the media reports, then Sukhen Debsharma deserves special mention. He was the Upa-Pradhan of Surun II Panchayat of North Dinajpur district. He won the election in 2018 but continued to drive toto. According to him, the money he received as honorarium from the office was not enough to support his family. Despite some news on clash with drivers of other vehicles or misbehaving or creating traffic congestion, media in West Bengal have mostly reported the toto drivers as responsible, struggling, compassionate, helpful, etc. Toto, as a sector has been represented as inclusive for both passengers and drivers. Inclusiveness of the trade can be understood in two aspects - people from every class can hire a toto and women can choose toto driving as a profession.

¹⁶⁵ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 17 August 2017.

¹⁶⁶ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 7 June 2017.

¹⁶⁷ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 4 October 2016.

¹⁶⁸ *Uttar Banga Sambad*, March 2022.

¹⁶⁹ *Uttar Banga Sambad*, September 2022.

Family, Locality and the Class Question: Accounts of toto drivers

This section is a brief documentation of what the drivers said during interviews and ethnography. Sometimes the drivers could not respond to question when asked in a group. In course of this work, I have talked to some of the drivers again when they were alone. This hesitating behaviour was found more during questions on rent and politics. They have much aspiration about the sector. As of now, they concentrate on the daily earning, scope of work in their locality and the time which they can spend with their families.

Umesh Pal¹⁷⁰ (47 years old) drives his own toto since the lockdown. Earlier he was a construction labour. He was jobless for a long time during the lockdown. Somehow he managed his household during that time. His family had some savings from Umesh and his wife's contribution. His wife works as a cook in a residential complex and has a tailoring business. Umesh owns his house and land in Champasari.

Bhola Sarkar¹⁷¹ (30 years old) earns Rs. 500 – Rs 1000 each day. The earning decreases during rainy days. During festivals, similar to others, earnings reach much beyond the average. During initial months of lockdown, the drivers survived on their savings and credit from local vendors. He admitted that he saves some amount of his monthly income, but does not deposit the savings in Bank or post office. He spends

¹⁷⁰ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in November 2021.

¹⁷¹ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in November. 2021.

Rs. 50 per day for charging toto's battery. Otherwise there is no such huge expenditure for his vehicle unless it meets any major accident.

His mother receives pension from West Bengal Government's Old Age Pension Scheme. Bhola, his mother and wife have Swatha Swathi Card. They both are home-makers. His mother spends the Scheme's money (Rs. 1000) for her monthly medical necessities. His daughter, who is in class 1, has a private tutor, charging Rs. 400 per month. His daughter is 5/6 years old, but his wife is not yet 22/23. I got to know this during discussions on whether his wife was eligible for '*Lokkhir Bhandar Scheme*'.

Asish Dey¹⁷² (34 years old) owns 3 '*kathas*' of land and a house. His savings are not uniform in every month. He lives with his wife and son. His son is studying in class 7. Maintenance of toto costs him 1 thousand rupees per month approximately. He spends 9 to 10 thousand rupees monthly for his household. He is convinced that drivers in Siliguri can manage their household by driving toto. He saves a good amount of money for his wife's medical treatment. They usually visit Vellore once in a year for medical treatment. It is evident from his expenditures that he earns way more than Rs. 15000 as he has deployed another 4 wheeler for commercial use.

Similar to Bhola Sarkar, Asish believes that one individual owning multiple tolos is the reason for rapid increase of toto on the road. He says that 1 family should

¹⁷² Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021.

own 1 toto for its livelihood. In Siliguri and Dooars region, a family with 3 or 4 members can manage their bread and household by driving toto. His principle of ‘1 family, 1 toto’, may facilitate thousands of families to earn their bread from this sector. His son is in class 7 and wife is a home-maker. Asish is a frequent visitor to Vellore for the treatment of his wife.

Asish believes that the sector is transforming yet and therefore flexible, not featured by ‘powerful’ (masculine?) organisation similar to other transport sector trade unions. Even connection with any stand is not mandatory, till date (December, 2022). Police harassment is negligible as the vehicle mostly runs within inner roads and lanes. Siliguri City Police harasses those who ply on the main roads. He accepts that toto’s area of operation, which is close to community/ *para*, has strengthened its operational base and has made it inclusive in multiple senses.

Debasish Halder¹⁷³ (32 years old) lives with his mother and sister and owns the house at Debi Danga (Champasari). Apart from driving toto, he is into tailoring works accompanied by his mother. They do this from their home. They do not have any separate outlet. His sister is a private tutor and teaches 3/ 4 primary students. His family earns Rs. 6000 to Rs. 7000 per month from tailoring works. Though, orders are not regular in every month. Few months in a year go without any order. He has studied till class 7 and was not good at studies. He wishes to continue in driving

¹⁷³Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021

profession. Earlier he used to spend his entire salary i.e. Rs. 14000 for his monthly household necessities.

Parinam Ghosh¹⁷⁴ (58 years old) fortunately is associated with the Court more stand in Siliguri, which is one of the few spaces in the city with maximum footfalls of regular commuters. But due to the presence of several government offices, surveillance of the Metropolitan Police is customary. Sometimes the drivers are threatened to be thrown out from that space permanently¹⁷⁵. This uncertainty is the biggest threat in their life. Similar to him, there are a few other drivers in the Court More stand, who pay house rent in Siliguri and take care of their wives and children. Parinam babu's rented accommodation is in Aurobindo Pally for which he pays Rs

Table 7: An outline of the income and expenditures of the toto drivers*							
Daily earning	Monthly earning	Expenditure for Family	Monthly Maintenance	Other expenditure such as paying rent to the local party leaders or the Police	Yearly expenditure for the vehicle	Monthly saving	Any other expenditure, such as payment of EMI
Rs. 500 – Rs. 700	Rs. 14000 – Rs. 18000	Rs. 10000 – Rs. 12000	Rs. 1000 – Rs. 1500	Most of the drivers denied any such expenditure	Rs. 25000 – Rs. 40000 to change the vehicle's battery	Rs. 1000 – Rs. 2000 for purchasing the battery and other massive repairing	Rs. 2000 – Rs. 3000

*Source: Interviews of the toto drivers conducted by the researcher from 2019 to 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Though during my interviews in suburban and rural West Bengal, most of the drivers hardly mentioned about any case of regular Police harassment, apart from confiscation of tolos in large number by the Siliguri Police, once in one or two years.

5000 per month. His daughter is newly married. His elder son, who is also a driver, but not in this sector, is also married and lives separately. His youngest son is studying in class 12. His present toto is 12 to 18 months old. His earlier toto, which he bought 5/ 6 years back, was of Rs. 85000. His wife is a home-maker.

He comes to the stand in the morning and returns in the evening. He buys his lunch from any pice hotel. His daily earning ranges from Rs. 600 to Rs. 700. He has rented a garage for Rs. 900, per month for his toto and spends approximately Rs. 70 per day for charging the vehicle. After 1 year he will be paying more for daily charging. He has calculated an approximate monthly expenditure of Rs. 20000 to Rs. 22000 for his private and professional life. Madan Ghosh¹⁷⁶ (47 years old) owns a portion of his paternal house. His father was in government service. He lives with his son and wife, who is a homemaker. Toto drivers usually find spaces in their '*para*'(localities), therefore usually they do not face objection from the neighbours. As the spaces are not on or around the main roads, Police or Municipality hardly bother them. I have mentioned this earlier, that this 'closeness' and 'operation' in and around the '*para*'/ locality is a vital feature which safeguards the interest of the vehicle and the drivers.

I have got another interesting facet from him in regard to this '*para*' from Madan. He is disappointed with the fact that no one has came for their help during the

¹⁷⁶ Name changed; Interviewed by the researcher, in December 2021.

lockdown¹⁷⁷. On the contrary, I know from my brother, who lives in the same para, that there had been many help in regard to daily ration, other food ingredients, sanitary pad for the women, medicines, etc. have been offered from the ruling party's office in the vicinity. Those who were associated with that activity were all party members from that locality. Madan could not stand the queue for those helps as he himself is from the same para and that would hamper his 'prestige'. This explanation, allows me to think in a different line apart from the benefit of the driver for being close to the para. I derive two observations. Either, toto is the emerging symbol of economic escalation for a 'lower middle class' family or such families where Madan Ghosh belongs, who have a house with land and men in service (Government/private), are afraid of class exclusion i.e. fear of getting excluded from the 'middle class'. Here, the nature and scope of middle class varies from urban, suburban and rural Bengal. The class consciousness which I observed among the auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata does not match qualitatively with that of the toto drivers in suburban or rural Bengal.

Narayan Saha¹⁷⁸ is around 62 year old and is living in Dabgram for last 40 years. He is driving toto for last 5 years. He is associated with the TMC More Stand and also with the Court More Stand. Earlier he could build a house on the banks of

¹⁷⁷ In fact, restrictions were comparatively mild on the totes as in most of the cases they were hired by hospital visitors, market visitors or commuters of emergency services. Moreover their services were more within the localities. They had always tried to avoid main roads during the lockdown.

¹⁷⁸ Name changed; interviewed by the researcher in November 2021.

Jorapani River which got flooded and the family had to move. Since then the family is surviving in a rented house. He is one of the very few drivers (whom I met in North Bengal) who do not own a house or land. He has three sons and his wife is mentally retarded for a decade. Narayan was a cycle-rickshaw puller. Even before that he worked as a truck driver. He has been able to educate his three sons till 10th standard. The elder two sons got trained as tailors. 12 years back both of them joined ISKCON. Now Narayan lives with his wife only because his youngest son, who is now married with a child, has chosen to live in another rented accommodation nearby. Narayan's wife is home-maker. During the COVID induced lockdown, he survived on his younger son. Though his son's workplace was closed, but the employer paid him regularly in the lockdown. His youngest son works in a jewellery shop. He does not want his son to drive toto as he considers as not a good sector.

Suvojit Bardhan¹⁷⁹ (49 year old) is originally from Maynaguri and presently lives in Suryanagar Dabgram with his mother, wife, daughter and son. His son is a special child and is admitted in a school for special children. His daughter is now in class 1. He was stuck up in Bangalore for four months during the initial lockdown phase. He had to sell his paternal house and vehicle for his son's treatment. Still he has been able to admit his son in a school of special children. His daughter is in standard one.

¹⁷⁹ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021

During his 4 wheeler driving days, he used to be late every day. He could not spend time with his family and was getting addicted to alcohol. He entered into this toto sector as he was looking for something less hazardous and less prone to accident. He could spend much more time with his family by working in this sector. He had to spend Rs. 50000/-, five years back for buying his toto without number plate from another owner. Presently he has been able to buy 2 kathas of land and built a tin-roofed house. He has 2 LIC policies and can save 2/3 thousand rupees per month despite spending 15/16 thousand of rupees in a month for overall expenditure. Most of the toto drivers in Siliguri, including Suvojit take periodic loans from Bandhan Bank for huge expenditures such as buying the battery of toto which may cost Rs. 30000 to 40000.

His mother does not get any monetary help from the State government's schemes. His son (specially abled) gets aid of Rs. 1000 per month. His wife is receiving money through 'Lokkhir Bhandar' scheme (Rs. 500). His wife is a homemaker. He himself saves Rs. 300 per day for his vehicle. Though he is an owner, still he saves the money which a driver gives every day to the owner. This amount helps him not only in vehicle's maintenance but also in household expenditures. He is satisfied in this profession.

Rahul Mohammad¹⁸⁰ (31 year old) lives with his mother, wife, two daughter, elder sister and brother-in-law. Their house is built on a land of 7/8 *kathas*¹⁸¹. His brother-in-law is a construction labour. Rahul has two LIC policies; otherwise he is not able to save any amount. Those two LICs are for the marriage of two daughters. The elder one is 7 years and the younger one is 3 years old. They get free ration from the government. Otherwise they are not benefitted by any other government's schemes. Rahul, being a Muslim, participates in the Viswakarma Puja in their stand. He does not know anyone in around who owns multiple totos and has appointed drivers.

Mustafa Ahmed¹⁸² (35 year old) owns his own land and lives with his wife, mother and three daughters. Two of them are going to schools. His eldest daughter has appeared for the Higher Secondary examination and the next one is in class six. They have received every financial aid allotted by the West Bengal Government for girl child. As he is not educated, he therefore wants his daughter to pursue higher studies and look for jobs. Even he is convinced with the fact that his daughter can skip marriage for family or job, if she wants to. Then he says that if the girl gets a good job, she will get a good groom. At last he says that marriage is important.

¹⁸⁰ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021.

¹⁸¹ 1 katha is equal to 2880 square feet in West Bengal.

¹⁸² Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021.

Aurobindo Roy¹⁸³ (50 year old) lives with his wife and daughter. His daughter is in class 9. He aspires for his daughter's good career and job. Aurobindo pays Rs 7500, per month to pay the interest of Bandhan's loan. In case of small amount, the loan is granted from Bandhan Group, whereas larger amount is granted from the bank. Though not sure, Aurobindo says that the interest rate is 6% in Bandhan Bank. He is driving toto since 2015. He is a graduate from Mal College. Earlier he served as Panchayat Pradhan during the Left Front's regime

Samir Debnath¹⁸⁴ (45 Year old) is living in Chalsa for last 17 years. He has his roots in Maynaguri. He has two daughters, one is in 8th standard and the other is in nursery. He spends the morning in his shop. After 12 noon, he starts driving toto. He returns home in the evening. He keeps a fund of Rs. 1700, per month, for maintenance and charging the vehicle. His monthly expenditure for his family is approximately Rs. 10000, which includes food, education, maintenance of vehicle, etc. He personally has a social contribution. During Madhyamik of 2019, he carried the students from their house to examination centres, without any fare.

Malay Dey¹⁸⁵ (48 year old), a permanent resident of Panihati Sodepur, is driving toto since 2018. Earlier he had no fixed profession. He lives in a house on 5 kathas of land with his parents, wife and son. His father is a retired government

¹⁸³ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in December 2021.

¹⁸⁴ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in November 2021.

¹⁸⁵ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in June 2019.

employee surviving on pension. Malay has got a fixed source of income and stability due to toto. His wife is a broker in renting and purchasing residential properties. They spend huge money for Kojagari Laxmi Puja, every year in their house. He himself has studied till class 11 and his son is studying in class 9. Malay wants his son to pursue B.Tech. after higher secondary examination. He lives in a para/ locality which was a refugee colony in 1950s. Presently, that para houses people of different professions ranging from teachers in school and colleges, government employees to shop owners, businessman, etc.

Most of the drivers of Malay's stand in Sahid Colony, Panihati live in such localities. Gadan Sarkar¹⁸⁶ (43 year old) is a close neighbour. He lives next to two houses beside Malay's residence. He does not own much ancestral property, but his son and wife, both are working. Therefore, they could earn close to Rs. 40000 to Rs. 50000 per month. Presently his family consists of his wife, son and daughter-in-law. Gadan's elder sister, who had married a local shop owner, has now bought an apartment in a stand-alone building beside their plot. Gadan's elder son works in Airtel as a technician, which is a salaried job. Gadan also sells flower in the morning as a side business. Gadan's family still uses the local pool for washing clothes and bathing. That pool is traditionally used by every member of the locality for those purposes. Some people gradually left that habit due to an upward mobility of their

¹⁸⁶ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in June 2019.

class. All the toto drivers of his stand are close associates of the local councillor (TMC) who lives in the same para. Due to this, they have availed almost all the schemes of the West Bengal government for their families. Usually the affluent class in the urban areas hardly avail the schemes. Those schemes are actually meant for the poor and lower middle class. But with those aids from the West Bengal government, such families, could improve their economic condition and aspire for an upward mobility of class.

Swapan Sarkar¹⁸⁷ (28 year old) lives with his parents and elder brother in Narendrapur. Their house has enough land around to maintain a kitchen garden. Earlier Swapan was involved in a business which he had to give up. Two brothers drive the same toto in the day and evening. Apart from this, they have a business of water supply. They sell 20 litre jars of drinking water in the locality, mostly in the residential complexes. Swapan, being an extrovert man, can mix up with the apartment dwellers and often gets the long distance contracts.

Despite being a staunch CPIM supporter, he and his brother are associated with the local sub-stand and the main stand which is taken care of by the local TMC Councillor. The locality where he lives has two types of residents, one, those who own apartments in three residential complexes and the other, those who own houses on 3/4 kathas of land. Members of both the groups mix up with each other regularly

¹⁸⁷ Name changed; Interview conducted by the researcher in September 2022.

in the evening or in social events. A severe class gap is not at all visible in his locality. Most of the toto drivers in his sub-stand are residents of the same para and share a usual social bonding. Most of the toto drivers in the sub-stand own a motor bike. Swapan is a bachelor. He has no other plan for future. He thinks that he has time, but as of now, he wants to continue with toto. It is safer and keeps him close to his family.

Aforesaid cases draw an outline of the socio-economic conditions of the toto drivers. Aspiration for middle class identity ranges throughout the sector in different density. Despite difference of densities, commonality of criteria shapes the nature of toto drivers' class identity. Most of the toto drivers have school education, some of them are graduates. But they are very keen regarding the education of their wives and children. '*Chele/ Meye ke porashuno koratei hobe*', 'boy/ girl child's education should be continued at any cost' is a common concern of every father in this sector. They are not at all willing about their children entering into any other labour sector. Moreover they expect a '*chakri*' or salaried job for their next generation. In this regard, they are similar to auto-rickshaw drivers of Kolkata. Staying close to the family and looking after the education of children are important concerns for the drivers.

Thus from the urge to migrate for the sake of higher pay to staying in his locality and spending quality time with family is the trend in toto sector. As discussed earlier, living within the locality not only benefits the family, but mostly strengthen

the operational base of the sector. Craving for a safe and peaceful life if not lavish or luxurious is very common among a section of urban Bengali middle class. This mentality is a distinguishing feature among the toto drivers of the districts I have surveyed.

In the districts of North Bengal, the Bandhan Bank fulfils their need for credit card, which, now a day, is common among the urban middle class. Apart from their own savings, toto drivers are in a habit of borrowing ‘thousands to lakhs’ from the finance company which has now become a bank. With the help of that loan, a driver repairs his house, buy jewellery for daughter’s marriage, buy commodities such as Smart TV, micro-oven, scooter, etc. Once a loan is repaid, they apply for another loan and such a ‘vicious’ cycle continues in the lives of these drivers. Such loans undoubtedly support this group of people and help them to avail comforts which are common in a middle class household in urban or suburban Bengal. They are not vocal about their middle class identity. During the auto-rickshaw experience, ‘we are also Bhadrak’’, i.e. respectable Bengali gentlemen, was common in a conversation. While, during toto interviews, this status was hardly claimed distinctly by them. They have a presumption that they are a part of the middle class. Moreover, ‘*Bhadrak*’ identity in suburban or rural Bengal is not that particularly pertaining to higher education and rich sense of culture. It depends on certain decisive factors such as owning a house, a source of income, if not particularly chakri or salaried job,

connection with education, conventional family, etc. Toto drivers mostly possess all these attributes.

Further, the contradiction, which was evident among the auto-rickshaw drivers are absent in them. On one hand, the auto-rickshaw drivers, during interviews, have strongly raised their claim to be '*bhadralok*', on the other hand, they identify themselves with labour identity which developed with their 'Unionisation'. Influence of trade union movement through decades, have developed this sense of identity among the auto-rickshaw drivers. In this context, I would like to refer to Ritwik Ghatak's film '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*', which has a scene where female protagonist Nita's father was asking about her brother's new job. Nita's family, which was an affluent family before 1947, was then struggling with chronic poverty in a refugee colony, in the outskirt of Calcutta. Knowing the nature of her brother's new job as a worker, her father expressed his severe disappointment through the word 'labour?'. This is how the middle class aspiration has shaped their desired profession. Though, later on public sector heavy industries and their highly privileged workers (service men) have been successful in changing the perspective of middle class aspirations regarding professions. The construction of a middle class professional excludes any form of menial labour¹⁸⁸. Even physical labour is not desired among middle class profession. Panchali Ray has shown that doctors despite their professional necessities

¹⁸⁸Panchali Ray: 'Is This Even Work?': Nursing Care and Stigmatised Labour, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, No. 47, pp. 60-69, November 19, 2016.

for body touch, bandaging wounds, etc. are revered as demi-gods, where as the nurses and the attendants are situated at lower and lowest strata of desirability respectively. Body touch or bandaging wounds are overlooked in case of the doctors as medical practicing involves intellect and super skill. Best students choose medical science in under-graduation. Samita Sen has explained how not indulging into physical work but employing someone for physical work such as domestic work has been historically a benchmark of upper caste middle class societies¹⁸⁹. Moreover the passengers of the auto-rickshaw drivers have always made them feel that they are not at par with them in regard to class. This chapter has already discussed that how hostile passengers in Kolkata and the media have portrayed the auto-drivers as hooligans, therefore villains, which had let their aspiration of upward mobility of class go down. The narrative of auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata has been shaped in this contradiction between their labour identity and aspiration for upward class mobility.

