

**HAND-PULLED RICKSHAW PULLERS IN KOLKATA: EXPLORING
THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**

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ABSTRACT

*Hand-pulled rickshaws were introduced in Kolkata during the British period and after serving local residents for a long period of time, they are facing the problem of marginalization. In the present age of globalization and urban growth, this type of transport has been an integral part of the city's socio-economic fabric. This is a pollution-free, human-driven mode of transport. The people, predominantly migrants from states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and other rural areas of West Bengal are mainly work as rickshaw pullers and are dependent on this occupation due to lack of formal education and alternative employment opportunities in Kolkata. The present study aims to find out the basic socio-economic characters of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata and also tries to evaluate the reasons behind its marginalization in recent days. The present study combines **both qualitative and quantitative** approaches, with an emphasis on **fieldwork, direct observation and primary data collection and analysis**. The primary survey was conducted on 100 hand-pulled rickshaw pullers (all male) in selected localities of Kolkata like **Burrabazar, North Kolkata, Bhawanipore, Sobhabazar and College Street**. This research highlights the intricate dynamics of the social and economic structure of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their present situation in society as well as their daily struggles.*

KEYWORDS: *Rickshaw, Pullers, Migrants, Marginalization, Inclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

Rickshaws are very effective, eco-friendly and easily available mode of transport in India. It is mainly a human-powered transport and was first seen in Japan in 1868 (Nandi, Bhattacharyya & Banerjee, 2015). In Indian cities and villages, people often rely on rickshaws as a more convenient mode of transport for movement within a short distance. In India, we can observe two major forms of this human-powered transport -hand-pulled rickshaws and cycle rickshaws.

Among these two, the hand-pulled rickshaw, being the poorest version and found only in Kolkata in West Bengal.

Hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata are facing the problem of marginalization though it has been an integral part of the city's socio-economic fabric since the pre-colonial period. The people, predominantly migrants from states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, and also from the surrounding rural areas of other districts of West Bengal. They usually came to Kolkata to find suitable jobs and are often work as rickshaw pullers which needs high physical labor and almost no specific skill. Thus, it is easy to work in this profession due to lack of formal education and alternative employment opportunities for those migrants in present days. This is one important reason, why these pullers are facing the problem of marginalization.

The present study revolves around the socio-economic condition of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata and also finds out the reason behind its marginalization in recent days. Based on primary survey, the study also recommends some measures to improve the situation of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata.

Objectives and methodology

Main objectives of the study are-

1. To examine the socio-economic condition of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata and
2. To investigate the reasons of marginalization of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata

The methodology of research outlines the research design, tools, and techniques used to study the socio-economic aspects of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata. The present study combines **both qualitative and quantitative** approaches, with an emphasis on **fieldwork, direct observation and primary data collection and analysis**. The primary survey was conducted on 100 hand-pulled rickshaw pullers (all male) in selected localities of Kolkata like **Burrabazar, North Kolkata, Bhawanipore, Sobhabazar and College Street**.

This research tries to throw light towards the intricate dynamics of the social and economic structure of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their present situation in society as well as their daily struggles. Through participant observation, interviews and interaction with the rickshaw pullers, this study reveals the facts behind the marginalization of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers of Kolkata.

Socio-cultural significance of hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata

The rickshaw was first invented in Japan in 1869, which later spread to China in 1874. In India, these were introduced by the British East India Company in different cities like Shimla and Kolkata (Ghosal; Saha, 2025). In Shimla, the British East India Company first introduced the hand-pulled rickshaws, which later came to the streets of colonial Calcutta (Present Kolkata). This type of transport is a cultural icon of Kolkata since colonial period, which is documented in many Bengali films and documentaries to show the socio-cultural situation of colonial Kolkata. Thus, this hand-pulled rickshaws have a special significance in Kolkata's history and culture. This type of transport was an essential system of transport in colonial Kolkata, when the city was expanding northwards covering the narrow streets of North Kolkata. Thus, during the early 20th century, most of the local residents of Kolkata depended on hand-pulled rickshaws to navigate narrow and congested streets, especially during floods or emergencies. It can be said that, for more than a century, Kolkata's cityscape and streetscapes were dominated by hand-pulled

rickshaws. In Bengali, it was known as *tana rickshaw*, the hand-pulled rickshaws are one of the heritage transports of Kolkata.

Historically, hand-pulled rickshaws were introduced during the colonial era as a symbol of urban mobility. For many years, they served as the single mode of transport for passengers and goods for their movement in narrow lanes of Kolkata. During heavy rains, especially in areas prone to water logging, except hand-pulled rickshaws, no other vehicle can operate effectively. Till today, in some narrow streets in North Kolkata, this is the main reason why these hand-pulled rickshaws are still operating. West Bengal Government attempted a ban on these hand-pulled rickshaws in 2005 on the issues of modernity and urban development, which faced much criticism of not making an alternate livelihood pattern for these rickshaw pullers before banning their primary occupation. However, with support from local people, hand-pulled rickshaws continue to function under legal protection as a means of livelihood, symbolizing the complex intersection of tradition, poverty, heritage conservation as well as urban development in Kolkata.

