

***Bhadralok* or masculine labour: Gendering of auto-rickshaw operators in Kolkata**

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Abstract:

The paper looks into the gendering of auto-rickshaw operators in relation to the politics of the sector. It is argued that the operators' aspiration for upward class mobility, clash with passengers, etc. have their roots in their gendering which also make them different from the rest of the informal labours. The paper tries to understand the contradictions between how the auto-rickshaw operators aspire to see them and what the political milieu expects from them.

Key Words: auto-rickshaw operators, gendering, politics, *bhadralok*, informal labour.

Introduction: Auto-rickshaw has been in the news since the move of a group of environmentalists and media in 2008 against pollution on roads of Kolkata. In July 2008, the division bench headed by chief justice S. S. Nijjar ordered a conversion of all two stroke engines to four stroke engines in auto-rickshaw within 31 December. The auto-rickshaw operators were protesting against the proposed conversion. Some popular dailies such as Anandabazar Patrika and The Telegraph, which had targeted the auto-rickshaw in 2008 – 2009 for pollution, again targeted them during 2010 – 2014 for hooliganism and misbehaviour with passengers. In course of my interaction with the operators, I have found that most drivers identify themselves as '*bhadralok*' whose English synonym can be respectable middle class men. It was hard to understand that how the tag of 'hooligan' and '*bhadralok*' could fit to same group of men. But this aspiration of '*bhadralok*' identity of the auto-rickshaw drivers is at the same time in stark contrast to the informal labour practice and specific kind of masculinity usually visible among workers in transport sector. Moreover, the working of the sector since the beginning shows that the political parties want these workers to remain a tool in their informal politics for electoral gains.

These masculine auto-drivers have served as party cadres for mobilising electoral gains in favour of the political party. This was a part of the reciprocal relation between the auto-drivers and political party, as the latter had safeguarded drivers despite all para-legalities of the sector and in return, the drivers had always protected the party's interest, mostly during the election. Therefore, how the operators aspire to see themselves, how political parties manipulate them and the way they are portrayed by the media, appear to be contradictory. Thus the people working in this sector are characterised by a number of contradictions, such as, workers in this sector have a strong organisation despite of the informality in their labour practice, they identify themselves as '*bhadralok*' which is contradictory to image of other informal workers in transport sector, etc. The prevailing politics in the sector shapes the labour practice and expectations of these operators.

Politics and the sector: Biren Roy has correctly observed that ‘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’ He has further questioned the union’s position of obeying the party’s decision without taking into account 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 due to the strong hold of the ruling 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. The auto-rickshaw has been introduced under a self-employment scheme and at the same time the State Government did little to formalise the sector. As mentioned earlier, a number of practices in the sector are illegal, and are carried out only because the sector is protected by the trade union of the ruling party. 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 politics. 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 informal 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. On the one hand this perceived mutual dependence is premised on the informal, indeed paralegal, character of the sector and on the other hand 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, backed by the political party which has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to bring the city to a standstill. The left front and its government had have not been found in addressing a way out for the settlement of the para-legalities of the sector since the 80s of the last century. The court’s decision finally brought the front and their government at a limbo where their confused status became visible. Moreover the implementation of the court’s decision by the end of 2009 was another instance of government’s confused status. Instead of a systematic conversion, the entire sector became a mess during that period which actually fuelled the opposition to earn credit for being the vanguard of the operators. The INTTUC, the trade union of the Trinamool Congress formed the ‘auto-banchao’ committee to launch protest against the unplanned conversion. Though the erstwhile left front’s government had promulgated a scheme to give the operators two thousand rupees per month during the time of conversion, but our field survey indicates that the number of benefitted operators were very less.

The existing relation between the political party, trade union and the operators somehow challenges the traditional role of the trade union where the trade union is expected to champion the cause of the workers instead of becoming the tool of the political party to exert control among the workers. Neither the political parties in power nor the trade unions made any move to settle the legal disputes of this sector in the past decades. Rather, the political parties and their trade unions ensured the working of auto-rickshaw with all sorts of para-legalities. The phase of conversion was an ultimate blow to that attitude of the CPIM and the trade union affiliated to it. A gradual shift was visible in the change of trade unions' membership by the auto-rickshaw operators which reached the height during the accession of power by the TMC in 2011.