The toto drivers have been fortunate enough in this regard. Their sector has grown in the rural and suburban areas respectively. Therefore, the boundaries of middle class have never been stringent for them. Rather owning a toto as well as a house on one hand and giving up earlier laborious jobs on the other hand have helped those drivers to consider themselves as a part of the middle class. This consolidation of identity has resisted Madan Ghosh of Siliguri to stand in a queue to receive aids

¹⁸⁹ Samita Sen: *Women's Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

distributed by the local club during lockdown. Another driver from Narendrapur claimed that they as rickshaw pullers used to ask for extra money from their passengers during the Durga Puja. They had given up that practice since buying toto – *‘ekhon toto kenar por theke osob korina’*/ ‘after buying toto, we gave up those habits.’ Here by ‘osob’, he meant that/ those practice of asking for more money during Puja. The tone of the driver clearly reflected a sense that the practice is no more desired once they have bought toto.

Due to the absence of unionisation and drivers’ movement, the toto drivers have never been in any practice of identifying themselves as labours/ workers. Moreover, the sector is still devoid of any owner-driver relationship as noticed in auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. In auto-rickshaw sector of Kolkata, cases can be found where an individual owns multiple auto-rickshaws. Some of the owners drive their vehicles and some are into different professions. Therefore the sector has three types of people, driver-owner, only owners and only drivers. As per the practice, all three types of people are directly connected to the stand and the union. Stratification exists even within the sector.

Majority of the toto drivers in entire North Bengal, as well as in the surveyed areas of South Bengal are owners of their own vehicles. Asish Dey of Siliguri has been vocal about ‘1 driver 1 toto’ which can do justice for those who are planning to enter into the sector. Rare presence of separate owner and driver has been a notable

feature of toto sector. Very few drivers are not owners. But in those cases, owners are not usually connected to the sector directly. As there is no formal organisation, therefore hardly there is any necessity for an owner to remain connected to that union for the sake of his vehicle. Each driver, owning and driving a toto, considers himself as an owner and his profession as a business. Though, reportedly, an individual buying multiple totes and deploying them in the sector for money is rarely found or heard in course of my field work. I have come across two drivers in Siliguri who do not own their vehicle. Even their owners have only one toto. Therefore, the sector has not yet become a space for investing money for business. Mostly, a driver supports his family by the earning from toto driving. The drivers consider that their totes are their business, which they own, provide service to the passengers, as done in any service related business. Therefore onof the contradictions, which was evident in auto-rickshaw sector, between the identities of working class and middle class, is absent in this sector. The drivers do not usually consider them as labours in transport sector. As mentioned earlier, they consider the trade as their business and toto is the symbol of their ownership. They consider themselves more as service providers. This identity of service provider has been instilled among them during the lockdown.

The middle class in urban, suburban and rural spaces have expanded itself in a massively since the last two decades as a result of economic development in India. A similar phenomenon can be noticed in West Bengal. Due to a few specific

professions, a section of the class has reached a new height of comfort and luxury. Though, visible more in the urban spaces, IT sector employees, Sales and Management employees, government school and college teachers, have achieved such a level of financial capacity that they can assure a niche life style as projected in the market. Well-furnished apartments, cars in the parking space, shopping from the retail store, private events are some of the criteria to ascertain their new height within the class. Many of those new achievers have grown up in struggling middle class families in 90s. Now with their earned capacity, they can survive at a higher stratum of the middle class. The economic development in the last two decades in India has enabled another section of people to be identified with the middle class. Apart from this, those who could not achieve the higher stratum, but grew up in middle class families, continued to exist somewhere in the periphery of the middle class.

Table 8: Educational Qualification of toto drivers*				
	Class 10	Class 12	Graduate	Post Graduate
In North Bengal	17%	77%	6%	0%
In South Bengal	3%	87%	10%	0%

*Source: Interviews of toto drivers conducted by the researcher from 2019 to 2022.

Eventually, as the market has desired, the middle class has evolved itself into a 'grand' phenomenon. In the spaces within districts, the identifications of the middle

class are not that intense as in Metropolitan Kolkata. Therefore, people from backgrounds such as small businessmen, owner of vehicle/s, shopkeepers, private sector employees, etc. can be identified as a part of the class as they can provide a presentable life if not a lifestyle to them and their families. This section of the class has always been keen to uphold the rich Bengali culture. The culture has historically been an assurance for the class identity. In Bengal, the construction of *Bhadralok* identity has always been in deep connection with culture of the land. Not only financial strength, but education and culture are two prime aspect of the *bhadralok* identity. The section, which is not able to sustain in the upper strata, for the sake of maintaining the class identity, has always nurtured the culture and education. Though the educational qualification of majority of the drivers is not a middle class attribute in West Bengal, but their commitment for the education of their children certainly proves their connection with the middle class.

As of now, toto as a trade is providing a peaceful life though with limited financial capacity for the drivers in the districts. With that capacity they can adjust comfortably in the standard of living in the districts of West Bengal. The trade has also prevented migration up to certain extent. Drivers, such as Rahul Mohammed, Swapan Sarkar, and some other respondents have given up their plan to migrate out of their locality or city in search of a better option. Within the age group till 35 years, most of the drivers had plans to try their luck somewhere out of the state. Though the

drivers who are above 40 and were employed somewhere before, are not willing to leave their families and localities.

Conclusion

Two sectors, one time tasted and the other is still developing. One has worked for more than four decades with para-legalities, while the other has been tagged as illegal within a year or two of its genesis. Recently, the central government is working on its policy to ban government owned vehicles which are 15 year old¹⁹⁰. Moreover, in the last year, there was a news for a very short span of time about the State Transport Department's plan to introduce electric auto-rickshaws (e-autos) in the city and had initiated talks with a few companies to understand the cost involved in replacing the existing three-wheelers (auto-rickshaws) with the new one (e-autos)¹⁹¹. As per the report, the transport department had been considering to allow around 400 e-autos on routes around Dakshineswar, Noapara, Bengal Chemical, Central Park and Swabhum Metro Station. Now it is known to all about the Central and the State Government proposed plan for promoting e-vehicles in the cities and metropolitans. Though toto, as of now, has an 'illegal' status, but every stakeholder believes that there would be a way out to resolve the crisis. After all, in India, the Executive rules. Therefore, on one hand, it can be assumed that the auto-rickshaw drivers who are aware are in pressure.

¹⁹⁰ *The Indian Express*, 'All government vehicles older than 15 years to be scrapped from April: Centre', 27 January 2023.

¹⁹¹ Kinsuk Basu, *The Telegraph Online*, My Kolkata, 'West Bengal govt plans to roll out e-autos for Metro connectivity', 21 July 2022.

On the other hand, those who are in toto sector, know that at least for the next 3/ 4 years they have to depend on their local leaders and administration to ply. The dilemmas of the drivers can be understood more in the fourth chapter, which discusses the politics in these two sectors. Hence, socio-cultural expectations of the population are reflected in their politics.

Chapter 5

Informal politics and informal labour

Political parties, pressure groups, civil society organizations have their defined role in a parliamentary democracy. Political parties ensure peoples' representation in the government and therefore a modern political system cannot work without them. Similarly, pressure groups, civil society organizations are necessary to maintain the balance between the government and the people. Constitutional framework guides the government, other agencies and the citizens. Periodic elections keep the democracy alive. Election, which is the centrepiece of democracy, is the fundamental political event in democratic society and the only occasion on which most people become directly involved in politics¹⁹². An election is a discovery process, a way to find out who will be temporarily in charge of government. Sometimes elections are dramatic, sometimes they are mundane; sometimes they are the harbinger of new phases in history, and sometimes they pass on without significant change. It is difficult to imagine democracy without elections, though elections without democracy are fairly common. Therefore it becomes the most urgent need of a political party to win the election to sustain further. In a third world country with multiparty system such as Indian, winning election becomes the first and foremost purpose of a political party.

Once a political party comes to power in a country like India or in any of its states, it is obvious that there would be a constant pressure of managing the informal. By informal, I mean those who are not counted within the ambit of civil society. They

¹⁹² Robbins James S. 'Introduction: Democracy and Elections', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1997.

are counted as populations, some of them, organized into groups, transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work. Their sectors of work can exist beyond the realm of legality, such as the toto drivers. They may live in illegal squatter settlements, make illegal use of water or electricity, and travel without tickets in public transport. Chatterjee identifies two lines of politics¹⁹³ in this regard. One line connects the aware individuals who are the members of civil society to the nation state founded on the grounds of popular sovereignty and granting equal rights to the citizens. The other line demarcates a domain of relationship by connecting those who are unaware of their rights and counted in populations and the governmental agencies pursuing multiple policies of welfare.

According to Chatterjee, political process is one where the organs of government interact with members of civil society in their individual capacities or as members of associations¹⁹⁴. The government is fully aware of the informality of those who are unaware and counted in populations. This section, which is major in countries such as India, is not outside the reach of the nation state or excluded from the domain of politics. As an obvious responsibility, the incumbent government governs and ‘takes care’ of these populations through different governmental and political agencies. This relationship is political in nature and does not always conform to what is envisaged in the constitutional depiction of the relationship between the

¹⁹³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2016.

¹⁹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2016.

nation state and the members of civil society. The state agencies and non-governmental organizations cannot ignore them because they are among those thousands of groups representing the population whose very occupations or habitations involve violation of the law. Therefore the agencies deal with these groups not as bodies of citizens but as convenient instruments for the administration of welfare to marginal and underprivileged population. These groups on their part accept that their activities are often illegal and contrary to good civic behaviour, but they make a claim to a habitation and a livelihood as a matter of right. They profess a readiness to move out if they are given suitable alternative sites for resettlement, for instance. The state agencies recognize that these population groups do have some claim on the welfare programs of the government, but those claims could not be regarded as justiciable rights since the state did not have the means to deliver those benefits to the entire population of the country.

These populations respond to the governmental actions by seeking to constitute themselves as groups that deserve the attention of government. To treat their claims as rights, they only invite further violation of public property and civic laws. In the perspective of the government, people of these groups do not carry the ethical significance of citizenship. They are heterogeneous groups, each of which is

defined and classified by its empirically observed characteristics¹⁹⁵ and constituted as a population who could be manipulated for governmental policies. On the other side, the government aims at regulating the vast populations of the urban poor through its populist policies which actually add a huge pile of exceptions to the normal application of the law. However, the negotiations that take place among these groups and the government frequently involve chances to create exceptions beyond the formal structure of legality. Thus, when the auto-rickshaw drivers severely protested against the High court's order for the conversion of two stroke auto-rickshaws to four stroke auto-rickshaws, they had no intension to disrespect the judiciary. They wanted the executive to find an exception within the system where they could fit their trade. Similarly, when the toto drivers refuse to replace their illegal totos with registered e-rickshaws or when they crowd on the state and national high ways ignoring the regulations, they actually raise their claim to get included in the system. They too look for the government to create an exception for them which they consider as rightful. At times the government eagerly waits for the right moment to find out exceptions for these people without disapproving them. The second chapter has narrated how the state governmental departments have been issuing notices sometimes to restrict the totos and sometimes to ease their movements. Most surprising is the fact that the executive has been dodging the directions of the court for years on the ground of

¹⁹⁵ These groups can be identified by any of the following – occupation, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. This dissertation is referring to two such groups who are identified by their occupation – auto-rickshaw drivers and toto drivers.

popular sympathy. These are some instances to create exceptions. Non-action and inertia of the Executive toward such informal groups are basically examples of creating exceptions for them. Undoubtedly the incumbent government benefits for creating these exceptions in a parliamentary democracy where the credibility government and the ruling party lies in winning elections.

The informal groups, usually, are countered first by the members of civil society. The conversion of auto-rickshaw or orders to restrict and ban unregistered totos or converting them to e-rickshaws to meet prescribed parameters are outcome of public interest litigations filed by some of the members of civil society. The government might be found uncomfortable in such a situation where pressures are being exerted from other segments such as the judiciary and civil society, regarding its failure to control a sector. It could be a kind of relief for the government in a sense that the agencies such as civil society's activism works as a control over a specific group of population. Such moves of some agencies ease the work of government in resisting those groups of the population. Instances of these kinds can be understood as circumstantial methods of political control. The government usually cares about the urban elites. The elites fill up many governmental positions and work in different agencies associated to the government. The intellectuals and media persons are also included among the elites. But, those who are counted as the population, stand as the vote bank and are dearer to every political party. The ruling party prepares the ground

for those ministers-in-charge, so that they get the chance to sustain for another term. In doing so, it hardly disappoints its vote bank. Though, the Left Front favoured the high court's direction for conversion of four stroke auto-rickshaw, the government tried to help the drivers by providing monetary aid for a few months during conversion. But, by that time, most of the drivers had been able to find their aspirations in Mamata Bannerjee. On the contrary, the TMC was cautious about the complex situation of the toto sector due to court's direction. The court continued to impose ban on them, whereas the government had been lethargic consistently, in taking actual action to remove unregistered totes from the road spaces. Interestingly, during that time, the local leaders of the ruling party actively penetrated into the sector by taking charge of each and every toto stand in the areas where the party had a stronghold. Thus the sector continues to operate; an occupation that continues to generate bread for lakhs of families but with deepened informality.

The next obvious phenomenon is a political negotiation. On the one hand, government and its agencies have an official responsibility to look after the poor and the underprivileged, while on the other hand, particular population groups receive attention from those agencies according to calculations of their political usefulness in a parliamentary democracy. Groups in political society usually find their way through this uncertain terrain by displaying of their connections with other groups in similar situations, with more privileged and influential groups, with government functionaries

and perhaps with political parties and leaders. An incumbent government hardly risks letting the opposition parties enter into the bargaining. Those groups often make instrumental use of the fact that they can vote in elections and so that it is true to say that the field of citizenship, at such situations, overlaps with that of the relationship of being governed. But the instrumental use of the vote is possible only within a field of strategic politics. This is the stuff of democratic politics as it takes place in the context of India. Among the states in the country, the intensity is higher in West Bengal. Such a phenomenon here is usually justified in the name of moral assertion of popular demands.

The informal labour sector and job crisis are consistently two major areas of challenge for the state as well as central government in this country. Formalizing the entire informal sector is impossible. But they need to be controlled and if not controlled, they may pose severe challenge for the incumbent government. This may lead to an adverse consequence for the party in the next elections. On the contrary, the huge informal sector which operates with regular challenges due to their informality, looks for some kind of legitimization. A mutual and informal understanding between the party and the informal workers has the potential to benefit both. In due course, if the party chooses to legitimize an informal labour sector in ways other than formalizing it and in return, if the people associated with the sector serve the legitimizing authority in every possible sense, then a relationship develops which is

evidently informal. If the legitimizing authority is a political party, then generating fund, maintaining a ground level force, and at the end, winning elections, are the series of foremost necessities. In West Bengal, we have seen how agricultural labours, auto-rickshaw drivers, rickshaw pullers, etc. become committed cadres of the party during election days. We have also heard of the left parties collecting minimum amount regularly from those workers to generate electoral fund. In the Left regime, the party agencies such as the trade union used to collect regular rent from the workers associated to it. That 'daily donation' or rent was the assurance of the worker's attachment and obligation to the political party or its trade union. In exchange, the party or its trade union guaranteed protection and sustenance of the trade. Regardless of the change in regime and its agencies, the relationship between the government and the ruling party continued to be the same.

Machiavelli starts his masterpiece stating that "those who wish to win favour with a prince customarily offer him those things which they hold most precious or which they see him most delight in"¹⁹⁶. Very often, therefore, we see princes presented with horses, weapons, cloth of gold, precious gems, or similar ornaments worthy of their greatness.' Machiavelli himself had presented '*The Prince*' which was the condensed collection of his experiences of 'modern affairs'. He believed that the collection would be the best gift and of great help to the Prince for managing the statecraft.

¹⁹⁶ Machiavelli Niccolo, '*The Prince and Selected Discourses*', Bantam Dell, Bantam Classic, reissue: January 2003.

Those informal individuals, in the same way, are unconditionally obliged to the legitimizing source. They are aware of the fact that assured service in every sense to the ruling party is the only way to sustain. The informal labours in the same way, as mentioned in *The Prince* offer their best to the contemporary ‘Princes’ – a share from their hard earned wages and as well as service to the party for electoral benefit. This relationship, which is political in nature, can be termed as ‘informal politics’.

Scalapino considers informal politics as the patterns of political behaviour between and among individuals and groups in any given society. Formal politics on the other hand, is characterized by an institutional structure of legality upheld by the nation state. A political system essentially is the product of the interaction of these two political forces¹⁹⁷. The scholars sometimes provide extensive evidence that formal institutions rarely operate as codified or assumed. The literature on hybrid regimes, i.e. political systems combining authoritarian and democratic elements—is particularly eager to stress the ways in which actual behaviour deviates from the democratic formal content of a country's constitution and body of law. All those deviations have been identified by Hale as informal politics, the ‘real’ workings of politics, those unwritten and officially un-codified norms, habits, and practices which

¹⁹⁷ Robert A. Scalapino, ‘Informal Politics in East Asia: Introduction’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 3, March, 1996.

actually guide political behaviour¹⁹⁸. The actors, both client and patrons, perform remaining close to the grass root level. Output and input of their politics affect the formal political system in every sense. According to James, in the politics of informality, those individuals who are most hidden from the public eye tend to be the most effective carriers of demands and information. On the national political level, they remain behind the veil¹⁹⁹.

Summarising those views, it can be said that informal politics is all about the processes and activities which exist beyond the periphery of the formal institutions and rules of governments, but that nonetheless have an impact on political decision-making and outcomes. Informal politics can include a wide range of practices and phenomena, such as lobbying, personal networks and informal relationships, patronage and clientelism, social movements and protests, creating exceptions in legal framework to adjust anything informal etc. It can exist at every layer of the society, from the grass-root to the highest level. In many cases, informal politics can be used to circumvent or undermine formal institutions and procedures of governance, such as elections, legislative bodies, and courts.

On the contrary, formal politics refers to the official procedures, rules, and institutions of government, such as elections, legislative bodies, courts, and

¹⁹⁸Henry E. Hale, 'Formal Constitutions In Informal Politics: Institutions and Democratization in Post-Soviet Eurasia', *World Politics*, October 2011, Vol. 63, No. 4, October 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Bill James A., 'The Plasticity of Informal Politics: The Case of Iran', *Middle East Journal*, Spring, 1973, Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring, 1973.

bureaucracies. While formal politics is essential for establishing a stable and legitimate system of government, informal politics can also play a significant role in shaping political outcomes and influencing policy decisions. The study of informal politics is important to understand the complexities of political systems and the factors that influence decision-making and policy outcomes. It can also help identify ways to strengthen democratic institutions and reduce the negative impacts of informal politics on governance.

Informal labour sector, whom the state could not accommodate within its realm of formal politics, sustains with their physical labour and informal politics. Primarily their card is their vote. In addition, they have certain other ways to serve the incumbent government and the party. Once a relationship is established, those informal groups want the continuation of the political regime for the sake of their interest. There are instances, where the groups have been found to shift their obligation to the emerging political party. From 2009 to 2011, the final days of Left Front Government, the auto-rickshaw drivers started to shift their allegiance to the aspiring Trinamool Congress.

In West Bengal, we can find changing patterns of informal politics. During the Left regime, the informal politics existed in an apparently systematic form. The informal relationship was formalized in some sense by the organizational structure of the ruling party. Formalization was not in terms of legality but legitimacy.

Relationships were clear and apparently open. The clarity of outputs and inputs were from the top level of the party authority to the bottom level of party or trade union workers who maintained liaison with the informal labours. That was the reason why a journalist, Jayanta Basu of The Telegraph, could write openly and produce an approximate financial data on the rent seeking in the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. Even the amount of rent seeking was hierarchically centralized and clear to the top leadership of trade union and the party. Formalization was also in the sense of distribution of responsibilities. Left leaders who were in charge of party organization were excluded from governmental charges.

The ruling party controlled different sections of the society and such groups through its specialized agencies, such as trade unions. Even the middle men or ‘agents’ (as they were called) in government offices were organized by the trade union. The trade union, though an extension of the party itself, had a different set of structure and functioning. Trade unionism was successful to build a sense of identity and organize the auto-rickshaw drivers successfully until the phase of transition arrived in 2009. On the contrary, the TMC regime is interesting, in terms of a different way of political control and rent seeking. This has been discussed elaborately in this chapter. The chapter discusses the relationship of the auto-rickshaw drivers and toto drivers with the party and the government/ state. The question of organizing the informal has always been an area of special interest for the scholars. In course of the

relationship with party and the government, the route of organizing these two sectors and nature of their organizations has become the centre of focus of this chapter.