In Kolkata, the hand-pulled rickshaws operate in certain congested part of the central Kolkata within the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Metropolitan Corporation. Halder and Basu (1982), in their work estimated that the number of hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata ranging between 24,000 and 70,000. Recent research report suggests that, about 3,500 hand-pulled rickshaws are still operating on a daily basis in different parts of Kolkata which is declined from 6000 in numbers during 1919 (Santra, 2024). Although modern traffic rules in Kolkata in 2006 banned these hand-pulled rickshaws from major roads but still one can see this type of transport in the narrow streets of North Kolkata.

The British introduced these rickshaws to Kolkata, replacing the ornate palanquins (pulled by 2-4 people) used by the high-class people. It involved one human manually pulling another, i.e., the colonial master-slave power dynamics was represented in this shift of transport. In 1919, the British enacted the Calcutta Hackney Carriage Act, which authorized the use of hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata for passenger movement within a short route. These rickshaws thus became the alternative to palanquins for high-class people. However, due to some specific reasons, though this unique mode of transport is still operating as a lasting legacy of Kolkata, but the pullers are facing the problem of marginalization.

Literature Reviews

In most of the urban cities, according to urban policy makers, there is need to promote non-motorized modes of transport like bicycles, cycle rickshaws or even walking as they are more inclusive and non-polluting (Tiwari, 2007). As a mode of transport, rickshaws are the most important and convenient mode of movement within the narrow streets of urban area for daily commuting. Due to easily accessible and cheap fare, rickshaws are invaluable for the city's transportation and economic activities (Basu et. al., 2022; Hossain & Susilo, 2014). Rickshaw plays a critical role in transportation in city areas of many east Asian countries like India and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the rickshaw has one front wheel and two rear wheels and can carry two passengers except for the puller. In some cases, rickshaws are also used for carry goods up to 250 kg (Replogle, 1991). Some research in Bangladesh reveals that, among poor people, rickshaw pulling has become a popular informal economic activity in urban areas due to its low initial investment, low maintenance and as it requires no specific skill to operate. Many people are engaged in this sector across the many Asian countries (Karim & Salam, 2019; Basu et. al., 2022).

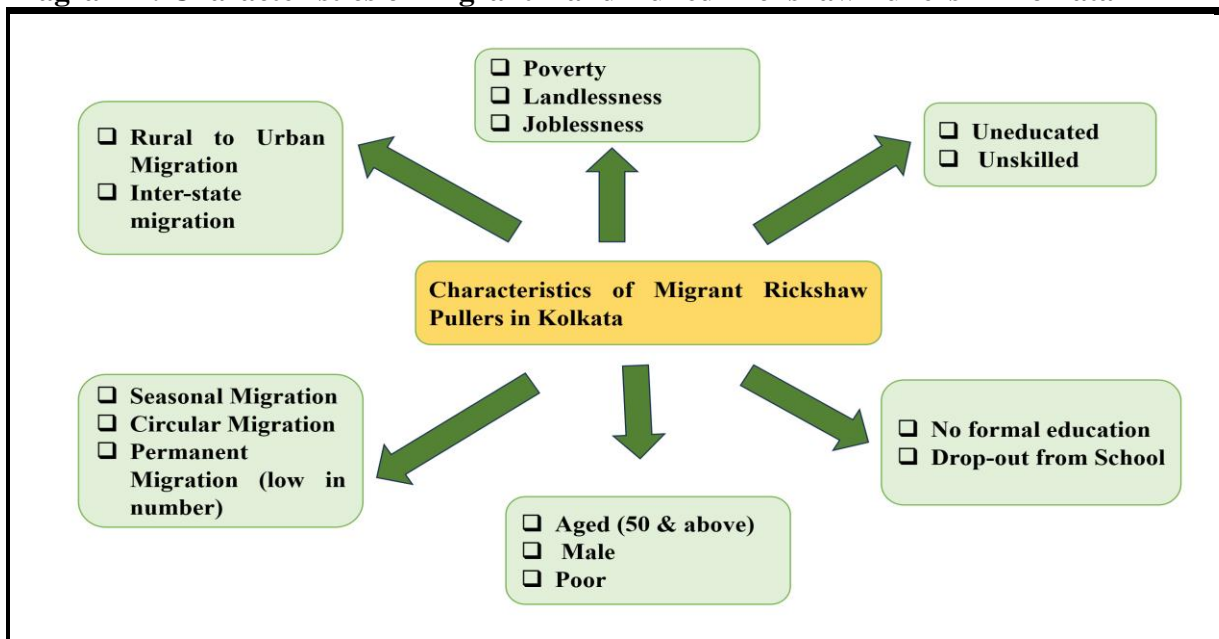
The city of Kolkata enjoys some specific iconic symbols since the early 20th century. Among them, hand-pulled rickshaw is one important tangible heritage of this city. In spite of that, the person who bears all the load of pulling the rickshaw and the passenger remain marginalized due to many reasons. The city of Kolkata is the only city, which enjoys highly mechanized modern modes of transport like the metro rail alongside hand-pulled rickshaws (i.e., a primitive form of human-powered vehicle). For shorter distances and in narrow lanes and by-lanes, the rickshaws have emerged as a significant and popular mode of informal mobility (Samanta & Roy, 2013).