The auto-rickshaw, in Kolkata was originated as a 'transport of the locality' where the unemployed local youths, who were then mostly Bengali, received the permit of auto-rickshaw from the State Government. Naba Dutta mentions in his occasional paper that intimacy with local political leaders of the ruling party (or front) was one criterion of getting the permit during that time. Further, the defection of certain prescribed rules, such as to work as contract carriage, by the sector probably powered by the trade union might have been carried out due to some other intension. Though in an interview in 2016, the then transport minister of the Left Front, Mr. Shyamal Chakravarty said that changes such as transformation from contract carriage to stage carriage took place only on the basis of 'public demand', which the government did not resist. May be relying on the issue of 'public demand' is an easy justification of people who are/were in power. Ironically, in 2014, Gopal Sutar, an INTTUC leader, in the same way put forward the reason of 'public demand' for justifying 'kata-route' in one of our conferences. The other intension, which I assume might be as 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 such as Garia, Jadavpur, Sinthi More, Dum Dum, Dunlop More, Bara Bazar, Beck Bagan, etc. in Kolkata. 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 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 later 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 cadre 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. Thus the relation between the operators, trade union and the political party appears to sustain on mutual gain. Though, this relationship is not as mutual as we perceive it to be. The workers, due to their informal labour practice and moreover para-legal status of the

sector are bound to depend on the organisation or the political party in power. The history of this sector in Kolkata, at least suggests that. In this way, the auto-rickshaw sector works with two features which are contradictory to one another, informality and strong organisation, where the latter has not contributed anything yet to improve the labor practice of the workers.

The auto-rickshaw operators: *Bhadralok* or masculine labours?

During the field interviews¹ 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' of the middle class in Kolkata as it is in present Indian context. 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 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'. It has been argued by several scholar that the Bengali middle class has always find 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 lifestyle. 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 *Bhadralok* 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 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 practise through which it reproduces its privileged position. Fernandes and

¹ Field interviews used for the research and this paper are available in the archive of School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata - 700032.

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 class. 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. 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. According to the data collected from the field interviews, 51.7% of the owner-drivers earn up to Rs. 10000 per month and 29.2% earn up to Rs. 15000 per month. There are few owner-drivers, whose monthly earnings range from Rs. 15,000 – Rs. 25,000. 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.

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.

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 style. On the other hand, the auto-rickshaw drivers hardly have the choice to sustain in their profession giving up their rough and toughness. 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 practice, 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 are mostly Bengalis, 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 'apni'².

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. 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. 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. 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, *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.

² '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.

A recent survey (July, 2017) among 12 auto-rickshaw drivers in South Kolkata disclosed a worse picture of their present expenditure and net income from the trade. Though the fuel price has decreased in last couple of years, but cost for monthly maintenance, certificate of fitness, etc. have increased. Moreover, presently the drivers pay huge amount of money as penalty if they fail to get certificate of fitness within the due date. Usually, due to shortage of time, they pay a huge amount to the brokers to get their job done at the Public Vehicles Department or at the CF centres. Drivers have to get the 'Certificate of Fitness' for their vehicle once in a year and the government's rate is Rs. 640/-. If they get their paper work done through a broker, the later will charge Rs. 1300-1500 (CF charge included). Rs. 50/- per day is the new rate of penalty for failure to renew CF within the due date. Similarly the amount of annual premium for first party insurance of auto-rickshaw presently ranges from Rs. 5500 to Rs.7500. Annual premium was approximately Rs. 3000 during 2014-2015. Owner-drivers have said that, presently they estimate an amount of Rs. 3500 – Rs. 5000 for the monthly maintenance of their vehicle. On the one hand, the net income of a driver (who drives an owner's vehicle) is Rs. 300 – Rs. 400 per day, if he works around 14 hours a day. On the other hand, an owner-driver earns Rs. 500 – Rs. 800 per day. Usually men driving auto-rickshaw in Kolkata work for 6 days in a week. 'Batchit' or the rent paid by the driver to the owner in each day has become Rs. 300 – Rs. 400 in most of the routes. Earlier in 2014 the amount was approximately Rs. 250. Whereas in most of the auto-rickshaw routes in Kolkata, which are mostly dominated by the trade union of All India Trinamool Congress, has not allowed the drivers to hike the fair in their routes. Profit from this trade has decreased in last couple of years. The reason for why I am sharing his recent data is that the drivers who were aspiring for a better life in 2013-14 are now in a dilemma whether to continue as an auto-rickshaw driver or to opt for other profession.

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 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'³. The female passengers' language of class superiority and authoritative speech are generally received negatively by these working class men. These bread winner men who have a different gender role in their household space cannot relate these women who hire auto-rickshaws to reach office/college/universities with the women

³ 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'.

in their own family. Independent women's performance in the public space is a feature of the new middle class but not the traditional Bengali middle class (*bhadraloks*). 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.

Conclusion: The informal labour practice and para-legality of the sector are reasons for enormous pressure on the drivers. 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. The auto-rickshaw operators are actually unique among the informal labour sector due their aspiration for upward class mobility, inclination for single-male-breadwinner-model and the labour practice. This paper has tried to focus on the gendering of these workers in brief. The masculinity of these workers is not a crisis of the sector. The crisis lies in the para-legality and labour practice of the sector. Policy formulation to legalise the sector will improve the operators' lives and labour practice. Bringing these operators in the ambit of law by formalising the labour practice will not only help the drivers to meet their aspirations but will also contribute to the improvement of 'intermediate public transport'⁴ in this region.

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⁴ 'Intermediate public transport' includes auto-rickshaw, e-rickshaw, hand pulled rickshaw, etc. which provide last minute connectivity to bus routes, metro rail stations, railway stations, air ports or our residences.

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