Trade union and informality in the auto-rickshaw sector

There is an urban legend regarding the operators and their daily confrontations with the police, passengers and the general public. It is believed that the operators have got away with such illegalities and violence because of their importance to political parties, who have used the auto rickshaw operators for mobilising their electoral machinery. My argument is two-fold: first that this perceived mutual dependence is premised on the informal, indeed paralegal, character of the sector and second, the dynamics of this relationship is not as ‘mutual’ as it is usually perceived. We have already discussed a number of points about legality and workers’ rights which have laid bare the vulnerability of the individuals directly related to this sector. Despite all these limitations, the auto rickshaw sector has one of the strongest trade unions in the city and they have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to bring the city to a standstill.

Since the 1980s, Kolkata has experienced violent protest of auto rickshaw operators firmly backed by the unions. Gopal Sutar²⁰⁰, secretary of INTTUC in South Kolkata, spoke to us²⁰¹ about the first violent protest organised by the auto rickshaw operators launched in the late 1980s in Tollygunge area where the gathering of auto

²⁰⁰ Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 September 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²⁰¹ Team members of SWS RLS Research Project.

rickshaw drivers was brutally crushed by the police. The media in West Bengal, in the past few years, has reported about the disturbances created by or due to the auto rickshaw operators in Kolkata and its suburbs²⁰². We have lot of news²⁰³ on atrocities by auto rickshaw drivers, particularly in the last few months of 2013 and the initial months of 2014. The media has openly accused the operators for hooliganism. On 29 January 2014, news papers in Kolkata reported a violent confrontation between drivers and the police in the Palmer Bazar area of Tyangra, Kolkata, where auto rickshaw drivers beat up the outnumbered police²⁰⁴. However the operators have a different version on the incident where Md. Salauddin, an auto driver, present at the spot, in Tyangra, claimed that it was the cops who were harassing them since Monday. “They were not even checking our papers and fining us Rs.3000 for violating Motor Vehicles Act. When we protested and asked the traffic sergeant at Palmer Bazar to let us go, he suddenly smashed an auto windscreen and then lathi-charged at us. As we beat a hasty retreat, a driver staying in Tyangra, name Israel, fell on the road where he was beaten up with a baton in front of his family members. We rushed him in a goods van to NRS Hospital where his condition is critical.”²⁰⁵

The police denied the claims alleging that the auto rickshaw drivers first attacked the traffic cops on duty, when the police tried to issue challans to drivers

²⁰² *Ananda Bazar Patrika, The Telegraph, Times of India and Ei Samay*, leading news papers in Kolkata. (Specific reports of these news papers have been referred to in this dissertation at appropriate places.)

²⁰³ *The Telegraph*, ‘Panel to look into auto-cracy’, 10 January 2014; *The Telegraph*, “Panel ploy to protect auto rouges”, 22 January 2014.

²⁰⁴ *Anandabazar Patrika*, ‘Auto chalakder haatey ebar prohrito pulishi’, 29 January 2014.

²⁰⁵ Statement documented during the Workshop of SWS-RLS Research Project in February 2014.

carrying more than four passengers in their vehicles²⁰⁶. There were other reports on helplessness of the police in curbing the menace of auto rickshaw operators on road due to political backing of the trade unions. A report in 'The Statesman' describes about the action of Salt Lake police on the unregistered auto rickshaws, stating that there were 50,000 illegal auto rickshaws among the total number of 1.20 lakh operating in Kolkata and its adjoin areas²⁰⁷. The leading dailies in Kolkata also regularly reported violence on passengers by the drivers. One of the reports claimed death of a senior citizen in south Kolkata (near Baghajatin area, Raja SC Mullick Road) due to the rash driving of auto rickshaw at night²⁰⁸. Many cases of harassment of women and children were also reported during these months. There was a report on auto rickshaw drivers harassing a freelance photographer attached to a media house when he was trying to take a photograph of some alleged 'illegalities' of the drivers²⁰⁹.

The newspapers also reported the involvement of the Transport Minister in handling the atrocities of the operators on road. On 10 January 2014, there was news about the initiative of Transport Department, West Bengal to form a panel to investigate the ongoing trouble in the auto rickshaw sector²¹⁰. Newspapers reported about the Transport Minister Madan Mitra's threat to the operators who were creating

²⁰⁶ *The Time Of India*, Kolkata, Wednesday, 29 January 2014

²⁰⁷ *The Statesman*, 30 July 2015

²⁰⁸ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Kolkata, 19 February 2014

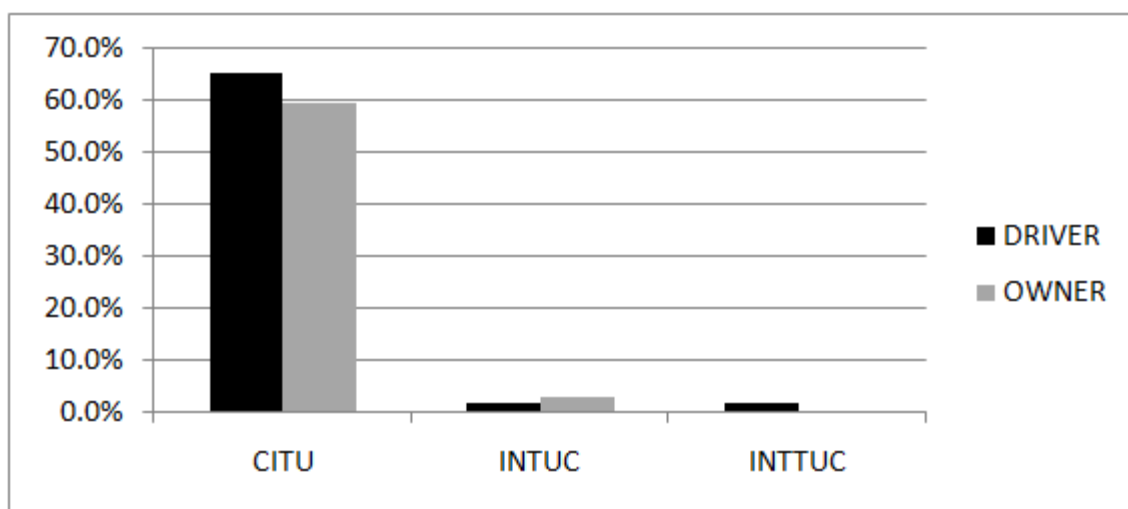
²⁰⁹ *The Telegraph*, 30 January 2014

²¹⁰ *The Telegraph* on January 10, 2014

disturbances²¹¹. Another media report²¹² released during this time increase our curiosity about the nature of this sector and can be mentioned in this context. INTTUC, the trade union of Trinamool Congress, too stepped in to handle the disturbed situation. Its president Dola Sen spoke to the ‘The Telegraph’ regarding the wish of the Chief Minister and the party line to not hike auto rickshaw fare. The drivers were obviously unhappy given that they were struggling with inflation in fuel prices. The leader of the trade union appeared to be voicing the government without being least concerned about the anguishes of auto rickshaw drivers. Thus it was clear that though the trade union affiliated to the ruling party claim to play a benevolent role for auto rickshaw operators, they act as representatives of the political party and prefer to toe with the party line. The para-legal status of the auto rickshaw operators does not allow them to voice their opinion against the diktats of the trade union leaders. The leaders among the operators too remain helpless and are unable to prioritise their rights as union demands. The only concern that trade union leaders show is regarding police action on drivers. The interviews with auto rickshaw drivers suggest that their unions take care of them in case of police atrocity or dispute with the passengers.

²¹¹ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, ‘Auto niyontrone fer humki dilen Madan’ on January 24, 2014

²¹² *The Telegraph*, “Trinamool meet to ‘discipline’ autos”, 8 January 2014.

Figure-1: Union membership of operators (till May 2011)*

***Source:** Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

We have seen a sudden and massive change in trade union affiliation in 2011. Our findings²¹³ revealed that 53.7% of the drivers and 48.3% of the owners have changed their union affiliation while being in this profession. Figure 1 shows that among 243 interviewed operators, 65.3% drivers and 59.4% owners were a part of CITU till May 2011. Only 1.4% and 1.4% of the drivers said that they were previously under INTUC affiliation. 2.9% of the owners were identified to be a part of INTTUC previously. When the operators were asked about their shift in affiliation of trade unions, it was surprising to find that none of the operators referred to the change in power at the state level. As if there was no connection between their apparent shifts

²¹³ Field survey carried on by the members of SWS RLS Research Project, of SWS, JU ('Increased understanding of gendering of workers and culture and politics of organization of workers with special reference to auto rickshaw drivers and beauty workers in Kolkata') during 2013-2014 among the auto rickshaw operators in Kolkata and suburbs.

of political affiliation to the Trinamool Congress and the change of political power in the state. It is surprising that a long-entrenched political equation between operators and political party to which they were affiliated was overturned so quickly and so easily without apparently unsettling the sector in any way. However, the new government changed nothing. Attending processions and meetings of the political party to which the union is affiliated, collection of funds for those gatherings and other purposes of the political party had been in practice since the Left Front regime. Apart from daily, weekly and yearly subscriptions and collection for funds, the auto drivers also contribute for processions and meetings like party events at Brigade Ground, claims Rakesh Kumar Yadav, an operator in Ultadanga²¹⁴. Irrespective of whether the drivers understood the importance of May Day, they had to attend the routine celebration by the left affiliated union every year.

When they are asked during the interviews in 2013-14 whether they continue celebrating May Day, most of them replied in the negative. Did they celebrate May Day during the Left Front rule because they believed in the ideology and importance of the day or was it just a compulsion? Their shift in their political loyalty with the shift in political power seems to have the clue to the answer.

²¹⁴ Name Changed, interviewed by team members of SWS RLS Research Project, December 10, 2013, Ultodanga, Kolkata, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

Table 9: Change of Trade Union affiliation by the auto-rickshaw operators (during 2011)*		
	YES	NO
DRIVER	53.7%	40.5%
OWNER	48.3%	45.0%

*** Source:** Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

The membership of a certain union implies the individual's support to the political party to which the union is affiliated to. Since the Left regime, the auto rickshaw drivers are attending processions, meetings and participating in the pre-election activities of the party to which their unions are affiliated to. The Left Front recruited these urban informal workers as their party cadres. They have been highly visible in the public sphere due to the political strength of their unions which has been dubbed by the media as 'Auto Raj'²¹⁵, in the last few years. Unlike other public transports, such as bus and taxi, which have extreme long routes or no routes, auto rickshaw has its reach and strong hold over small zones like Garia, Jadavpur, Sinthi More Dum Dum, Dunlop More, Bara Bazar, Beck Bagan, etc. This hold becomes easier because of the presence of stands and unions in every route. The presence of the unionized groups in localities seem to be benefitting the political party, which

²¹⁵ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Kolkata, 19 March 2014.
Ananda Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, 26 January 2014.
The Telegraph, Kolkata, 11 March 2014.

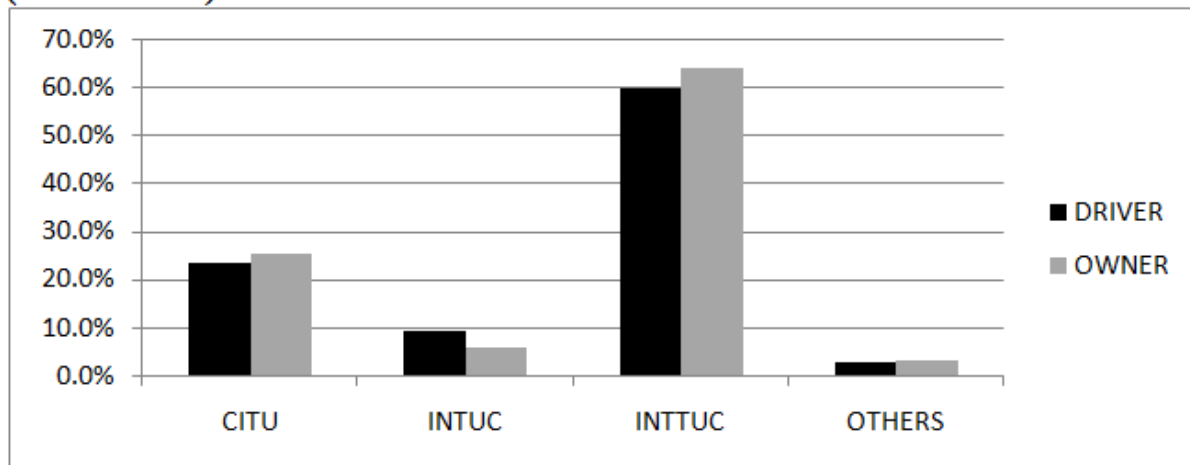
feels its presence and hold in the areas and zones through the organization of these auto rickshaw operators. Despite its illegality, neither the ruling party nor the government opposed the introduction and existence of routes in auto rickshaw sector. The benefit in terms of powerful hold over areas and zones of auto rickshaw seems to be a major benefit for this decision. This may have also had some bearing on the decision behind the formal declaration of routes for auto rickshaws by the Left Front Government in 2003. The auto rickshaw drivers depend on the unions so that the latter can save them from their daily problems of livelihood, especially caused because of their para-legal status. They have always returned the favor by contributing to the party by working as cadres for it, both before as well as during elections. This is not to say that auto rickshaw operators do not support the party due to their personal choice or ideological beliefs. The understanding of the dynamics of this connection needs further detailed research.

However, the overnight change in the political colour of the union in the routes in 2011 questions this perception. “We are united right now, all those who were with CITU previously have joined us, and there are no such problems anymore”, said Debasish Sarkar²¹⁶, a driver from Garia, when he was asked about existing conflicts between two unions over the issue of deciding routes. Apart from the participation in formal politics, the political parties have always nourished the operators in different

²¹⁶ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 November 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

ways to win elections. Moreover, in a democratic setup where the votes decide everything, political parties go the extra mile to assure that votes are gained even if by the virtue of informal politics. These informal groups, in many ways, act for these parties with the hope that if their party wins, they may enjoy an advantageous position despite or because of the informality of their sector. The political ruler rather than the political party or ideology has been more valuable to the operators for the continuation of their existence. In his interview Biplob Das²¹⁷, a driver in Garia-Sonarapur route, says that they have only one union, all the members of CITU have shifted their affiliation to INTTUC in 2011.

Figure 2: Auto-rickshaw Operators' trade union membership during the survey (2013 to 2015)



***Source:** Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

²¹⁷ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 14 November 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

Our finding reveals that 59.8% of the drivers and 64.1% of the owners are a part of INTTUC union and 25.2% of the owner and 23.4% of the drivers are part of CITU union. Only 9.3% of the drivers and 5.8% of the owners are a part of INTUC. Thus, not all operators have changed their affiliation to the INTTUC. However, decision-making and power resides with operators who are members of ruling party union. The perceived mutual dependence is premised indeed on the informal and paralegal character of the sector. Two questions arise at this juncture; first, what is the actual role played by the union in these years and secondly how much the dynamics of the relationship between the political party and the operators is 'mutual'.

The second question was most evident when there was a court-directed conversion of auto-rickshaws from 'two-stroke' to 'four-stroke' in West Bengal. The government led by the Left in West Bengal was not ready to implement the decision of the court and had been delaying its implementation for nearly four years. In 2009, the government was redirected by the court and hence they had no option but to implement the verdict of the Calcutta High Court²¹⁸ which ordered the conversion in response to a Public Interest Litigation filed by an eminent environmentalist, Subhas Dutta. When the government finally embarked on the process of implementation, there was a huge tension between the operators, trade unions, the party and the government. Different actors in this drama pulled in different directions. There were huge protests. It is true that the government took up this project only at the insistence

²¹⁸ The order of Honorable S S Nirjhar, Chief Justice, Calcutta High Court on 18th July 2008

of the judiciary and was fully aware of the possible political costs, but they made very little effort to mitigate these costs with governmental solutions such as compensations, adequate loans, arrangements with banks and other measures routinely adopted by state governments elsewhere (such as Delhi and Mumbai). The government (or the ruling party) had either taken the support and dependence of the operators for granted or they had left all the hopes of their sustenance in power. This incident demonstrates the operators' vulnerability and the government's relative carelessness. There has been, therefore, very little by way of civic services and welfare benefits forthcoming from the state. The INTTUC has become the dominant trade union leading the operators; and yet no new law or policy has been made to reward their switch in loyalty. The operators remain in the same legal limbo previously inhabited by them. It appeared as though, given the unemployment situation in West Bengal and the operators' dependence on the auto for their survival, they had no option but to ally themselves with the party in power. This strategy was further dictated by the very fact of their legal uncertainty and their existence was contingent on the indulgence of the government. While the state does enter into negotiation with the operators, despite the illegalities of their situation and their activism, the persistence of informality (or para-legality) also weakens the operators' ability to bend the state to their demands. There has been, therefore, very little by way of civic services and welfare benefits forthcoming from the state. The role of the

union in this case deserves to be introspected. Despite the informal nature of the sector with the existing para-legalities, the auto-rickshaw sector is highly organised under the trade union.

Trade Union and Politics

John Harriss has observed ‘politics’ as the only resource available to informal workers and their valuation in the electoral democracy can be understood only in the context of their participation in politics²¹⁹. In the case of the auto rickshaw operators, platforms like the trade union play a vital role. It appears that these drivers exist on the power of their unions, but are helpless in availing what they deserve from the government, as workers in the informal sector. The field interviews demonstrate the relation between the individual operator and his trade union. Responding to the question, whether he has changed his union or not, Hari Biswas²²⁰, an operator from Dumdum says, “you have to be with the people who are in power, be with the flow. If you want to exist in the transport sector, then you have to support those who are in power”. Replying to another question on whether membership of union is mandatory, he continued, “it is not mandatory, when you are in driving, anything can happen on road, you can be treated as badly as animal. But union’s protection can save you in

²¹⁹ John Harriss, ‘Middle Class Activism And The Politics Of The Informal Working Class’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 38:4, pp. 445-465

²²⁰ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 2 December 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

such cases”. Another operator, Rakesh Kumar Yadav²²¹ said that it is not mandatory to be a member of the union. However, he added that it is better to be a member because the union is their guardian in this profession.

Our findings reveal that while 86.8% of the drivers and 85.0% of the owners are members of the trade union, 15.0% of the owners and 12.4% of the drivers are not a part of any trade union. On the issue of new appointments as drivers on the route, an operator, Shantanu Sen’s²²² statement may give a clear idea about the ‘apparent’ unconditional authority of the union. He said anyone could appoint any person his vehicle’s driver. But generally the person recommended by the union is appointed, as he is a familiar person, and it is not safe or even logical to appoint someone who is unknown. Another auto driver, Ajit Roy²²³, said that obedience to the ruling party’s trade union was persistent, whether it was CITU or INTTUC. This helps the drivers to survive on road. Answering the question regarding whether the union leaders in their route are drivers or owners, Ajit Roy²²⁴ said that the top leader of his route was a leader of the ruling party, TMC. Recently due to his absence, his wife had taken the

²²¹ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 December 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadvapour University – Rendered into English by the author.

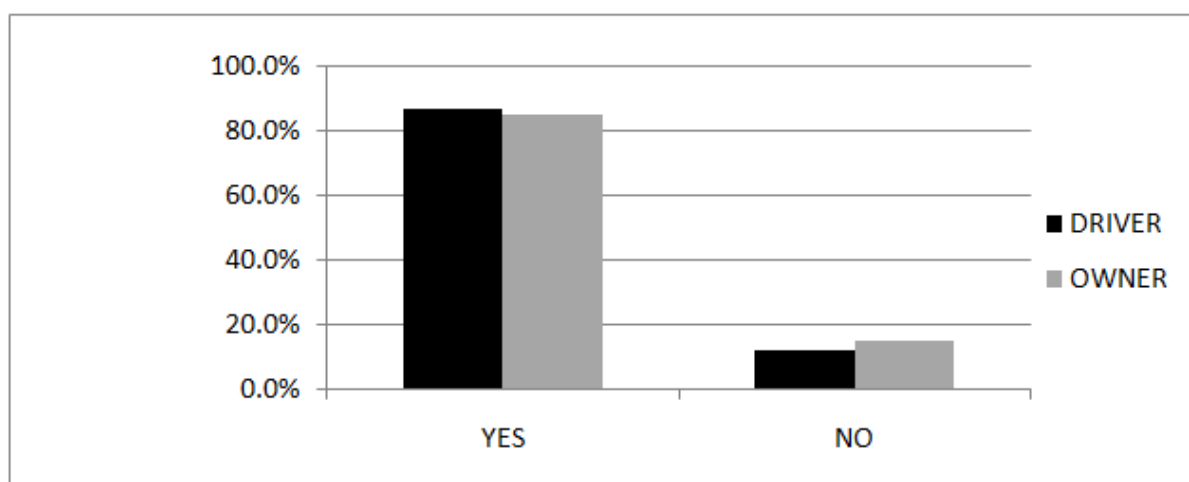
²²² Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 5 January 2014, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadvapour University – Rendered into English by the author.