Most of the pullers are migrants from Bihar and Jharkhand to Kolkata, who are forced to take this profession due to interplay of different push and pull factors (Seal, 2026). On August 6, 2006, the three-Judge Bench of the Supreme Court banned the hand-pulled rickshaws in the eco-sensitive zone of Matheran Hill Station in Maharashtra and declared as “inhuman” while holding that such an inhuman practice needs to be abolished (Saha, 2025). The role played by the non-motorized mode of transport is highly significant in case of urban sustainability like Kolkata as it links to the environmental sustainability. The economic issues related to the hand-pulled rickshaw pullers made the survival of this eco-friendly mode of transport a problematic one (Whitelegg & William, 2000).

Socio-economic condition of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata

Hand-pulled rickshaws are a unique mode of transport in Kolkata after its initiation in British India. This type of transport system is still operated in certain parts of Kolkata, particularly in older areas like North Kolkata and around the large old markets. These rickshaws are manually pulled by a rickshaw-puller, usually barefoot in older days and often belonging to poor migrant communities from Bihar, Jharkhand, or rural Bengal. The socio-economic condition of these rickshaw-pullers reveals the fact that, these people are still very poor and due to unskilled and uneducated characters, they are unable to change their profession.

Diagram 1: Characteristics of Migrant Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

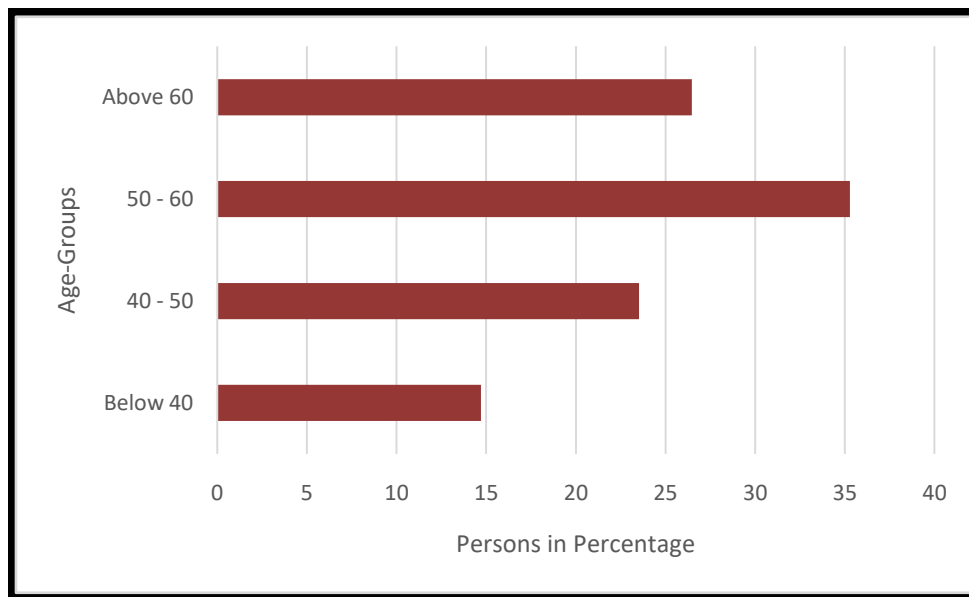


Source: Compiled by researchers

Age Structure of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

People came from different remote villages in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and other districts of West Bengal and started working as hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata. The study shows that, these people started their profession approximately 10 – 15 years back and today, they have very minimum possibility to change their profession due to their no educational attainment and lack of skill. These pullers are older people and some of them have brought their sons or cousins in this profession. But this new generation pullers are not happy in this profession due to very low income and they are trying to join in other type of jobs. Some of them are working in some private firms or work as casual labour in construction site to earn more money for their livelihood.

