

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

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My Ph.D. thesis 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 two sectors have emerged, which might be the outcomes of two different political regimes.

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.

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.

Research questions

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.

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 *Uttaranga 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 tolos 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.

The second and third chapters start with the trajectory of growth and then discuss the functioning and labour practice 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. Four issues have been studied 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; and fourth, there is constant tension between unions who resist demands for rights and welfare from drivers and drivers, who expect 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 indicate 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. I am exploring the gendering of these workers to try to explain some of this tension.

Toto has grown rapidly 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'. It is argued in this chapter 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*. 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. The experiences during lockdown also confirm 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 tolos for transport.

The fifth chapter examines the politics of these two sectors. I suggest that the growth and development of these sectors must be understood in relation to their political strategies.

These strategies become clear in the context of the roles played by agencies such as government, political parties and trade unions. The chapter argues that these informal trades have developed their unique relationship with these agencies. 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. It supports the formal politics led by parties and pressure groups in parliamentary democracy. The discussion includes how 'para-legal' or 'illegal' nature of a trade becomes the reason for this unique relationship. The policy makers never try to find a permanent solution for informality as such relationships benefit them in some way or other.

Governments of both the Left 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 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 wants the workers to contact the government directly. For them, necessity of trade union as a mediating presence was not required.

But toto sector was not growing as an orphan, it has a guardian. The nature of political control has changed in the TMC's rule. TMC regime maintained the 'party society' created

by its predecessor, the Left Front. Party society is a society, whose every layer has presence and control of the ruling party; a society where resource for the mass or political society is allocated on the basis of individual's proximity with the ruling party. Political Society is comprised of those individuals who are counted in mass, who are considered to be without the intellectual and democratic capacity with which one can claim her/his rights from the government. Since 2016/2017, the councillors of the municipality started to manage the toto sector in their municipal wards. In fact, most councillors in this period were affiliated to the TMC. The care takers, who were not just party leaders but public position holders, created networks among drivers. Though regular and systematic rent collection from these drivers was not maintained, there was periodic rent collection as well as huge donations for the membership of a stand. Auto-rickshaw drivers, during interviews, had confessed about the rent system of the trade union. But in case of toto, all surveyed drivers deny any monetary relationship with the party or the councillors. Toto, on the one hand benefitted the government by generating employment; and, on the other hand, it was a mode of ensuring party's control over the grass-root localities throughout the year, especially during election.

Policy implications

1. 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. 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.

2. 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.
3. Uber, a well known company and smart phone application for mobility through cabs and bikes, is extending its influence among the toto drivers in the suburbs of Kolkata. Organisations of toto, without being an agency of the political party, can create their own application similar to '*Namma Yatri*', which is created by the Auto Rickshaw Drivers' Union of Bengaluru. In this way, they can control their market as well as can pressurise the government to get rid of this informal status.
4. The state government of West Bengal must consider about a separate 'toto policy' as a part of its E-vehicle Policy, 2021. Totos should be included in state rules as both contract and stage carriage (stage carriage within municipal areas and contract carriage beyond municipal area).

5. Auto-rickshaw sector in Kolkata urgently needs a fare policy, compatible to the market, is necessary for the auto-rickshaw sector. A new mapping of the sector to exclude unregistered auto-rickshaws in Kolkata is necessary. This would facilitate the state government if it implement the E-vehicle Policy, 2021 and replace the existing auto-rickshaws with electric-autos.

Auto-rickshaw and toto drivers need governmental intervention and support to sustain in their profession. If the proposed transition as mentioned in the E-vehicle Policy, 2021 of the state government can be achieved, it will be interesting to observe how government and political parties respond to the informalities of the sectors. In any event, the regular developments in the toto sector have to be followed so this research remains ongoing.