²²³ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 January 2014, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadvapour University – Rendered into English by the author.

²²⁴ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 January 2014, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadvapour University – Rendered into English by the author.

charge of that route. Hanif Gaji²²⁵, an operator from Garia, has similar views to that of Ajit Roy²²⁶. According to him, the general secretary of his route is a leader of Trinamool. The drivers of the routes generally assist him in managing the route related affairs. Thus, the power obviously does not lie with the operators but with the union leaders.

Figure 3: How many auto-rickshaw operators had Trade Union membership during the survey?



***Source:** Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

Hanif Gaji²²⁷ added that they tried to settle their problems by internal meetings and discussions. As everything went in a smooth way, there was no scope or need to

²²⁵ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 12 December 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²²⁶ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 January 2014, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²²⁷ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 12 December 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

protest or organize a movement. Two points are noteworthy from these views; first, it is the political power, and neither the union nor the political party which is the actual basis of loyalty for the drivers and secondly, the union, mostly acts as an extension of the political party among the drivers and its absolute authority is derived from the power position of the party to which it is affiliated. Certainly the union negotiates with the police or passengers during dispute, but the political party remains the actual source of its power. Therefore, the union affiliated to the ruling party, has preferred peaceful settlement than movement or protest for the rights of the drivers. People in power have always played vote-bank politics with members of the informal sectors. Most of the drivers, whether belonging to TMC or CITU unions, have accepted that they participate in the political activities of the party. This becomes an indicator and their assurance of loyalty to the party. But the loyalty changes with the shifts in power. Javed Akhtar²²⁸, an operator from Park Circus, accuses the PVD for issuing permits to excessive numbers of vehicles under the instructions from the Ministry. Javed Akhtar and Shakil Khan²²⁹ are exceptions, who, despite of the change in power have remained loyal to CITU. In the context of power, I would like to add another

²²⁸ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 30 December 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²²⁹ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 28 December 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

point which Hari Biswas²³⁰ from Dum Dum mentioned in his interview. According to him, despite the monopoly of INTTUC in the routes around Sinthi More, Dum Dum, unions of adjacent routes are involved in clashes with each other. This implies clash among fractions of the party in power for supremacy.

Trade union in everyday affairs

From the appointment of the starter in a route to settling disputes between drivers and owners, the union is omnipresent in the daily life of the drivers. Debasish Sarkar²³¹, an auto rickshaw operator had informed that they had submitted their insurance papers to the union, whose leaders were expected to negotiate with the insurance company in case of any insurance claim. But unfortunately, trade unions only informed the drivers about existing schemes and did not take any initiative in securing those benefits. Biplob Ghosh Dastidar²³², an operator from Ramnagar, Garden Reach and Rajat Bose²³³, an operator from Jadavpur, who were union leaders of CITU, claimed that there were personal initiatives by the CITU leaders in different routes to avail the governmental schemes for the unaware operators, during the left front rule.

²³⁰ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 2 December 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

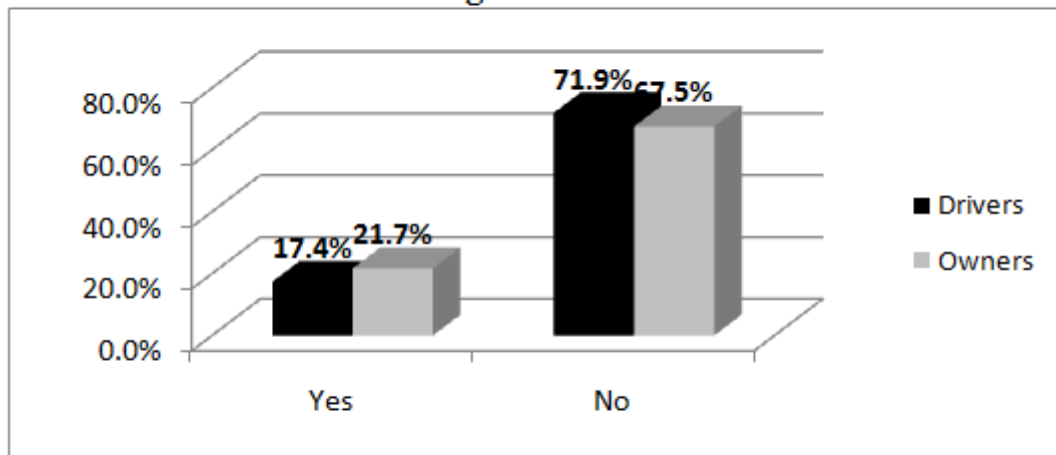
²³¹ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 November 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²³² Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 28 October 2013, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²³³ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 January 2014, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

But those personal initiatives had failed to reach the majority drivers, as they hardly had any time to furnish the formalities required to avail those schemes. Moreover, there is confusion around the beneficiary of the scheme – whether it is the driver or owner. During the field interviews, it has been perceived that individuals may be related to the auto rickshaw in three ways -- the driver who drives someone else's vehicle, the owner who only owns an auto rickshaw but does not drive it, and the owner who drives his own auto rickshaw. The trade unions also identify these three kinds of people in a uniform way by coding them as 'Auto Rickshaw Operators'. But how will the legal identities be established? If possessing official papers in one's name is the criteria of an individual's legal claim in the eyes of the Government, how will the individual who is only driving someone else's auto be benefitted? The contradiction in the legal identity of auto rickshaw operators, between the owner and the drivers resurfaces again in this context. The lack of clear definition of the legal beneficiaries in social security schemes again act as an impediments to the rights of operators.

Figure 4: Auto-rickshaw operators' awareness regarding the inclusion of occupational health issue in Trade Union's agenda*



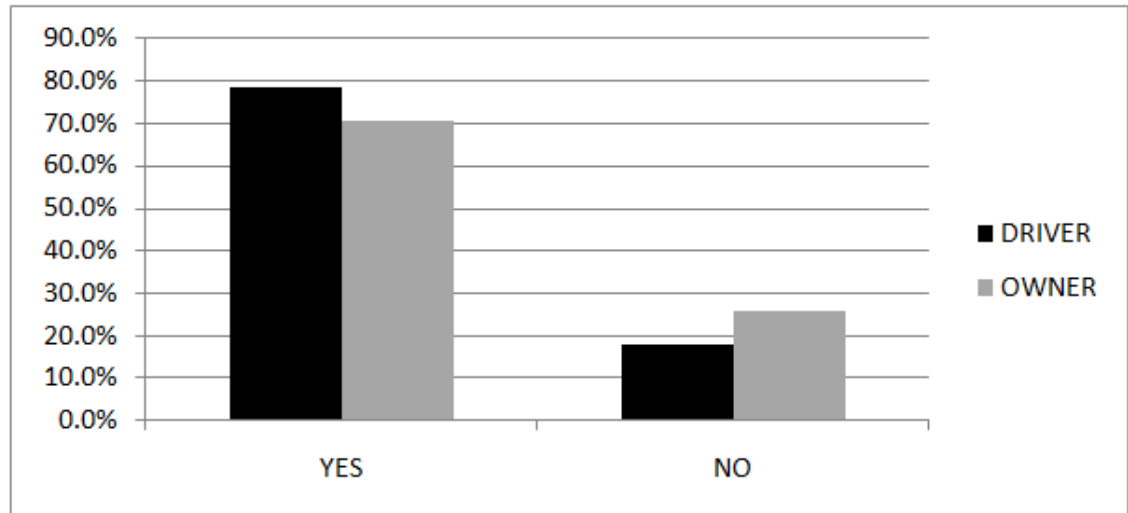
***Source:** Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

On the question of awareness of the social security scheme, most of the operators are unaware of it. While a number of operators have heard about the scheme during their discussions with the trade union leaders, they have not been able to find time to avail the benefits of the scheme. In many cases, unions have not shown much interest. Figure 4 shows the union's inclusion of the issue of occupational health hazards in their agenda. 71.9% drivers and 67.5% owners said that the union did not include the issue of occupational health hazards in their agenda, while only 17.4% drivers and 21.7% owners admitted that the union included the issue of occupational health hazards in their agenda. It is also difficult for the operators to find time to get certificate of fitness, insurance, registration, permit/ renewal, licence, etc. due to long

formal procedure involved. Trade unions help by recruiting men who act as middle men/ brokers to get these works done for a lump sum amount of money. Again, while the unions do protect drivers from police harassments during accidents, they have not been able to successfully solve the problems of excessive citation cases issued by the police against the drivers. This is especially important, given that auto rickshaw operators have reported about false cases in this regard. The drivers and owners spoke about false citation cases used against them in the legal aid camps arranged by us²³⁴. Among 243 interviewed operators, 78.5% drivers and 70.8% owners mentioned that they face police harassment regularly whereas 25.8% owners and 18.2% drivers had no such complaint (Figure 5). When speaking to the team members of Labour and Gender Project, Colonel Sabyasachi Bagchi, Vice Chairman of PVD²³⁵, supported the police. In his opinion the police have no other way to deal with the problem of overloading or '*kata-route*'. But unions are a saviour from the police only up to a certain extent with serious limitations. Acting as a guardian and negotiator, it can only assure regular mobility of auto rickshaw on road.

²³⁴ The team members of the SWS RLS Research Project, 'Increased understanding of gendering of workers and culture and politics of organization of workers with special reference to auto rickshaw drivers and beauty workers in Kolkata', organised two Legal Aid Camps and several meetings in December 2013 to February 2014 between auto rickshaw operators and advocates/ lawyers to facilitate the former to handle with the different types of legal cases charged against them by the Traffic Police.

²³⁵ Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 4 February 2014, Source: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

Figure 5: Auto-rickshaw operators' response to the issue of police harassment*

*Source: Interviews of auto-rickshaw drivers and trade union leaders conducted by the researchers of SWS-RLS Research Project, from 2013 to 2015.

Trade Union and Crisis

The INTTUC, though in a minority at the time of conversion of auto rickshaw from two stroke to four stroke, organised protests from different routes as a part of their political agenda. A committee named '*Auto-banchao*' (save auto) was formed by operators opposing the government's decision. Most of the drivers lost employment during this phase. The Left Front government declared a monthly aid of Rs. 2000 for the drivers where a few drivers received the sum for a few months from the government. Apart from this, neither the ruling party nor the majority union played

any significant role during this time. Javed Akhtar²³⁶ and Shakil Khan²³⁷, who were members of CITU and continue to do so, stood by the party decision during the transition. The drivers, who were members of CITU and were not happy with the transition, also followed the party line, i.e. the decision of the Left Front government. This was despite the fact that they had faced problems as shared by Rajat Bose²³⁸, a driver from Jadavpur. He said how almost all the operators had taken loan either from private financiers or from their relatives.

Biren Roy has correctly observed this issue as, ‘the problem of working class unity [which] is endangered by the fact that the organised working class is divided by their affiliation with different political parties’²³⁹. He has further questioned the union’s position of obeying the party’s decision without taken in account, the labour rights or interests of the worker. He writes, ‘is it incumbent upon the left trade unions including the CITU, to support each and every decision of the Left Front and its Government?’ The interest of the political party and its government was not questioned during that time because of the presence of that political party’s affiliated trade union among the workers. This can be seen as the ruling party’s hegemony over the workers through its affiliated union. Partha Chaterjee’s idea of ‘political

²³⁶ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 30 December 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²³⁷ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 28 December 2013, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²³⁸ Name Changed, Interviewed by Team Members of SWS RLS Research Project, Kolkata, 10 January 2014, Source: School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University – Rendered into English by the author.

²³⁹ Biren Roy, ‘Left Trade Unions and New Economic Policies’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 51, pp. 2777-2779, Dec. 18, 1993.

society'²⁴⁰ justifies the position of these workers who are not citizens but member of political society. According to Chatterjee, these members of political society, unlike the citizens or members of civil society (consisting of the middle class and upper classes in the developing world) are 'populations whose periodically changing demographics and political role are defined by the policymakers. Since they lack the citizens' moral claim on the state, any benefit that they receive from the state are based on the government's calculation of cost and benefits. At times, this population demonstrate their presence to the state by controlled or uncontrolled violence'²⁴¹. Chatterjee accepts that political demonstration and client patron relationships may bring real benefits to less privileged populations but also mentions that these kinds of relationships fail to give effective agencies to the underprivileged²⁴². The welfare benefits that the government policy makers offer at one point of time may subsequently be withdrawn if the cost-benefit calculations change. Perhaps this is a way to understand the position of these auto rickshaw operators as members of political society and their relation with the political party and the government. However events of 2010 leave us with a query: if this informal relation with these workers and the party stands on the calculation of cost and benefit, then, why did the Left Front government, not put any effort to stop the transition when the Assembly

²⁴⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics Of The Governed*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2004.

²⁴¹ Howard Handelman, 'Perspective on Politics', *American Political Science Association*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 2007), pp. 382-384, June 2007.

²⁴² John Borneman, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 107, No. 3, pp.- 513-514, Sept. 2005.

Election of 2011 was knocking at their doors? The government, in a democratic set up like India, is not comprised of the executive alone. Instead, the judiciary, executive and legislative are expected to work together. The executive, in the case of transition of auto rickshaw from two stroke to four stroke, was compelled to follow the judiciary's decision. The auto rickshaw operators were a clear victim of these differences and suffered most due to this fragmentation or serious differences among the decision makers. The workers existing in the para-legal state and not formally protected, are worst sufferers in these situations who are not formally protected by any legal system have been observed to be the worst sufferer of these situations. The Left Front government still took no adequate measures for the operators except for releasing a monthly aid of rupees two thousand. However, according to our findings, many respondents could not avail this aid as well.

A new legal complexity came up in the initial months of 2013, when the High Court gave a decision on converting auto rickshaw into contract carriage. Justice Arun Mishra and Justice Joymalya Bagchi had given their judgement which indicated that auto rickshaw should run on meter-system. However, the state government failed to enact any such legislation which could make this conversion possible. A Bengali daily²⁴³ reported in February 2014 that the state government had got relaxation of time for implementing the High Court's order in March 2013. There are media reports²⁴⁴

²⁴³ *Ei Samay*', Kolkata, 4 February 2014

²⁴⁴ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*', Kolkata, 12 February 2014.

on the Transport saying that the government wanted to legalise the auto rickshaw (or remove the para-legality from this sector?). According to the reports, the minister further blamed the previous government for the existence of illegalities in this sector. But till December 2015, the government has not been observed to initiate any process of legislation related to this sector.

Further change: Organisation in the auto-rickshaw sector

From July to September 2017, I had interviewed 10 auto-rickshaw drivers and General Secretary of West Bengal INTTUC. During the SWS RLS Research Project, we had already met those 11 drivers and the leader. Apart from it, as a regular passenger of auto-rickshaw I have been through a number of incidents. Those interviews and interactions indicated a new phenomenon regarding the trade union and the sector. Let us have a look on few incidents. First, in August 2017, being asked about hosting Vishwakarma Puja in Garia Golpark route one auto-rickshaw driver said that they might not be able to organise the puja because the majority INTTUC affiliated trade union had been split up into three non-convergent groups. Second, in September 2017, there was a clash between a driver and a passenger. Both of them had connection with either the ruling party or the INTTUC, therefore countering each other equally. After the clash was over, a pedestrian said another driver to inform the trade union leader who could take action against the abusing driver. But the driver negated that option as there was no such existing union in the Garia stand as the major

trade union in their route (INTTUC) had been inactive due to the existence of confronting lobbies within the trade union. Many auto-rickshaw routes do not even have starters to maintain the passengers' queue and serial number of the plying auto-rickshaws.

Within a couple of years, the charges for the first and third party insurance, registration of vehicle, certificate of fitness have been increased without any increase in the fare of auto-rickshaw in Kolkata. On the one hand, the ruling TMC influenced its trade union, i.e. INTTUC not to increase the fare of auto-rickshaw in Kolkata. While, on the other hand, the expenditure for driving an auto-rickshaw escalated rapidly in last 2 to 3 years. But there has been no trade union movement for the relief of the drivers. In the initial years of Trinamool Congress regime, INTTUC maintained the CITU's tradition of rent seeking from the drivers every day for plying the vehicle. Later on, due to the emergence of parallel groups within the trade union, confronting groups stopped seeking rent. Thus with the end in rent seeking practice the trade union leaders started to overlook the auto-rickshaw. Presently in most of the auto-rickshaw stands in Kolkata, the INTTUC exists as a signboard without any activity or movement to facilitate the workers. The auto-rickshaw sector has been actually operating without the presence of any trade union.

In the left regime, the majority union, i.e. CITU had a strict control over the working of this sector. From rent seeking to deciding fare and route, the trade union

of the Left Front was the sole controlling agency and collaborator between the workers, party and the government. In the initial years of Trinamool Congress rule, the INTTUC played the same role, but with the development of parallel groups within the trade union, political control through trade union became impossible for the incumbent political party. Later we observed increase in expenditure of the vehicle such as fines for traffic rules violation, spot fines, certificate of pollution, registration, license, etc.

It felt that the nature of rent seeking has been changed in the Trinamool regime. Earlier which was done by the trade union to fill the coffer of the party is now done by the Traffic Police and Public Vehicles Department on the behalf of the government. In 2016 and 2017, notifications of the Transport Department and the Traffic Police have been controlling the working of the sector. Another point I would like to add is that the trade union of CPI (M) have not been able to mobilise the workers due to lack of membership. In September 2017, Dola Sen, the State Secretary of the INTTUC, had said that they are following the policies promised by Mamata Banerjee and her party. According to Sen, Mamata Banerjee promised to bring change in ‘control by political party to control by government’ (*dalatantra noy, ganatantra* – from political party’s control to government’s control). Mamata Banerjee, before ascending to power, vehemently criticised the Left Front’s practice of controlling almost all the sectors through party and its agencies such as trade union. According to

Dola Sen, as their party is in power, she would prefer to resolve the workers' demand by direct 'table talk' (rather than 'violent' trade union movement and strikes) with the Government for getting their demands and solutions to their problems.

The question that arises now is whether the change of agencies of political control was the effect of the 'promise' made by Trinamool leaderships or whether there were other factors that brought about this change. Whether competition among groups and lobbies within one agency (such as trade union) has compelled the political administrators to choose another way of control? The recent bill of the West Bengal state government to replace students' union by students' council is an instance which proves that the government and the political party are no more successful in controlling sectors through party affiliated agencies. Though this observation needs more clarification, introspection in the toto sector could give a better answer to this question. Active trade union (CITU) as an agency of political control and mediator between the ruling party and workers during the Left Front regime has been replaced by a trade union which lost its effectiveness. This is due to the existence of groups and lobbies within it which has always hampered the movement for workers' right. Through 2015 to 2018, the INTTUC on being ineffective in sectors such as auto-rickshaw has been replaced by governmental agencies such as Police or PVD. This phenomenon is altering traditional nature of trade union, i.e. organising workers and their movement for the sake of rights. The auto-rickshaw sector in West Bengal is in a

state of constant change in the respect of workers' organisation, movement and politics. It can be said that control through governmental agencies may directly address the issue of para-legality in the auto-rickshaw sector. Otherwise, counter politics of the workers may pose challenge to the incumbent political party.

Throughout the TMC regime, the Trade Union lost its distinct identity. The earlier dominant trade Unions, such as CITU, usually did not disobey the party line, but had its own visibility and voice for the concerned groups. Although party agencies do exist even in TMC regime but they do not have any separate action plan by which they can be separated from the party itself. As mentioned earlier, due to factionalism and local lobbies, the top leaders could not control the trade union. Instead, of controlling, the factionalism in these agencies had become a severe concern for the party leadership. The party though, stepped in the shoes of its predecessor, lacked the training of walking with those shoes. Moreover, the idea of the 'Party Supremo' and her control has been so dominant, that development of a proper hierarchy from the grass-root could never been possible. Similarly agencies such as trade union could not maintain, at least its earlier status in such sectors.

By the assembly election of 2016, the supreme leadership of the party realised that it lacked the structural supremacy of the left, i.e. lack of a hierarchical structure of authority from the Supremo to the grass-root party worker. Though the Supremo

knew many of her party workers even at the block levels by name²⁴⁵, but somehow a hierarchical structure within the party to convey the messages and directions from the highest authority to the grass-root level could not be developed. By this time, areas in and around Kolkata were dominated by individual leaders. In fact, the domination was a kind of identification for a specific area. Leaders obviously had rivals. Here in West Bengal, rivals have mostly been from the same party, as the incumbent party is everywhere due to the nominal existence of the oppositions. Thus some of the leaders dominating localities were directly connected to the Supremo, but most of them had connections with any of the leaders in the second highest line after the Supremo.

But an alternative was noticed in the aftermath of the assembly election of 2016. Another incident must be noted in the context of this period. The TMC had strong hold in the rural and urban local administration. In 2020, instead of arranging municipal elections, the government appointed administrators in the municipalities and corporations which ensured domination of the ruling party in most of the urban, semi urban or sub-urban spaces in West Bengal. Informal sectors such as auto-rickshaw, toto, etc. henceforth have been '*looked after*' by the local administration and the Police.

In an evening immediately after Kali Puja in October, 2022, I met Babun (38 years old), an auto-rickshaw driver, whom I had interviewed during my work in the

²⁴⁵ As evident from the chief minister's administrative meetings, which are broadcasted by the media and available for the public.

SWS RLS Research Project. He was also a neighbour in my previous locality. Since the beginning of his career as an auto-rickshaw driver, he had been a CITU member. He said that even in areas such as Jadavpur, trade unions such as INTTUC and CITU were inactive and had become almost non-existent. He briefed an incident involving a 'No Parking Notice' issued by the Kolkata Police during Durga Puja days. Such notices were a severe blow to the interest of auto-rickshaw drivers throughout the festive week. According to him, auto-rickshaw drivers of Jadavpur 8B to Tollygunge Metro route and the Jadavpur 8B to Ranikuthi route jointly met the local Police to negotiate and seek relief for them. Drivers from both INTTUC and CITU union went to meet the Police. Such a negotiation for the interest of drivers was one of the most important jobs of the trade union. Due to the absence of any such entity, the drivers, forgetting their political affiliation, met the local administration to find a way out of this situation. Babun concluded by saying 'that since 2018/ 2019, the trade unions gradually became inactive. They (drivers) were united to fight the odds and find solutions to their problems for themselves'. This conversation highlights the plight of trade unions and their future under the TMC regime.

The auto-rickshaw sector continued as it had become an integral part of the transport system within the city of Kolkata and its suburbs. The transport ministry and the Police have been controlling the sector for the last 5 to 6 years, if it actually comes to the question – then who is controlling? In 2016/ 2017, daily rent collection by the

union in the stand had become extremely irregular and there were disputes over control and authority among the various groups who now fought for dominance in all the auto stands. The smooth process of unquestioned collection of rent in the Left regime could not be continued. Later in 2019, this collection of rent started again but the process was not formal as in the CITU period. The course of input and output from grass-root level to the central authority through organisational hierarchy has been completely unachievable in the TMC regime. The auto-rickshaw, as a mode of intermediate transport, sustained in pressure due to the increasing presence of toto in entire West Bengal, except Kolkata.

The Toto Sector: A case of disorganised growth

This research work started with a hypothesis that organisation in the toto sector in West Bengal would be a prototype of the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata. In August 2016, during the time of title registration for this dissertation, toto had already become a much available medium of para-transit in North Bengal. Numbers were lesser in South Bengal, though the sector was expanding in the entire state. No sign of organisation was noticed in this sector. In fact, the organisation in the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata took 4 to 5 years to develop, since 1983. Through observing this sector, initially I had two assumptions, i) similar to the auto-rickshaw sector,

organisation in toto sector might take substantial time to grow and ii) a new form of organisation, different from party affiliated trade union, might be found here²⁴⁶.

In the next year (2017), when I was interviewing her, Dola Sen²⁴⁷ said that toto was illegal; therefore the party's trade union²⁴⁸ had nothing to do with the sector. This statement was a blow to my first assumption, i.e. with time, the drivers could organise themselves under a banner of a trade union, most likely INTTUC. The second chapter has discussed the trajectory of growth of the sector since 2014. The state government and the ruling party were immune to the growth of the sector. Consecutive cases and directions of the Court clarified the illegal status of unregistered totes. Totes which were plying initially had bodies assembled with Chinese parts. According to the Court, those vehicles did not match with the prescribed model of e-rickshaws. Therefore the judiciary directed toward replacing unregistered totes with registered e-rickshaws. Even in 2016, that was a tumultuous task which was next to impossible.

By that time, as per the policies of the Central Government, the local administration had started to map the sector within its periphery. Moreover due to the judiciary's directions, the trade union of the ruling party never moved to organise the sector. Even the statement made in the court rooms on behalf of the state government

²⁴⁶ Due to visible unwillingness of the Leaders of TMC and INTTUC.

²⁴⁷ She was a Member of Rajya Sabha and the State Secretary of the INTTUC.

²⁴⁸ All India Trinamool Trade Union Congress

suggest that the administration could not ban unregistered totos plying within the entire state within 3 or 4 months. As per clarifications given in court, the state government had a sympathetic outlook towards the thousands of families surviving on toto. Another reason cited by the state government was the vastness of the trade throughout the state. Initially the High Court was disappointed with the municipalities taking care of the sector, but after the recommendations of the 'High Power Committee' in 2016, permanently the urban and rural administration started to manage and control the trade. In the case of West Bengal, it was the party's local leaders who were in actual charge of that responsibility. Agencies of the political party were already becoming ineffective, rather useless according to the party leaders. The leaders maintained trust in the party and in the Supremo only. Therefore, to control these populations, the party remained as the sole agency. Being incumbent, officially it could not support the illegal trade. Therefore, the local leaders of the party silently carried on the responsibility. Officially, in urban and suburban areas, some restrictions were imposed. Periodic confiscations of totos in Siliguri were good examples. But unofficially, the ruling party leaders always had liaison with the drivers and stands in most of the areas. Thus the party officially maintained safe distance from toto, the entire charge of controlling the sector was carried out by the leaders of locality.

In this way the informal sector set to be controlled informally whereas during Left Front regime, formal trade unionism was successful in organising many of the informal labour sectors. But let us not judge the TMC regime by its informality. If, guided by Benthamite principles, maximization of happiness is the goal of life; then the incumbent TMC regime is undoubtedly successful. Rather, labelling those initiatives as informal would be wrong. Rather one could use ‘domestication’ as an alternative to informal. Technically, ‘informal’ is that, which is beyond the scope of law and legality. Those are the areas of problem for not just the rest of the society, but for the state as well. The political regime nowadays does not worry about finding solutions, but tries to minimise the pain in the every-day life of its population with its regular ‘utsavs’, i.e. festivals. Local artisans, sellers, organisers, etc. are financially benefitted and the rest of the populations are psychologically nourished by the mela (fair) and utsav. Among the populations, these successive festivals are ways to do away with their problems. Life moves on similar to a toto. Despite being labelled as illegal several times by the Calcutta High Court, they ply on every lane, in-road, main road and even in the high roads of the state. Eight years have passed, being informal and unorganised; the drivers are successfully winning their daily bread.

In 2017, SMC²⁴⁹ number plates had already been distributed among some toto drivers in Siliguri. Other municipalities in North Bengal as well as South Bengal, such

²⁴⁹ Siliguri Municipal Corporation

as Mal Municipality, Jalpaiguri Municipality, Burdwan Municipality, etc. started the distribution of number plate among drivers totos made in India. Siliguri Municipal Corporation, in the following years, started confiscation of totos made in China. Most of the confiscated totos made in China were destroyed by the SMC. Till the Durga Pujo of 2022, such confiscation occurred for four to five times within the Corporation area of Siliguri. Despite that, number of totos in Siliguri (both registered e-rickshaws as well as unregistered totos) has been increasing rapidly.

Siliguri Times, a local news channel, broadcasted a massive confiscation by the Siliguri Police on 14 September 2022, which was followed by massive protest by the drivers on the following days²⁵⁰. Such execution made after certain interval is a traditional method to of controlling an informal sector which is constantly expanding. When the government fails to frame policy for an informal sector, it carries out such coercive executions to scare the people of the sector as well as to assure the civil society that it will not spare anything illegal. More than 400 totos including some registered e-rickshaws²⁵¹ were confiscated and kept at Commissionerate Maidan. This administrative measure was the execution of a notification from the Siliguri Police Commissionerate, which was published few months back. The notification completely banned unregistered totos and restricted the registered e-rickshaws from plying on the

²⁵⁰ *Siliguri Times*, 'Siliguri Metropolitan Police takes action against E-Rickshaws once again, seizes 400 totos', 14 September 2022.

²⁵¹ Either unregistered or registered, toto or e-rickshaw is synonymous for the common people in West Bengal. Usually people are mostly familiar to the term toto.

main roads of the city and other high ways within the jurisdiction of Siliguri Metropolitan Police. Individuals whose vehicles were confiscated were owners of single totos. They accused that those who own 10/ 12 totos had ‘monetary setting’ with the police. The protesters claimed that, vehicles of such owners were never harassed by the police. Though the number of owners having 10/12 totos is comparatively much smaller but the possibility of people investing Rupees 20 lakhs to buy 10 totos is becoming a reality as such investment becomes lucrative. In such a situation, getting satisfactory return would not be a big deal. 10 totos can yield approximately Rs. 90000 to Rs. 1lakh, per month for the owner (excluding the driver’s share). This would jeopardise the existence of those who own one toto and earn from driving that. The number of drivers having bought a single toto with their utmost capacity and driving the same for their survival is in maximum. Many drivers, whom I met, mostly in North Bengal, have strongly demanded for – one individual one toto model, i.e. one individual driving his/ her own toto for breadwinning.

One of the protesters raised a question – “when the showrooms are selling totos in the city, why does the administration restricting us?” He suspected some political equation for the situation. He also demanded the money, spent to buy his toto, back from the government. Another female protester wanted to know if any other intermediate mode of transport could facilitate the passengers more than toto? Their only concern was breadwinning. Vehicles of some female drivers were also being

confiscated. Everyone in the city was aware of the fact that usually women who had taken up driving toto as profession were sole breadwinners of their family. Protesters, out of rage, gave call to stop other vehicles plying on road and requested other drivers of the city to go on a 'toto strike' for five days. They knew well the consequences of the city dwellers without toto for five days. Police had also confiscated the vehicle of a blind couple. They had managed to buy a toto²⁵² with municipal assistance due to their physical disability. They were severely concerned about the loss of their only source of income. Mother of a toto driver said that they had bought a toto for their son, who, after completing his education could not find a job. Toto has become a sector for those who could not find a suitable job within their town or village. The government, who cannot get rid of this huge portion of the population by banning the trade, neither can formalise them. In this situation, the government stands apathetic to the sector.

During 2018, within Panihati Municipality area, number plates from the Municipality office had been distributed. Within 2018/ 2019, Sodepur, Panihati, Agarpara area had visible number of totos along with auto-rickshaws. Auto-rickshaws were plying within specific routes on the main roads such as, Dunlop to Barrackpore, Sodepur Traffic more to Madhyamgram along with the lanes, such as Sodepur Station to Panihati Ferry Ghat. Thus the auto-rickshaw had already created a network to

²⁵² The couple had appointed a driver for their vehicle.

connect railway stations, bus stops, ferry ghats, etc. Most of the routes were registered with the RTO. Every route had office of the registered Trade Union, i.e. the INTTUC, an obvious choice in Trinamool Congress ruled West Bengal. Toto became visible in such a context, characterised by highly organised modes of transport such as auto-rickshaw. Such a situation was common for the Northern and Southern Suburbs of Kolkata only. In rest of West Bengal, it emerged to fill the gap between less available 8 sitter auto-rickshaws, magics, on the one hand and the cycle rickshaws on the other hand.

Political Control: Local leaders and administration

In 2019, while interviewing²⁵³ the toto drivers of Dhankal Sahid Colony stand, I got to know that they did not have any registered trade union. The Councillor of Ward Number 13, Jayanta Das, popularly called ‘Gobindo’ in his locality, is looking after the totes and theirs stands in his ward. Similarly, the rest of the councillors were doing the same in their wards. The councillor accepted that he is ‘taking care’ of the totes in his ward as per the party’s instruction.

In West Bengal, during those years, 2017, 2018 and 2019, mapping the sector from the Government’s side was being done locally by the local administration, Municipalities, Municipal Corporations and Panchayats, through issuing of number plates or registration numbers along with issuing notices from local administrative

²⁵³ Interviewed by the researcher in July 2019.

bodies or transport department. This process went on throughout West Bengal, inconsistently and never took the shape of rules/ regulations for the operation of the vehicle, i.e. formally this process never became a feature of the sector. The Calcutta High Court was initially upset with the role of municipalities and panchayats distributing TIN²⁵⁴ and fixing route and fare instead of the Regional Transport Authority. In all the areas chosen for interviews, this process continued inconsistently. Many toto drivers remained out of the list of the registered or numbered toto. Reportedly, apart from certain steps²⁵⁵ undertaken by the local administration, no common action throughout the state to map the entire sector had ever been made.

In December 2021, when I was interviewing the drivers in Siliguri and Chalsa, the process of registration from municipality with number plate had become a history. During that time, RTA in Siliguri was in charge for the registration and number plate. On the one hand, there was no mandatory clause for the drivers to get the vehicle registered from the RTO, despite periodic taking away of the non-registered vehicles by the City Police. Whereas the drivers of Chalsa, on the other hand, never faced any such police action and on the other hand the Mal Municipality stopped distributing number plates. Therefore they did not know what to do to become legitimate in the transport system or to formalise their sector. Simultaneously, the number of totos had been increasing all over the state.

²⁵⁴ Temporary Identification Number

²⁵⁵ Confiscation of totos without number plate in Siliguri Municipal Corporation Area

Drivers of Siliguri (within SMC area) never gave any information of their sector being taken care of by the local councillors. But a constant watch or connection from the Party's²⁵⁶ side has been maintained constantly. In the opinion of different drivers associated to the stands, it is clear that the local leaders of the ruling party have always maintained a connection. The drivers have approached the leaders several times to help them in organising themselves. But no leader, neither from the ruling party nor from the opposition tried to organise the sector in the locality, till initial months of 2022.

Siliguri, as a field for survey is unique in West Bengal. Despite being the most important city in the state after Kolkata, it had a Left and the INC²⁵⁷ dominated Municipal Corporation till the election in 2022. In the assembly election in 2016, Siliguri, Dabgram Fulbari and Matigara, these three constituencies were won by the BJP, Left and INC candidates. Even in 2021 Assembly election, TMC could not win Siliguri and Matigara. Furthermore, the TMC could never been successful in winning the Darjeeling Lok Sabha Constituency. Though, at last, after constant struggle for a decade, TMC has won the Municipal Election of 2022 without any alliance. People say that the incumbent Mayor Gautam Deb's role as an administrator²⁵⁸ till the

²⁵⁶ The ruling party Trinamool Congress

²⁵⁷ Indian National Congress

²⁵⁸ Department of Municipal Affairs, Government of West Bengal has appointed administrators in municipalities and corporations whose tenure was completed but the State Government could not arrange fresh municipal election. The opposition continuously blamed the TMC government for delaying the election. Apart from other reasons, the lockdown phase has also been cited by the government for the delay. In general, the administrators appointed were mostly from the ruling party.

municipal election has been noteworthy for the victory. In general sense, these data suggest that the opposition is mightier in the entire Darjeeling district, as the TMC, since its birth, could not win either the district or the city completely. In the Panchayat Election of 2018, the TMC had landslide victory even in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts. Though, political murders and violence during that election made headlines even by the National Media. Now, the outcome of the Panchayat election, in favour of the party, justifies the strong hold of in the rural areas. Even if we accept the claim of violence, still winning needs ‘vote machinery’ of the party to manage the ‘election’. The TMC, more than any other political parties, has a strong network of party workers in rural and urban spaces of Darjeeling district, including Siliguri.

A personal source²⁵⁹ within the ruling party confirmed that Dola Sen and Ritobrata Banerjee spent ample time since the assembly election of 2016 till the lockdown in North Bengal to organise the plantation labours. Their presence had benefitted the sector in such a way that in the aftermath of the lockdown phase, the TMC could mobilize a significant vote share during the Assembly election of 2021. Surprisingly, those forefront leaders of the party did not look towards organising the toto drivers. The entire population of the dooars, including the areas adjacent to the forests, depends on toto for local transportation. Even for the tourists, toto is the better option for a travel of even 8 to 10 kilometres. Tourists getting down at New Mal

²⁵⁹ During interviews of toto drivers in Champasari area of Siliguri in December 2021, I had the opportunity to meet a leader of the plantation labours in Gulma Mohorgong Tea Estate who was a friend of the respondent driver. The leader confirmed the fact.

Junction for a doors trip, also hire toto to reach Murti riverside resorts, a popular place for lodging, which is a distance of almost 16 kilometres. In such cases, totes are easily available and cheaper than rented four-wheelers. It is really astonishing that despite such prospects, the sector could not attract the party formally for its benefit.

In Narendrapur (Ward No. 26, Rajpur Sonarpur Municipality), a meeting of the toto drivers was summoned in August 2022. Councillor's husband, the de facto head of the ward, was the driving force for the meeting. The main stand of Raktan Gazir Majar, has some sub-stands around it. Drivers of those sub-stands identify themselves with the main stand. One of such a sub-stand is in Nobel Gate, with 8 toto drivers. The meeting sought to 'discipline' the movement of totes in the area. As the outcomes of the meeting, the leaders²⁶⁰ laid down certain norms which include – i) maintaining a strict line to get passengers, ii) passengers can only hire a toto from the queue of the stand, iii) weekly/ monthly contribution of Rs.70/ Rs. 300, etc. The second point has been interesting. All the 8 totes of this para/ locality depend mostly on the three residential complexes. Office goers, students and their parents, senior citizens, are regular passengers. Some of them regularly hire any of the totes to commute. In such cases, the passenger hires a toto over a phone call bypassing the queue in the sub-stand. Due to such hiring, disparity of daily earning becomes vivid. Therefore the local controlling authority, without considering the convenience of the

²⁶⁰ Local leaders of the ruling TMC

prime passengers (individuals of residential complexes) had taken a strict decision. Those can be considered as initial steps to formally organise a rapidly growing sector. Before the meeting in Narendrapur, the toto stands were managed by the husband of the Councillor, the de facto party head in the Ward. Though by the end of 2022, no declaration from any registered trade union, most likely INTTUC, has yet come to substantiate whether they are going to organise the sector in formal sense as in case of auto-rickshaw. It seems that Dola Sen's statement of 2017 is still guiding INTTUC's policies, formally.

While discussing about local administration, the Police has a traditional role in handling such an informal sector. Study on the auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata shows that how the relationship between the drivers and the Police has become a feature for the trade. Police, who have become a villain for the auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata, are apparently insignificant as per the opinion of drivers from North to South Bengal. Apart from periodic confiscation as per the instructions of the Municipal Corporation in Siliguri or detaining totes in the local police station during the lockdown phase, the Police have never been a threat or challenge for the drivers. Toto drivers hardly come across the Kolkata Police because toto is not permitted on road in the jurisdiction of Kolkata Police. In rest of the areas, as toto has become an obvious mode of transport, therefore a typical coexistence has developed between the two. Informal negotiations between the Thana (Police Station) and the Stand is an obvious feature. Clash or

violent movement between the two sides has never been reported. Rather, informal negotiations, such as paying monthly rent or one-time money to the Police, either by the Stand or by the individual driver are normal features.

None of the drivers, I have interviewed in South Bengal, have clearly narrated the relationship between the police and the toto drivers. They have strongly denied on being asked about any other harassment from the Police. For them, the informal negotiation with the Police through money is something which is very obvious for being in an informal sector, which does not need a special mention. In fact, the trade union usually plays a vital role in such negotiations with the sector and other agencies. The trade union, while acting as the agent of the sector can establish a uniformity regarding the settlement of such negotiations. In case of auto-rickshaw sector, the might of the Trade Union could be understood easily from the dominance of the auto-rickshaw drivers on roads which were strictly controlled by Kolkata Traffic Police.

Media representation of ‘toto union’

It has already been discussed in the previous chapters that the media has always an interesting role in representing the toto sector. The media often plays a very significant role in as a recogniser. Once media recognises a phenomenon and brings it to the public domain frequently, people become habituated with that. It is expected

that the media persons are aware of the fact that neither the INTTUC has yet extended itself officially to the sector, nor anywhere any toto stand has received registration number to form a trade union. Trinammol Congress and INTTUC have been officially indifferent on the issue of organising the sector. The local party leaders are usually taking care of the sector. A local leader is looking after the stand/s in his/ her locality. Drivers are usually claiming this arrangement as ‘amader union’/ our union. May be due to such claims, the media has been representing this arrangement as ‘toto union’²⁶¹. Mostly the news papers in West Bengal are using this term while reporting about the sector on several issues.

Thus, a group of toto drivers in a stand, having the support of local TMC, are claiming a ‘union’. Undoubtedly this too is a kind of organisation, or initial stage of organising an entire sector, but it would be wrong to claim such arrangements as a trade union. At the local level, on the one hand, the drivers feel safe claiming themselves as a part of the ruling party. The local leaders of the party, on the other hand, benefit by extending protection to the group. Due to such a set up, localities where leaders of the ruling party have factions among themselves, internal clashes are often reported²⁶². In such situations, all the factions of the leadership withdraw themselves from the toto sector leaving it uncontrolled and as well as unprotected.

²⁶¹ *Anandabazar Patrika*, ‘Rasta atke chada keno, khov toto unioner’, 9 February 2019; *Anandabazar Patrika*, ‘TMC: toto cholachol niye trinamool er kondol, oboruddho joshor road’, 5 September 2021; *Jagran*, ‘Progressive toto driver unionka gathan’, 26 October 2021; *Jagran*, ‘E-rickshaw chalako ne saupa SDO ko gyapan’, 8 April 2022; *Anandabazar Patrika*, ‘Chanda pachsho, na deoyay mar chalokke’, 12 March 2017.

²⁶² *Anandabazar Patrika*, ‘Toto niye jujudhan dui neta’, 10 September 2016.

Different initiatives by the drivers have been noted in regard to get the identity of union in their stands. Toto stands displaying a board with 'TMC Toto Union' written on it are common now a day. In Raninagar, Murshidabad, an NGO has been registered by the name '*Samajsebi* Toto Association' in January 2020. Its unique identity and registration number are WB/2022/0310054 and IV-120700001/2020 respectively. Its website displays 'Education & Literacy, Labour & Employment' as its key issues and achievements.

A few groups in Siliguri have already been visible who claim themselves as associations for toto drivers. North Bengal Toto Drivers and Owners Welfare Association is one such with West Bengal Government's registration number – 'W.B. Govt. Regd. No. – S-0006938'. This association also maintains a Facebook page and organises the drivers of several toto stands. The toto stand outside New Jalpaiguri Railway Station (NJP Railway Hospital Stand, Ward Number 34), displays the association's board in their stand. Another toto stand in Sahudangi Haat, works under the banner of this association. Both the stands are in eastern part of Siliguri but are under Jalpaiguri district. Expanded Siliguri city has areas of both Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts. Even some portion of Gorkha Territorial Administrations comes within the city. Such an initiative of forming registered association is unique. Such initiatives can be understood as ways to find an alternative in a situation where the traditional trade unions are not willing to organise the sector. Such associations, no

doubt, are political. Being regular to Siliguri, I know that the NJP stand is an old strong hold of TMC and nowadays a huge number of totos are associated with the stand. That stand is my smoking zone while exiting or entering the railway station. I have often wondered, “Why do the drivers need to build an association?” They were performing perfectly under the ‘shelter’ of TMC. Did they look for a distinct identity remaining within the party, similar to the workers of other sectors? Further introspection may clarify this. Siliguri Times and News18 report another organisation named ‘North Bengal Toto Driver and Welfare Association’ which had offered free rides for the needy students during Madhyamik (secondary) examination in February 2020²⁶³.

Jagran reported two incidents about organisation, one in Islampur (North Dinajpur) and the other in Siliguri²⁶⁴. During October 2021, in Panditpota -1gram panchayat under Islampur Block, the INTTUC organised a meeting in the rural health centre with local and district trade union leaders and more than 150 toto drivers. INTTUC being the mother body, created ‘Progressive Toto Driver Union’ to control and supervise the movement of totos. The motive was to safeguard the interest of common people and passengers as well as to protect the toto drivers from any harassment. The leaders pasted union’s sticker on every vehicle. Another report in

²⁶³ *News18*, ‘Toto Rickshaw Drivers’ Association Offers Free Rides to Poor Students in Siliguri on Secondary Exam Days, 13 February 2020; *Siliguri Times*, ‘North Bengal Toto driver and Welfare Association takes an initiative to provide free transport service for poor students’, 13 February 2020.

²⁶⁴ *Jagran*, ‘Progressive toto driver unionka gathan’, 26 October 2021; *Jagran*, ‘E-rickshaw chalako ne saupa SDO ko gyapan’, 8 April 2022.

April 2022, reported that a delegation of toto drivers with the banner of CITU Darjeeling District Committee, met the SDO of Siliguri, Sri Srinivas Rao Patil, to submit a deputation requesting to allow the toto drivers to ply on the main roads similar to the other vehicles. The deputation urged to allow the vehicles which were registered and had paid the tax. It was highlighted that after the lockdown phase, many people entered toto sector due to the loss of their job. In the post lockdown phase, the Siliguri City Police has been controlling the toto sector with severe strictness. The police are rigorously restricting the totos from reaching the main roads of the city. Periodic confiscation and scrapping of unregistered toto by the Municipal Corporation is also going on.

IG News, a local news portal of North Dinajpur, in November 2022, reported that the INTTUC met the members of Auto and Toto Drivers' Union at Karandighi to prepare roadmap for the upcoming panchayat election²⁶⁵. The meeting was held in the presence of Karandighi's MLA and the Presidents of District and City (Dalkhola) INTTUC. This meeting aimed at organising a grand meeting of auto-rickshaw and toto drivers of the district at Raiganj Sadar, in December 2022. It is clear from such reports that the sector is deeply connected to the party and trade union. The connection is so strong that the drivers of the district could be organised and deployed to promote the party in forthcoming panchayat election. But terming such informal

²⁶⁵ *IG News* (irshadgul.com), 'Meeting with toto and auto drivers at Karandighi', 14 November 2022.

organisation as ‘union’ will be wrong. Such kind of informal organisational setups are fragile and conditional. In areas where the ruling party cannot monopolise, or have factions within it, such informal organisations can hardly sustain. Moreover, such an arrangement is primarily focussed to meet the interest of the organiser, i.e. the party. The ‘shelter’ or protection the workers receive is basically a bi-product of serving the ruling party’s interest.

Politics of informality

Politics of informality refers to the ways in which informal practices and arrangements are used to exert political power and influence. Mainly it refers to the operational part of informal politics, i.e. the ways in which informal politics operates²⁶⁶. This can involve both the use of informal practices to achieve political goals, as well as the ways in which formal political actors and institutions respond to or interact with informal practices and actors.

In many cases, the politics of informality is associated with situations where formal institutions and rules of governance are weak or ineffective. In such contexts, informal practices and actors may fill the gaps left by formal institutions, and may even become dominant forces in shaping political outcomes. In the third world

²⁶⁶ Claire Bénit-Gbaffou, Sophie Oldfield, ‘Claiming”rights” in the African city: Popular mobilisation and the politics of informality; Published in Susan Parnell, Sophie Oldfield, ‘*The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*’, London, Routledge, pp.281-296, 2014.

countries, with weak civil society institutions and rule of law, informal networks and patronage systems may be used to secure political power or access to resources.

The Left regime was marked by the range of activeness of its agencies in different layers of the society. Specific agencies developed to organise and take care of different group of people in the society throughout the left rule in West Bengal. Though, history of trade union in Bengal can be traced much before the beginning of Left Front's rule in West Bengal. In particular, the trade union was the agent of the working class and vanguard for their interests. Though every prominent trade union was guided by the affiliating Political Party, still they had their distinct identity, line of action and proposals. The workers could claim the trade unions as their own agency. Trade union as the specific agency for the workers was different qualitatively from any of those authorities such as local Councillors, who have been managing the trade. I have heard a phrase '*dada amader dekhen*' from the toto drivers about the local Councillors in municipal areas of South Bengal which meant the local leader looked after the toto drivers, in the sense of managing or supervising their day to day affairs. This cannot be claimed as similar to common claim of workers/ drivers - '*amader songothon*', which means 'our organisation'.

'The gap in the regulatory mechanism of the State was filled by the trade union. Among informal workers in the city, auto-rickshaw operators are one of the most 'organised' in more ways than the obvious one of being unionised. The day-to-

day management of the auto-rickshaws were in the hands of the trade union wing in each stand. Trade union membership among the auto-rickshaw drivers is perhaps the most common feature²⁶⁷. Sen explains how the auto-rickshaw, being informal, is highly organised in Kolkata, operates in its own way²⁶⁸. Though informal, still the drivers had an immediate protection, the trade union, which could protect them from Police atrocities, threats from other transports, etc. Furthermore, the trade union was exclusively their agency to place their demands to the government. As discussed earlier, the TMC regime since 2011 neither facilitated further growth of agencies as means of political control nor kept them active.

Initially after coming to the power in West Bengal for the first time, TMC had a good number of agencies and associations affiliated to it. Due to the deep influence of its predecessor, the mother party nourished the agencies for few years. But the political management of the party was different from its predecessor. The CPIM, due to its internal management, could successfully handle all those agencies for such a long time, while all the agencies benefitted the electoral interest of the party. Just after the victory in Assembly election of 2011, there was a huge shift of political affiliation in almost every layer of the society in West Bengal. This has been discussed in the auto-rickshaw phase of this chapter. With that shift, it looked like as if the new party

²⁶⁷ Samita Sen, 'Organised Informality: Auto-Rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper13, Tradecon, Kolkata, 2016.

²⁶⁸ Samita Sen, '*Organised Informality: Auto-Rickshaw Drivers in Kolkata*', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper13, Tradecon, Kolkata, 2016.

in power had similar agencies to control different sectors. With time, agencies of same sector got multiplied to maintain a balance between the contending leaders of the party. For the youth wing, two agencies were created, apart from the Students' Union²⁶⁹. After few years since 2011, the various agencies which were born with the party ascending to power lost their effectiveness. For the common voters, it was the TMC which was omnipresent and its Supremo as the only face of the party. Undoubtedly, the Supremo till date has an unmatched charisma to mobilise voters in pan West Bengal.

The election of 2016 was interesting. The Left entered into an alliance with INC, whereas the BJP was increasing its vote share in the State. The incumbent party already had been labelled for severe corruption charges along with many of its important leaders. The urban population and the mainstream media within the state were sanguine of the defeat of the incumbent. At this juncture, the Supremo travelled entire Bengal and gave a call to the voters to vote for her. She asked the voter to consider her as the candidate in every constituency forgetting individual leaders. Unlike 2011, TMC emerged as victorious without any alliance. This phenomenon however cleared the nature of the party. The Supremo is the only power centre and she needs no one to win the election. Hence the Supremo and her party, being omnipresent in the state moved for the forthcoming challenges.

²⁶⁹ NDTV, 'Mamata Banerjee Sets Stage for Nephew Abhishek for Bigger Role in Trinamool', 18/10/2014, link - <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-sets-stage-for-nephew-abhishek-for-bigger-role-in-trinamool-680826>

Now, the obvious question is where does the toto sector exist in the political milieu of the state? Toto, similar to the illegal²⁷⁰ appointment of Civic Volunteers, generated employment in the state, since 2014. The nature of operation of the sector, as discussed in second chapter satisfied a large section of the mass in the districts. Initially, the trade had only faced challenges from pre-existing cycle-rickshaws and auto-rickshaws, which they could overcome not because of their organisation, but mostly due to the exclusive closeness to a specific locality and unique nature of the transport. During the initial years of auto-rickshaw, the local unemployed youths got the permit to drive the vehicle. When the routes were informally decided by changing the very nature of the transport, i.e. from contract carriage to stage carriage, mostly the drivers got attached to stands close to their localities. This proximity benefitted every agency or individual connected with this trade. But toto never had to work on any strict line of action, since its introduction in West Bengal. People in the locality relied on the toto driver of their *para*/ locality. This is already proven during the Pandemic days. Those who have not yet attached to any stand usually start their daily operation or plying from the *para* and end up in the same place. In case of any 'phone call' from any individual of the *para* (locality) for a trip booking, a driver usually get chance for an extra income in the day. Such phone calls are generally for full contract of the carriage for a trip which is obviously beneficial for the drivers because they

²⁷⁰ Rajat Roy, 'Nothing Succeeds Like Success in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, No. 22, pp. 24-26, May 28 2016.

drivers do not have to wait for shared trips. Thus, even if they had challenges, but who could resist a '*parar chele*' (local boy/man) to earn from such a profession? Therefore toto is surviving comfortably since 2014. Problem arises within the sector, when more men want to buy toto and get into the sector. The roads get unusually crowded with totes, income of the earlier drivers get slashed, etc. this is common when such a sector is beyond the control of any authority.

Samita Sen²⁷¹, during a conversation with me regarding her work on auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata, said that the ruling TMC had already understood that they were no more capable of channelizing the money extorted as rent from the auto-rickshaw drivers from leaders at the ground level to the party fund due to severe factionalism within the party organisation. Therefore they had not taken the risk to introduce that Left originated system in toto sector, though they had ample opportunity to do so. Party's factionalism and absence of hierarchical strictness is well known and had become news headlines for numerous times. Instead of party workers and agencies such as trade union, there has been a new way of political control since the assembly election of 2016. The new mode was deployment of people in administration to control such informal sectors. The highest authority might have realised that the people in administrative positions, either representatives or bureaucrats can be controlled easily from the power centre. Incidents such as

²⁷¹ In September 2018, she had this observation during a talk on her work related to auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata.

controlling toto sector by the Councillors, trade unions becoming mere sign boards, the top trade union leader opining for direct ‘table-talk’²⁷² between the workers and the government, since the Assembly Election of 2016 strengthen the assumption of Sen regarding change in the method of political control.

As discussed earlier in the previous sub-heading, the incumbent as well as opposition parties have clearly overlooked the problems of the sector. As we have seen in other informal sectors such as auto-rickshaws, the political party or any other local authority involves in extortion of rent from the sector. But throughout the empirical work for this thesis, none of the toto drivers has been vocal about a systematic or consistent client-patron relationship between the sector and the authority, i.e. political party or the police. In areas such as Siliguri, Dooars, where both the ruling and the opposition parties are strong, toto drivers work more independently. But in rest of places in West Bengal, where the ruling party stands unparallel, the sector is visibly managed by the party men in their localities, may it be the Councillor or the most prominent leader of the area.

It is clear that there is not yet any systematic extortion or seeking of rent by the ruling party in its areas of dominance. However, does that imply protection and care free of cost? Then how does the ruling political party benefit from managing the sector? If rent extortion (though denied by drivers as well as party leaders) is

²⁷² The term used by Dola Sen, in an interview with the researcher in September 2017.

overlooked, even then, nobody could deny that the sector is beneficiary. In South Bengal, unlike in Northern districts, most of the toto drivers are associated with a stand in their locality. Hence the local Councillor or the leaders of the locality who are managing of the sector usually involve those drivers during the time of election and electoral campaign. A candidate campaigning through the suburban or rural streets in a procession of totos has become a regular phenomenon in West Bengal during election. Similar to the auto-rickshaws in Kolkata, the toto drivers carry the ruling party's banner during the election time. Apart from these, physical presence of the toto drivers in the booth office of the ruling party and around the polling centre, '*to check if any voter has any problem*' is common in South Bengal, especially in the suburbs of Kolkata. The auto-rickshaw drivers had similar role in Kolkata. These are the traditional role of such locally operating informal workers. The question still remains ambiguous as to how the toto drivers are beneficiary for the political leaders apart from their role during election.

As per the available primary data, if we forget the probability of 'rent seeking on daily or monthly basis', there are a few notable points which suggest at least two benefits of the ruling party in changing their strategies of political control. First, self-employment through toto has relieved the ruling party in a sense that a large section of probable job seekers of the locality are nowadays busy with toto and earning a sum of Rs. 15000 to Rs. 18000 per month. These kinds of self-employments are supporting

the state government to claim that West Bengal is in '*Number 1*'²⁷³ in job creation. Such employment generations usually save the Government from increasing load of unemployment. The Left regime, in a formal way, introduced auto-rickshaw through SESRU Scheme in 1983/ 1984 for the educated unemployed youths in erstwhile Calcutta. Second, the change in the instrument of political control is a striking feature in the TMC regime.

As Sen remarked that the ruling party TMC being aware of its party management throughout its first term in power deployed the representatives in urban and local governments to control the rapidly expanding toto sector. Alongside, the police was also a tool in the metropolitan and urban areas. The local administrators, such as the councillor are not just a local party leader but works in a formal hierarchy under the chairman or mayor and the minister in charge of the Urban Development & Municipal Affairs. Apart from party loyalty, they are bound by another interest, i.e. keeping their chances open for being nominated as candidates in the next election. Proving resourceful to the party is a way to ensure ticket for the same position or get promoted in different ways. Therefore, at least hypothetically, it can be said that the councillors controlling the toto sector in municipal areas might be successful in

²⁷³ Outlook, '*West Bengal Will Be No. 1 In Creation Of Jobs In 4-5 Years: Mamata*', 30/10/2022, Link - <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/west-bengal-will-be-no-1-in-creation-of-jobs-in-4-5-years-mamata-news-223617>

generating 'resource' for the party from the sector. Otherwise such a vital change in the controlling mechanism would not be needed at all.

CPI(M), during the Left regime, had salaried party cadres. Some of the cadres who were 'whole-timers', i.e. exclusively serving the party for 24x7, used to get honorarium for their personal and family expenditures. Those party workers who were employed in government sector or private sectors were out of this system. This kind of payment of honorarium for the party workers was possible due to a perfect rent seeking network in every corner of the society. '*Chanda tola*' (rent seeking) for the interest of the working class's party, was not any secret during the Left regime. Amount of regular rent in such informal sectors was usually a minimum sum of money. But the regular rent created a sense of connection between the workers/labours and the party. The rent was collected openly in the name of the party and the workers paying the rent willingly or unwillingly had developed attachment with the party with the party. Even if some of the rent payers were not the supporter of the party, they had option to approach the leaders during any crisis. Mamata Bannerjee was vocal against this fund raised by the CPIM agencies and cadres since her active involvement in politics. Though, in the initial years of TMC rule, the INTTUC used to collect rent from the auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata in the same CITU style. But the system stopped with the decreasing effectiveness of the trade union.

From the 'mediatory nature of its politics' ²⁷⁴ as highlighted by Partha Chatterjee to maintaining a 'Party Society' ²⁷⁵ throughout its regime, the left had undoubtedly strengthened the sections of society through those agencies. However the Left could penetrate in each and every section of the society because of the effectiveness of those agencies, such as trade union, Kisan Sabha, youth organisation such as DYFI, Mahila Samiti, etc. Public space was exclusively under the control of party and its agencies. Likewise they could influence the personal sphere as well. But in the aftermath of the Left rule, the TMC with its Supremo as the power centre exposed a different model. Instead of agencies, allegiance to the leaders and the connection of those leaders with the central authority has become the type of networking in the party. The Supremo being the centre of power has constantly changing faces of close associates around her. Thus political networking within the party is in a sense new as well as dynamic. With this new way, the party had been able to reach every corner of the society due to the political culture prevailing since the Left regime. The party remains present in every incident in resource management in public space. Resource management in public space without party's intervention was unthinkable during the Left rule as the party itself had become the only mediator and the process of mediating continued through its agencies and local committees. Political culture has been inherited, but the nature of operation has changed. Instead of

²⁷⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *'The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism'* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

²⁷⁵ Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, *'Government as Practice, Democratic Left in a transforming India'*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

agencies, nowadays, individual leaders have become the negotiators. While an individual leader fails, another leader or a government official who is presumed to be more loyal to the party takes over the responsibility to mediate. Thus the informal labours such as toto drivers, even if they have the capacity to organise themselves, remain as a group or a sector to take care by the leader or an administrator. An obvious question that arises is "How can the leader voice the problems or demands of these workers? How a party loyalist would do that on behalf of such an informal sector?" Hence the drivers as actors of informal politics even lose the capacity to bargain for their interest and place their demands to the government. Even the auto-rickshaw drivers could bring the city (Kolkata) to a standstill owing to their demand. In those days, despite left rule, both CITU and INTTUC had political space to work for the drivers. Though the CITU dominated in all possible ways, still space for trade unions of the opposition parties existed.

Though most of the drivers, in interviews, initially claimed that they did not give any daily rent or one time donation in their stand, but ethnographic accounts were different. Even the few newspaper reports also indicated toward the existence of rent seeking in toto sector. When a political party informally organises a sector, any statement denying rent seeking, daily or monthly would be wrong. Rent seeking in toto sector has been discussed earlier in the second chapter. Drivers usually denied rent seeking when they are interviewed in their stands. Some of my respondents when

interviewed individually outside their stand acknowledged the practice of rent seeking. Drivers even accepted this practice in their ethnographic accounts.

In December 2022, I interviewed two drivers, Prabir Raul²⁷⁶ (42 year old) and Shahbiddin Mandal²⁷⁷ (33 year old) who were the secretary and treasurer of their stand in Narendrapur. They informed that drivers pay a rent of Rs. 300 per month as a donation of membership instead of Rs. 10 on daily basis. The secretary used to keep the collected sum was kept in cash till they could manage to get a bank account. They were not accepting any new vehicle in their stand till the date of the interview, so there was no question of donation for enrolment in the stand. But the secretary added that, the toto stand in Sonarpur Railway Station which had already got registered, charged Rs. 70000 to Rs. 80000 for enrolment in the stand. Quite naturally, I was surprised to know the sum. They assured that footfall in that stand was so high that the drivers could earn much more within a year than what they had paid in enrolling themselves. When I further enquired as to who collected such huge amounts, the treasurer hurriedly intervened to explain that the money was only used for the benefit/welfare of the drivers. The phrase – ‘benefit of the drivers’ had already become old due to its frequent use for justification of the fund created through rent seeking since the Left Front era. I accepted and asked whether they were sure that the stand had got registered under INTTUC. I cited them some examples explaining how a few

²⁷⁶ Name changed; Interviewed by the researcher in December 2022.

²⁷⁷ Name changed; Interviewed by the researcher in December 2022.

associations had been registered in North Bengal, which were not trade unions, but were organising the toto drivers. Then the treasurer caught my line and accepted that their stand too was going to get that kind of registration, i.e. registration as an association which would help them to open an account in any bank. But that kind of registered association cannot be called as a trade union. For Prabir and Shahbuddin, TMC and INTTUC were coterminous. They admitted that whatever had been done since 2021 was done under the leadership of Shahenshah Mandal, the husband of the councillor and undisputed leader of their ward. Kolkata Police did not allow any toto to enter in its jurisdiction but the Bengal Police had never yet harassed them. Their areas of plying were under the Narendrapur P.S. and Sonarpur P.S. Despite judicial directions, the police had never been a threat for them. They accused the earlier councillor, who was also from TMC, for misguiding the toto drivers and their fund. Their stand in Narendrapur was constituted (informally) in 2016. She (the earlier councillor) appointed a toto driver, named Tona, to take care of the stand. During that period, each driver used to pay Rs. 5, per day to the stand secretary. According to the respondents, Tona, the then stand secretary and the ex-councillor had misused approximately Rs. 150000/- which was collected as daily rent from the toto drivers. Being a resident I have seen a constant tussle in ward number 26 of Rajpur Sonarpur Municipality from 2020 to 2022, between the lobbies of Tumpa Das (ex-councillor) and Shahensha Mandal (husband of the present councillor). In 2022, with the ‘grace’

of a very important leaders of TMC, Mandal triumphed and managed to get the ticket of municipal election in his wife's name. So, from 2022, as claimed by the respondents, 'Shahhensha Da'²⁷⁸ was managing and had systematised their stand. Drivers accused that they had been 'misguided' by the ex-councillor (TMC) and their fund (generated through daily rent) was misused; they were mostly without any protection during those days. Thereafter, they were stuck in a headlock between two lobbies of the ruling party and since the municipal election of 2022 they are being lead by the husband of the newly elected councillor (TMC). The party wanted to avoid any more clash within groups of the incumbent councillor and ex-councillor, therefore, the drivers had been discouraged to demand for that sum of Rs. 1, 50000/-. Moreover, the drivers knew that, none of the vehicles of the stand was registered e-rickshaw, i.e. all the vehicles were 'illegal'. At this juncture, their leader, the dada, was proceeding to register an association for the stand. If thousands of toto stands start applying for association registration, the state government undoubtedly, will be benefitted. But further observation through a particular period and research may do justice to the question of benefit of the drivers and their sector.

Till now, we have noticed that due to the absence of any centralised agency such as trade union, the toto sector is getting organised locally. The top leaders of the trade union claimed that as toto was illegal, therefore they would not organise the

²⁷⁸ An elder brother, in Bengali, is addressed by fixing 'da' after his name.

sector. The senior leadership of the party surprisingly kept themselves unaware. The court banned unauthorised totos and directed the government for several times to allow only registered e-rickshaws to ply exclusively within lanes and in-roads. But the government, every time, highlighted the sympathetic ground of thousands of families who survive on toto within the state, but assured the judiciary regarding implementing the directions, as early as possible. In the meantime, the state had been through one general election, two assembly elections, two panchayat elections, several municipal elections and waiting for the forthcoming panchayat election in 2023, general election in 2024 and assembly election in 2026.

Now, we know from field interviews and media reports that the ruling party is active in assembling and organising the toto drivers at local level. The party organisations in the rural West Bengal, want to deploy those groups to facilitate their victory in the next panchayat election in 2023. Naturally, panchayat election, as it has ample chances to influence the General Election in 2024, is very important for every party. It is expected that the ruling party would not let the government to take any decision which could affect the sector adversely. The toto network or the network which the toto drivers have developed within a locality is excellent. In my last interview, Prabir Raul, said that the drivers in his stand earned more in reserved trips (trips on contract) which they got through their network with passengers. Therefore, the interdependence of the drivers and the leaders would continue. I must add an

interesting point in this regard. Some drivers exist in every stand, who, similar to Prabir and Shahbuddin, have got party responsibilities as well. The local head of the party has appointed them. Alongside, party responsibilities have also been bestowed upon them. Now it is hard for them to prioritise any of the two identities – toto driver and party worker. Instances of toto drivers becoming local party leaders or even representatives in panchayats and municipalities can be found in this political regime. This kind of upward mobility of some from such groups must be appreciated. The CITU leader, who had also worked for the auto-rickshaw union in Kolkata, became a minister in Left Front Government in its 7th term. The TMC leader of Prabir's ward in Narendrapur was also associated with rickshaw-pulling in his initial days.

Trinamool Congress, as a party lacks the organisational discipline, which existed in CPI (M). Therefore, the negotiations between the local leader/s and the toto drivers do not cross the border of the locality. Due to this, the local leaders usually take care of their own benefits more than the collective benefit of the party. Absence of organisational discipline makes it difficult for the party to ensure exclusive control over the local leaders. Instead of a relationship between government, party and drivers, the toto sector shows two layers of relationships. The primary is among the drivers and the local leaders and the secondary is between government, party and the sector as a whole. The primary relationship is of more concern for the ruling party. The concerns can be of two kinds – i) political control at local level and ii) electoral

benefits for the party generating from that control. Prof. Samita Sen raised a similar concern during our conversation²⁷⁹, few years back. She had a hypothesis that as the ruling party cannot ensure an organisational discipline from grass root level to the highest authority, therefore the party had not been indulging itself to organise a fresh informal sector like toto. But now, at the end of this work, I observe that, despite chances of dilemmas due to factionalism and presence of strong opposition party, ruling party leaders at grass root level are operating as a distinct layer. Moreover in the matter of organisational strength, TMC is much ahead of other parties in the state. As per the charges labelled against a number of top leaders of the ruling party, we can assume the nature of extortion at higher level, though, none of the charges have been proven at court and verdicts are pending. It might be the situation that the extortion from such informal sectors, which are beyond the control of government and highest leadership of the ruling party, had been assigned as a stake of the local leaders. Extortion continues in different layers, horizontally. With the change in political regime, nature of extortion might have undergone changes. Now, I assume, it is horizontal, continuing in parallel layers. The concern is no more organisation or control. These are secondary, primarily extortion and creation of fund is more important, which helps in electoral victories. It was rumoured in the locality during the municipal election of 2022 that the husband of the ruling party candidate had secured the ticket for her by donating a sum of 1 cr. in the party fund. Though, I

²⁷⁹ In September 2018, Sen observed this during a talk on auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata.

believe that as a rumour, but somehow that does not contradict the nature of extortion in toto sector.

In November 2022, in a governmental programme, in Hingalganj, it was scheduled that the Chief Minister would distribute 15000 blankets and winter garments²⁸⁰. It so happened that the garments to be distributed were not ready due to lack of coordination. The chief minister then made an interesting statement. She was disappointed with the non-functioning bureaucracy of the government. She told the mass audience that she was always blamed for any fault of the bureaucracy or the police. She added that most of the time she was not updated about such incidents, as happened on that day. She ordered winter garments out of her concern for the people but those were kept away from her during the event. Then she announced that she would sit and wait with the mass audience till the garments arrived – ‘*apnarao bosun, amio boslam*’. She actually waited for 15 minutes till the garments arrived. She had been caring and motherly as usual, to the masses. But, I have seen that incident as she had been claiming herself as a distinct entity from the administration, as if she and the government are two distinct entities. It had been portrayed that, the administration with the bureaucracy and police often committed mistakes, but she should not be blamed for those. Yet she, being the Chief Minister could punish those officers. As

²⁸⁰ *The Indian Express*, ‘Clothes for distribution not at venue, Mamata stalls event’, 30 November 2022.

Zee 24 Ghanta (youtube link), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vfKb-ZHepA>

the motherly figure, she cared for the mass and therefore wanted to distribute winter garments directly, and not through any agencies. She has always been known to connect to the masses or to understand the pulse of the people in the best possible way. But the incident was confusing and raised the following questions - against whom did she sit to protest and give a call to the masses to do the same? Why should she not be blamed for any mistakes committed by the bureaucracy or the police? Did not she consider herself a part of the formal structure in parliamentary government where the chief minister and the council of ministers administer the state through bureaucracy, police and other public servants? A critique or a scholar could get the right message. But what about those who were counted as populations? She went there exclusively for those who are counted in the population. She had clearly distanced herself from the 'formal' (administration, law, bureaucracy, police, etc.). Then what was left was the 'informal', which could not be judged always by legality but with emotions and sympathy. Whatever is beyond the scope of legality is informal. In a constitutional democracy as India, affairs of nation state and civil society are guided by legality. But, as Chatterjee²⁸¹ explained, a huge section of the population cannot be adjusted within the ambit of legality by the nation state. Those people understand emotions, demonstrations, as well as care, sympathy better than legality. I understood the entire scenario as the political head creating distinction between the formal and the informal. The political head of the government as well as

²⁸¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2016.

the party then chose to distance herself from the formal structure. Throughout her tenure, she has been successful in accommodating such informal ways and means in the system.

The Left regime initiated contractual employment, but their trade unions never organised those contractual employees or labours. The trade unions escaped with a ‘remarkable’ justification – ‘as the party does not support contractual labour, therefore they would not organise them’. But Mamata has been successful in accommodating those contractuels and other informals. Appointment of state aided college teachers, civic volunteers, were some of the instances. She had been vocal in promoting deep fried snacks, locally famous as ‘*telebhaja*’ and ‘*chop*’, as a way towards economic independence of many people. Her regime promoted ‘*mela* and *utsabs*’ (fair and festivals) throughout the year where small traders and artisans could participate. I am honestly not criticizing her for ‘fair and festivals’ culture, she had been successful in connecting every corner of Bengal, which her elite predecessors could not do.

Toto was another sector which bloomed best in her era. But the problem is informality does not provide security and further, informality combined with lack of political control can jeopardise the sector, as well as people connected to it. At present, i) illegal status due to court’s direction, ii) the sector lacks a common *modus operandi*, iii) it is due to absence of formal and centralised control, iv) therefore, extortion of rent and other donations can be assumed as huge and unclear, and v)

rapid increase in number of vehicles, are major challenges for the sector. The third, fourth and fifth points are capable enough to transform the sector into a villain in the political system. Auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata, also operated within an informal framework with vivid para-legalities, but trade union's undisputed control had been able to systematize and formalise the sector up to certain extent. Though formalising process was not in terms of legality. Hale (2014) observes that constitutions influence an individual's behaviour primarily by shaping that individual's expectations as to the behaviour of others. But the way such expectations are shaped differs fundamentally depending on whether the underlying social context is characterized by high degrees of *patronalism*, a syndrome typically manifesting itself in weak rule of law, high levels of corruption, strong patronage politics, and low levels of social capital²⁸². Her party, as Chatterjee (2004) said, has been trying to accommodate some expectations of those populations through informal means and negotiations, while undermining the issues of rule of law, corruption and low levels of social capital in the state.

²⁸² Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, ed. '*Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*', Chapter 10, Cambridge University Press 2014.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Summary of the arguments

This thesis has discussed how informality has shaped the nature and labour practices of the two sectors, auto and toto, and influenced the social expectations and perceptions of the drivers in both these segments of the intermediate transport sector. It has shown how the change in the political regime affected labour practices including nature and scale of organisation and modes of rent-seeking in these two sectors. It has been discussed that from the initial decades of auto-rickshaw to the time of toto, the nature of organisation has changed radically. The role of trade union has diluted.

The second and third chapters started with the trajectory of growth and then discussed the functioning and labour practices in auto-rickshaw and toto sector respectively. Auto-rickshaw was initiated in West Bengal through Government's scheme of 'self-employment', and was included in the state government's Motor Vehicles Rules 1989. According to legal experts, the Motor Vehicles Act 1988 is applicable for the four wheelers and above and therefore it does not include the auto rickshaw. An auto rickshaw is only included in the category of the 'motor cab' in the West Bengal Motor Vehicle Rules 1989, where a motor cab, is defined as a 'motor vehicle constructed or adapted to carry not more than six passengers excluding the drivers for hire or reward'. The Central Act of 1988 identifies the motor cab as 'contract carriage'. The Act makes a clear differentiation between contract and stage

carriage, with the stage carriage defined as a system of transport which runs on a fixed route. The fare is fixed according to each stage. Both the fare and route are fixed by the RTA. Thus, the mode of the movement of auto rickshaws on the roads is not fully legal according to the Motor Vehicles Rules 1989.

Auto rickshaw appears to be an amalgamation of features from both stage carriage and contract carriage. The auto-rickshaw runs on a fixed route and its route and fare are decided by the trade union. The vehicle runs on fixed routes as in a stage carriage, number of passengers it carries, etc. are areas which make auto rickshaw an amalgamation of both stage carriage and contract carriage. The second chapter has studied four issues in this regard. First, the auto-rickshaw trade has developed over the years under the protection of trade unions affiliated to the ruling party, which has enabled them to exercise considerable control over fares, routes and other operational details usually regulated by the state (as in case of buses and taxis). Second, despite or because of the informality of the sector, the nature of their politics and their relationship with unions and political parties has also remained informal. Third, this informality is highly valued by political parties, who have deployed auto-rickshaw drivers for direct gains in electoral politics. Fourth, there has been a constant tension between unions who resist demands for rights and welfare from drivers and drivers, who expected greater gains from their involvements in unions.

The history of toto was similar, though the trajectory of organisation stands in stark contrast. On 8 October 2014, the Road Transport Ministry, Government of India, made a notification to amend the Central Motor Vehicles Act 1988 and include the e-rickshaw under the category of special purpose battery operated vehicle having three wheels and intended to provide last mile connectivity for transport of passengers for hire or reward. This notification was followed by an amendment bill in the Lok Sabha, further notifications from the central ministry and notifications from transport departments of the states. In West Bengal, the Transport Department made a notification on 27 April 2015, probably for the first time in case of e-rickshaw/toto, to allow the district administration to issue license for the drivers and registration for the vehicle. This notification refers the Central Government's Road Transport Ministry's Notification on 8 October 2014 and acknowledged the issue of infiltration of 'illegal e-rickshaws/totos' on rural and urban roads and the popularity of this mode of transport. I have come across another two notifications from Regional Transport Authority of North 24 Parganas, referring the state government's notification on 27 April 2015. Parallel to these notifications from governmental bodies in West Bengal, a series of judgment came from the Calcutta High Court, which challenged the status of e-rickshaw in this state. In the earlier months of 2016, the Calcutta High Court again asked the State's Transport Department to clarify their position on the plying of e-rickshaws on the roads of this state. Newspaper reports of this period indicate no

clear movement of the state government on the issue of illegal infiltration of e-rickshaws in rural and urban roads even by the end of 2016. It appears that the state government was waiting for further judgments of the Calcutta High Court on the status of e-rickshaws.

The notifications of the transport department indicated that the policy makers were aware of the present state of e-rickshaws/totos on the rural and urban roads in this state. Mostly acting as intermediate mode of transport, e-rickshaws have multiplied their number heavily in suburban and rural roads and their acceptance among the people also justify their increase in numbers. With these e-rickshaws, places got connectivity, which were deprived from being connected by conventional mode of transports like bus, taxis, etc. Apart from these facts, the infiltration of e-rickshaws have ensured livelihood to a large number of people in rural, suburban and urban spaces of West Bengal. With a low maintenance cost, plying as both ‘contract carriage’ and ‘stage carriage’, and fare starting from Rs 10/- for each passengers (in case of acting as stage carriage), the e-rickshaw is becoming most popular mode of intermediate transport in rural, suburban and urban areas of West Bengal (except Kolkata). Therefore, policy makers, who depend on votes, are hesitating to restrict the movement of e-rickshaws. On the other hand, the judiciary is taking a stand against e-rickshaw, because of its absence in the Motor Vehicles Rules. Therefore, these operators were operating under illegal status, even in 2022. Instead of waiting for a

common policy, municipalities started to distribute number plate, registration slip for totos plying within their jurisdiction. Later on, it became evident that councilors have become guardians or caretakers of the toto sector in municipal areas. This is a time in West Bengal, when the ruling party has majority councilors in municipalities. The dissertation shows that the sector is trying to organize under the leadership of local councilor (or a ruling party leader) instead of in traditional trade union.

The fourth chapter has tried to understand the two sectors and the workers in their social context. Social expectations of the drivers have shaped the nature of these two sectors. In the auto-rickshaw sector, middle-class passengers and the media had mounted strident criticism, resulting in a class tension within the sector. Whereas, in toto sector networks with local passengers have become extremely vital for success of the trade. Toto drivers in districts can easily connect them with their passengers, because most of the passengers in districts are from similar economic background. Expression of class differences through outfits or apparels are less in the districts compared to the metropolitans. There has not much struggle for upward class mobility among the drivers in toto sector. From the beginning, owning and driving toto have given them a sense of upward mobility. In rural and suburban areas, toto drivers have a sense of belonging to the middle class.

The gender question is of considerable importance in understanding the link between the structure of the occupation and its politics. Generally, informal trades are

not characterised by strong organisations. But the case of auto rickshaw sector is different. These fully male dominated sectors are highly organised, but are informal in nature. I have noted some remarkable characteristics in the politics of this sector. First, while traditionally the formal transport sector was focused on the ‘single male bread winner model’, the opposite was visible in the case of informal transport sector where whole families had to work. The auto rickshaw drivers, we see, aspire to the single male bread winner model and in a bulk of cases they try to support non-working wives and children. Second, the auto rickshaw drivers, who work in a highly organised, yet informal passenger transport sector, have an urge for upward class mobility. Most of them, want to identify themselves as ‘*bhadraloks*’.

Being a part of informal transport sector, which is constructed by a strong sense of masculinity, the auto-rickshaw drivers expect to be considered as respectable middle-class men. Some of them are unwilling to acknowledge the ‘class’ difference with their passengers, who are usually from the urban middle class (in the case of auto rickshaws). In the last decade, the mainstream media has been portraying auto rickshaw drivers as hooligans. Moreover, the political parties want these workers to remain a tool in their informal politics. Therefore, there has been a tension between how the auto rickshaw drivers want to see themselves and the socio-political expectations from them. The thesis has tried to explore the gendering of these workers to understand the reasons of these tensions.

The research analysed the rapid growth of toto in those eight years without being organised in the sense of auto-rickshaw sector. A huge section of toto drivers have tried to organise themselves through their 'toto stands'. The fourth chapter argued that despite being unorganised, they derive significant advantages from their intimacy with their locality/ *para*. A typical interdependence has been noticed between the toto drivers and their locality/ *para* during the field work. They have organised themselves around their stand located in their neighbourhood. This closeness with their locality on the one hand has strengthened their base of operation, and on the other hand has allowed women to step into this sector. Had they been fully organised as the auto-rickshaw, women might not have been able to drive tolos, since unions are, experience shows, hostile to women's entry. This chapter has argued that the due to the absence of the tension between informality, organisation and gender, it has been possible for the women to enter into toto trade as drivers.

Moreover, owing to the acceptance society, the government has not even tried to execute the court's directions to ban toto sector. A huge section of the state's population depends on toto sector for occupation as well as for intermediate transport. The experiences during lockdown also confirmed that the toto drivers relied on their local resources, such as grocery shops for survival, which was common for many other people. Some of them had converted their vehicles into mobile shops for

necessary commodities. People of their locality relied upon them for transport. At that time middle class households had to reserve totos for transport.

The fifth chapter examined the politics of these two sectors. The thesis showed that the informality of these sectors has shaped their political negotiations with the government, political party and trade unions. A few issues have been studied in the fifth chapter. First, the Left Front government created an exception for the auto-rickshaw by including it in its rules and hereby facilitated informality and controlled the sector directly through the trade union. Second, the TMC government, due to its organisational weakness, could not control such informal sectors through its agencies such as, the trade union. After a few years of its first tenure in the government, the party started to control such informal sectors directly, through its local party organisations. Therefore, the specific role of the trade union has been diluted in this regime. Third, the effect of this change has been reflected in the organisation of toto sector, which is now, mostly managed and controlled by local leaders of the ruling party. Fourth, rent seeking has been studied as the cost of informality in the two sectors. The thesis studied the change in the nature of rent seeking in toto sector is an outcome of political change in West Bengal.

This chapter argued that these informal trades have developed their unique relationship with the government, political parties and organisations. This unique relationship in effect shapes the politics of this sector. The politics is informal in

nature which benefits the workers, the sector and the political agencies. In fact, the sectors sustain on these informal relationships which is an outcome of the informal politics. The informal politics supports the formal politics led by parties and pressure groups in parliamentary democracy. The discussion included how ‘para-legal’ or ‘illegal’ nature of a trade becomes the reason for this unique relationship. The policy makers have never tried to find a permanent solution for informality as such relationships benefit them in some way or other.

Governments of both the Left Front and Trinamool had claimed that the birth of these two sectors were due to ‘public demand and expectations’, though the contexts were different. Auto-rickshaw was introduced in Calcutta through Self-Employment Scheme for Registered Unemployed (SESURU), whereas toto emerged from rural, semi-urban and suburban West Bengal, which was later recognised by the state government. Within a few years of its introduction, auto-rickshaw sector was organised by the trade union of the erstwhile Left Front government. The nature of its operation was also changed during this time from contract carriage to stage carriage. Auto-rickshaw stands were created along informally decided routes. Each stand became a centre for the trade union. The sector is organised and hence, controlled by the ruling party affiliated trade union.

Owing to its nature in West Bengal, the trade union was mostly another sub-agency of its affiliating political party. From that time onward, the trade union started

to decide the routes, fare and other issues regarding the auto-rickshaw industry. CITU, the trade union of CPI (M) created a fund in every stand to which drivers used to pay a sum of money, for example Rs. 10 every day. The annual collection of the rent from every stand in Kolkata amounted in crores. Trade union was always keen to protect the drivers from the Police harassment. Kolkata Police has been accused of harassing those drivers due to the para-legality of the sector. On the one hand, the ruling party could not alter the para-legal status of auto-rickshaw; and, on the other hand, the trade union of the same party used to protect the drivers from police atrocities. The auto drivers knew the reality and continued to serve the affiliating party (CPIM) till the notice of conversion from two stroke to four stroke auto-rickshaw was issued by the State Government. CITU, the dominant trade union, could not negotiate with the incumbent Left Front to stop the plan of conversion. That phase was worse than even the lockdown for the drivers. It was normal for drivers to work for their trade union's affiliating party, mainly during election. The institution of stands and fixed route gave better chance to the drivers to take care of the party in their locality. The obligation of the drivers' was monetary as well as physical. But the obligation or obedience changed overnight when a party came to power with absolute majority after the Assembly Election of 2011. Since then, most of the drivers shifted allegiance to the new party in power. The trade union affiliated to this new party, i.e. A.I.T.C. (All

India Trinamool Congress) replaced the old one virtually overnight after the defeat of Left Front in the Assembly Election of 2011.

Toto appeared on the public roads during the initial years of TMC regime. Their growth was from the rural and semi-urban spaces. Toto's number increased rapidly and it became the most popular mode of intermediate transport in every district of West Bengal except KMC area. Initially it was assumed that the sector would develop and work in the line of its forerunner auto-rickshaw. But with time, it was evident that the party and its trade union (INTTUC) was 'officially' at least not interested in organising workers in this sector, since the industry lay in a legal grey zone. Delhi and Tripura had been able to make policies to legalise toto, but in West Bengal inconsistent notifications from Municipalities and scrapping 'illegal' tolos (mostly in Siliguri) were the only visible governmental actions. TMC could have developed the same informal relationship visible in auto-rickshaw sector for the toto by its trade union. At least that could have organised the sector. But toto remains unorganised in this traditional sense even in 2022. Indeed, even in the auto-rickshaw sector, the ruling party's trade union leadership is fading. This reminded me about a statement of a senior Trade Union Leader of TMC that the party wanted the workers to contact the government directly. For them, necessity of trade union as a mediating presence was no more required.

The changing scenario

In May 2016, just before the results of the state assembly election were announced, a protest of toto drivers in Diamond Harbour was reported in *Anandabazar Patrika*²⁸³.

According to the report, a trade union affiliated to INTTUC was collecting Rs. 10 per day as rent from toto drivers. Earlier the amount was Rs. 360 per month which the drivers used to pay at a time. A group of toto drivers started to protest against the change in practice. Protesting drivers said that they could give away some money considering those rent extorters as beggars, but would certainly stop paying rent for driving toto. They wanted to stop rent-seeking activity in the toto sector. Though, the INTTUC leaders of the district (South 24 Parganas) denied any connection with those extorters, the receipts the given to the drivers had the name and symbol of INTTUC.

According to the protesting drivers, that wing of the trade union was accumulating Rs.66000 (approximately) per month from totes in the locality. The leaders claimed that the money had been used to appoint four employees to maintain four adjoining routes. They also claimed that the union helped drivers in situations of distress, so this was really for provision of welfare. The drivers rejected such explanations on the ground that no one had received any welfare payments. They alleged that the money was filling coffers of the leaders concerned. The incident came

²⁸³ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 10 May 2016; Link: <https://www.anandabazar.com/west-bengal/toto-driver-raise-voice-against-grants-1.382470>

into the limelight due to a clash between two groups of ruling TMC. An FIR was lodged with the local police station.

The months before the state assembly elections in May 2016 were disturbed. There was a strong anti-incumbency wave, at least in the urban and suburban belts of the state of West Bengal. The media speculated a possible victory of a political alliance led by the INC and Left Front. Already, in the first five years of its rule, the Trinamool party was plagued with severe factionalism and lack of internal discipline. The failures of hierarchical control became a persistent feature of the Trinamool Congress party. A section of urban opposition leaders of both the Left and Congress were trying to mobilize the voters against TMC on grounds of corruption charges and financial scams. Despite a lot of opposition optimism and media support for change, however, the election results went in favour of Trinamool party. It returned to power with a sizeable majority for another term.

Another incident took place in October 2022 at Birpara in Alipurduar district. Local toto drivers of Birpara organized a procession to protest under the banner of the INTTUC²⁸⁴. According to the report in *Uttaranga Sambad*, Kallol Deb, the president of Madarihat Birpara block INTTUC led the procession. The protest was against some of the wealthy businessmen of the locality who had bought and deployed multiple totos leading to a stark decrease in the income of existing toto drives. Several new

²⁸⁴ *UttarangaSambad*, October 2022; Link: <https://www.uttarbangasambad.com/totodriver-procession-in-birpara/>

totos deployed for profit had taken control of the inner lanes and by-lanes as well as the traffic just outside the town. In most part of North Bengal, drivers were following a ‘one driver, one toto’ model, which safeguarded those who depended exclusively on driving their own toto. I have already mentioned this in a previous chapter.

The time gap between the two incidents was nearly six and a half years. The first incident in May 2016 was a case of protest of one section (toto drivers, who were also TMC supporters) of the party against another on the charge of exploitation through extorting rent on daily basis. During that time, factionalism had reached its height in the ruling party; even general prediction of the ruling party’s performance in the assembly election was not optimistic. Some toto drivers, who were also TMC supporters, voiced their grievances against some of their own party leaders because of their role as rent extorter. In the period after 2016, however, while TMC maintained its monopoly of control in the state, such conflicts were hardly ever reported. As discussed earlier, local leaders of the ruling party (TMC) had managed to establish control over the toto sector in the districts where the party had a strong hold.

The second incident took place recently in Alipurduar district of North Bengal, which is a strong hold of BJP. As mentioned previously, in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar, the ruling TMC’s local leaders could not extort rent from the drivers in the way their counterparts do in South Bengal. The only reason is the four districts are strongholds of the opposition, BJP. Thus, INTTUC, which

already works among the tea plantation labours are taking interest in toto sector too, to revive party's vote bank. During my field interviews, I noted similar demands from my respondents. They wanted the government to promote the 'one driver, one toto' model. From our research in the auto-rickshaw sector, I had come to know individuals, who were not drivers but owned multiple auto-rickshaws. Such arrangements were a violation of the spirit of self-employment. The toto retains, by and large, the character of self-employment. It has not yet become a sector of investments for profit by businessmen. But such a tendency always exists and there is fear that big capital will encroach in the sector now accommodating petty accumulation. Toto drivers, with the help of INTTUC, are resisting such changes in the sector and that is probably the reason for such demands.

Time of transition: Government's plan toward e-mobility

The previous sub-unit started with references to the toto because it looks set to take over the bulk of the intermediate public transport in West Bengal as well as Kolkata. At present, in other districts excluding Kolkata, toto has already emerged as the largest sector of intermediate transport. The e-vehicle policy of the state government is an intimation of further change in auto-rickshaw sector. The central government is already promoting e-rickshaws and e-autos. Discovery of lithium mines in Jammu is expected to add momentum to central government's future plans regarding e-vehicles.

The state government, even if they delay, they have to deploy e-autos or e-rickshaws in the metropolitan area within the next five to ten years. West Bengal ‘targets to be the best state (in India) in electric mobility penetration by 2030’²⁸⁵. Prior to e-vehicle policy of 2021, the Auto-rickshaw Policy of West Bengal, 2018, strictly banned the sale of any new auto-rickshaw without an issuance of offer letter followed by a permit from the RTA. Moreover, in its section II, the policy proposes replacement of other variants of auto-rickshaws by LPG fueled four stroke auto-rickshaws or electric auto-rickshaws. It is interesting to note that the 2018 policy had already suggested a slant toward electric autos. The 2021 policy is more explicit. It sets a deadline to replace vehicles run by fossil fuel with electric vehicles. The policy, referring to the initiatives of the government of India, aims at – i) fully focusing on charging infrastructure (for both private and public vehicles); ii) demand creation for electric vehicles; iii) the establishment of an EV Accelerator Cell²⁸⁶; iv) state level electric vehicle awareness generation; v) supply of sufficient energy to support electric vehicles throughout West Bengal; vi) making E-visionary electric mobility cities; and vii) research and innovation oriented industrial development associated by skill development and workforce training.

The 2021 policy gives more importance to electric transport in the urban space to create ‘E-visionary electric mobility cities’. Kolkata, Asansol, Darjeeling and

²⁸⁵ Government of West Bengal, Electric Vehicle Policy 2021, Power Department, 2021.

²⁸⁶ An EV Accelerator Cell will be a nodal-entity for implementing the electric mobility programme within the state. (See - Electric Vehicle Policy 2021, Power Department, Government of West Bengal)

Howrah are the four targeted cities. Though the report does not mention Siliguri, which is the second largest city in terms of geography as well as economy. The importance of the urban spaces in the policy, especially Kolkata municipal area, implies that the changeover will be guided by the state. So far, since 2014, the exponential growth of the toto sector in districts of West Bengal has been left to market forces. It is remarkable, thus, that given the current situation of high-saturation of totes in many areas of the state, the policy does not mention any specific policy towards what already exists, either reform or redirection of the already operating toto sector in the districts. More changes are expected in the transport system with the advancement of science and technology. But the question which remains unanswered is – who will control the sector and what will be the roadmap? Electric mobility would certainly revolutionize the transport sector of the state and will contribute towards conserving non-renewable fuel and minimizing environmental pollution. However, none of these changes will improve the condition of work of the drivers or solve the problems created by informality.

The TMC, the new ruling party in West Bengal, prefers to control these sectors through the party organization rather than through the trade union wing. The Left Front was able to deploy the CITU for establishing control over the auto-rickshaw sector because it had a disciplined party apparatus and centralized control. In the absence of such a party structure, Trinamool party relies on more decentralised

modes of control. The toto sector is locally controlled and managed as of now. Officially it has been said that the municipalities, corporations and panchayats are controlling the sector within their jurisdiction. In reality, local councilors or local leaders of the ruling party have been controlling the toto stands within their area. Such local authorities do not follow any uniform mode of rent-seeking. The leaders fashion their strategies according to local conditions. Where the ruling party does not have the monopoly, toto drivers manage their own stands, as in some areas of North Bengal. In South Bengal, where the ruling TMC has iron grip in most districts, toto drivers are compelled to follow the diktats of local leaders. They know that unconditional obedience to local party leadership is the only way to survive in the informal sector in their areas. In these localities, the ruling party commands every sector and is the sole source of legitimating the operation of informal and para-legal trades. If, in the next assembly election, the incumbent party loses power, the sector might face a prolonged chaotic phase until the new political master is ready to take charge. Such condition is a consequence of informality.

We have noticed this in the history of the auto sector. Despite the doubtful legalities of the auto sector, the whole trade was successfully managed by CITU (trade union wing of CPIM). Following the footsteps of the CPI (M), Trinamool's trade union wing prepared itself to take over the sector after 2011. That is what happened overnight after the victory of TMC in 2011. At least for the first few years,

INTTUC was controlling the auto-rickshaw sector as its predecessor (CITU) did. However, this did not last long. The INTTUC was not able to consolidate its control in the sector. The Trinamool party leadership felt that ‘trade union as a middleman between the labours and the government was unnecessary, the party itself could build a connection between the two for justice’²⁸⁷. When the totos began to proliferate, as a result, there was no effort to set up an organisation by the party’s trade union. Quite remarkably, therefore, the sector was able to operate without daily rent-seeking, an unfailing reality in the auto-rickshaw sector.

As the toto sector developed, however, new modes of control and rent-seeking came into existence. I found, from field and ethnographic experience and also from media reports, that the associates of the local leaders or the councilors, who managed the stands, began to collect same or similar rent. In accordance with the central government’s policy and directions from the court, the state government empowered the municipal and panchayat authorities to manage and control the sector within their jurisdiction. But in practice, the councilors and the panchayat pradhans (who were mostly from the ruling party) took the responsibility to control the sector within their areas. Once the mode of control was decided, the local authorities started regular rent-seeking from toto sector. I have discussed earlier that how much money could be accumulated from the entire sector in a day by those controlling authorities in the name of the ruling party. A process of horizontal rent-seeking has now become the

²⁸⁷ Interview with Dola Sen, Trinamool Bhawan, October 2017.

trend in the localities. The rent from the drivers is not mobilized toward the central party fund. There has been no evidence that the leaders have used the huge amount they collect for the welfare of the drivers, which they often claim.

The government could have benefitted from a share of the money collected if paid by drivers as tax. I am not sure when the government would make law to formalize the sector because para-legality or illegality has been a feature of intermediate public transport in West Bengal for the last four decades. Even if specific law is made for the toto sector, what will be the nature of the drivers' organisation? Will they continue to depend on the party? These questions are not easy to answer. The expansion of the sector is a challenge for both the drivers as well as the government. Toto sector is expanding in every corner of the state. An initiative to organise them centrally may not succeed. In chapter five, cases of registering an association and an NGO to organize toto sector has been cited. But a few local initiatives cannot be helpful for organizing the drivers of the entire state. If we consider a situation where toto drivers of a locality form a registered association to organize themselves, then thousands of such associations will emerge in West Bengal.

Presently, toto operates both as a stage as well as a contract carriage. Who will mediate conflicts within the sector if only local associations are created? Usually trade unions or political parties perform such roles and mediate among local associations. The ruling party and its agencies have authority in most of West Bengal's public

spaces. Therefore, it is really difficult to get beyond the influence of the ruling party in what has been called a 'party society'. Traditionally, for many decades now, the ruling party had been the informal mediator in all forms of social conflict. Thus the informal sector has bred informal politics-- the ruling party as the legitimizing authority has taken decisions which has sometimes benefitted drivers or at least allowed them to operate in the economy. Mostly, of course, the party has ensured its own benefit. Given that the sanctions of the government (and therefore the party) determine their ability to function in the sector, drivers have accepted party governance in plying their trade as they have in other aspects of daily living. Truly, as Chatterjee (2004) claimed, these sections of the population, such as auto and toto drivers, can only negotiate in a group. Even their group negotiation is, however, limited. Despite high levels of unionization, the auto-rickshaw drivers could not safeguard their interests—they were not able to persuade the government to legalise their trade or to stop the transition from two stroke to four stroke in 2009. If the auto-rickshaw sector had a stronger or independent trade union, they may have been able to counter the party or the government on different issues. As of now, the toto, being fully illegal, entirely depends on the ruling party. They do not have any separate representation to voice their interest within the party.

Given the size and importance of these two sectors, drivers should have been better placed to negotiate with the government. The party gives importance to such

sectors because of their economic and political utility. The weakness in the drivers' bargaining position is because they depend on the ruling party for their existence. This is why the change in law is crucial, it alone can solve the crisis of legitimacy in such trades. A common law for e-vehicles or a specific law for totos is the need of the hour. Even in January 2023, there was no official data on totos in West Bengal. At present, the RTA is in charge of registration but this is an ad hoc arrangement. An inclusive action plan to register all totos on the road and to map the sector is an urgent task for the state government.

Policy implications

The government has allowed the toto sector to expand since 2014. It has already been discussed that both the ruling party and government have benefitted from the huge expansion of the toto sector. It is now a massive challenge for the government to register all existing vehicle and map the sector. The uncontrolled increase in the number of totos not only reduces the income of pre-existing drivers, but can affect the government and party adversely. In the respect of modes of control, the local arrangement is working. Thus, continuing to organize the sector within a municipal area or a panchayat area seems sensible. The driver within a municipal jurisdiction can organize themselves under the banner of a registered association or cooperative societies of their own. A registered association enables the members to open a bank

account to manage their common funds. In case of an association, election of the board of managers once in three years may ensure democratic systems. Such an association, owned, controlled and run by the drivers, can be effective in negotiating with the authorities for the interest of the drivers as well as the sector. Even for the municipal authority, an association will facilitate their management of the sector because they will negotiate with the elected officials of the association instead of every driver within the jurisdiction. Political parties, especially the ruling party, will certainly make their way into such organisations in West Bengal. However, if democratically run, such associations will benefit the drivers. This can be a solution to the unhelpful dependence of drivers on the ruling party.

A report published by Centre for Public Policy Research in 2014 proposed certain policies to regulate toto sector in Delhi²⁸⁸. The report argued in favour of only route-based operation (stage carriage) for the tolos and proposed that the municipal corporation should take the charge of registration, issuing identity card, issuing route permit and fixing fare. But considering their popularity in suburban, semi-urban and rural areas, toto should be allowed to ply as both state and contract carriage. According to the direction of Calcutta High Court, e-rickshaws are strictly prohibited from main roads and highways. Presently toto operates as an important mode of connectivity between villages, as well as between village and town/ city. To restrict

²⁸⁸ Centre for Public Policy Research, 'E-rickshaws: The road ahead', CPPR Policy Brief Series II, Vol 1, Kochi, 2014.

the vehicle to operate only as stage carriage would hamper the people's mobility in rural and suburban areas. The government must consider this while framing policy on the vehicle's mode of operation. There is also enormous scope for the operation of platform economy in this sector. There have been several successful experiments of this nature in Delhi and Bengaluru. The use of mobile-based apps in the toto or electric auto-rickshaw sector should be actively considered. Uber, a mobile based application company, which connects a commuter with a cab driver or a biker, is already active in some parts of Kolkata and suburbs. Drivers have also developed their own network to get regular contract from passengers in their locality. If the organisations or the administration can develop similar mobile applications, the drivers may get better profits out of the contracted trip. In case of applications such as Uber, the company deducts twenty-five to thirty percent of the money charged for the trip. Other alternatives could leave drivers with a higher share of the profits.

Coordination between the Municipal authority (or panchayat), RTA and Police is necessary to control the sector. While RTA can issue the license for e-vehicle, the municipal authority should be given the charge of registration and issuing the route permit. Moreover, the fare which is also an important aspect of the operation of these vehicles, should also be fixed by the municipal authority. It is already clear that the government has been benefitted as the toto sector has generated huge self-

employment. Therefore, the government must promote ‘one individual, one toto’ model and restrict individuals from buying and deploying multiple tolos.

The state government may consider these proposed policies and formulate an action plan to formalize the toto sector within two to three years as a step toward its proposed plan of e-mobility in West Bengal. If the state authority plans for another transformation in auto-rickshaw sector, i.e., conversion of existing four stroke autos to electric autos, they must consider the lessons from 2009. Many auto-rickshaw drivers lost their source of income for several months and could not even avail the aid provided by the Left Front government. A common e-vehicle policy with special mention to electric autos will certainly remove the para-legalities. If, in case the government does not consider a replacement in auto-rickshaw sector, then the case for fare increase must be reconsidered. Government must allow for a periodic increase in the fare of auto-rickshaw or a fare system compatible with the market must be implemented for the auto-rickshaws in Kolkata. Auto-rickshaw drivers in Kolkata are already struggling with the maintenance cost and increased expenses, some of which is paid to the government. Auto-rickshaw and toto drivers need governmental intervention and support to sustain in their profession. If the proposed transition can be achieved, it will be interesting to observe how government and political parties respond. In any event, the regular developments in the toto sector have to be followed so this research remains ongoing.

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