Diagram 2: Age Structure of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata



The study reveals that, a considerable percentage of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata belongs to older age group, specifically recording 35 percent of respondents are in 50 – 60 age groups, while about 26 percent persons are of the higher age groups (above 60 years) and came in this profession for more than 10 years. The below 40 age group comprises less number of people as these are mostly literate and are willing to engage in any other occupation which are comparatively high paid jobs. These comparatively young people can acquire skill that are necessary for other jobs and are still searching for their better livelihoods. Remaining 24 percent pullers belong to 40-50 age-groups and also eager to change their profession as the income in this work is uncertain and very low.

Educational Status of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

The average level of education of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata is generally very low, reflecting their socio-economic background, migration type, drop out from formal education and early entry into the labour force. Most belong to economically poor rural areas of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, where access to quality schooling is limited and majority are forced to leave their school due to family’s financial condition.

The study explains the educational status of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata. Most of these rickshaw pullers have come from very poor families both in terms of household income level and land productivity. In both these respects, rickshaw pullers belong to one of the most deprived social categories. They are mostly uneducated (58%) or semi-educated, having never completed primary level education (17%), only 2.5% have passed the secondary level. All others either completed primary school but did not continue (9%) or did not complete secondary education (13%). It is interesting to note that the rickshaw pullers who have joined the occupation relatively recently (over the last five years) have come from relatively higher educational backgrounds than those who have been pulling rickshaw for 15 years or more, representing two socially distinct waves of migrants. Two-thirds of recent rickshaw pullers are uneducated or semieducated, compared to 83% among older generation of pullers.

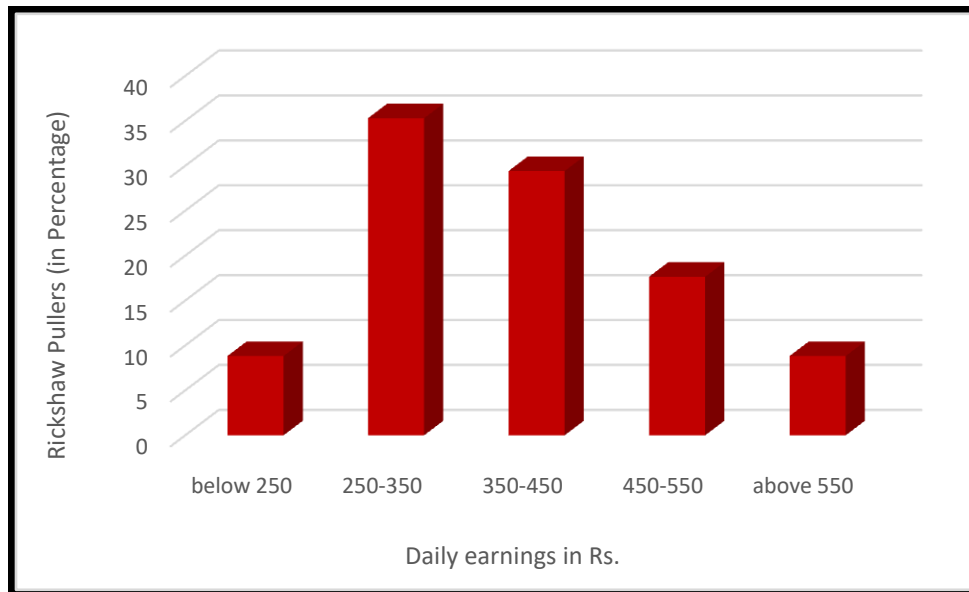
Table 1: Educational Status of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

| Education Level | Approx. % of Pullers | Characteristics |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---|
| No Schooling | 40–50% | Mostly older Rickshaw pullers, who came from very poor rural areas and working for more than 15 years. |
| Primary (Class 1–5) | 25–30% | Dropped out from school due to poverty and came to Kolkata with relatives and friends and joined as rickshaw puller. |
| Middle School (Class 6–8) | 10–15% | Usually, younger generation in this profession and some still continue schooling. |
| Secondary & Above | <5% | Very rare category and most of them came to this profession due to job loss or migration crisis and trying to find other jobs in this city. |

Income structure of hand pulled rikshaw puller in Kolkata

The income of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata is largely **weather dependent, irregular and low**. Most pullers operate on a **rental basis**, i.e., they pay a daily or weekly or monthly charge to the rickshaw owner. Their **daily earnings** ranges between ₹250 – ₹450 on normal days. During peak season, like Puja time, exam period, school hours etc, their earnings ranges between ₹500 – ₹600, while during lean periods, extreme heat, or their time of poor health their earnings may ranges between ₹150 – ₹200 per day. The study shows that, 35 percent respondents earn daily ranging between Rs. 250 – Rs. 350, while 29 percent earn between Rs. 350 – Rs. 450. The study also reveals that, only 9 percent rickshaw pullers earn more than Rs. 550 daily.

Diagram 3: Daily Income Structure of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

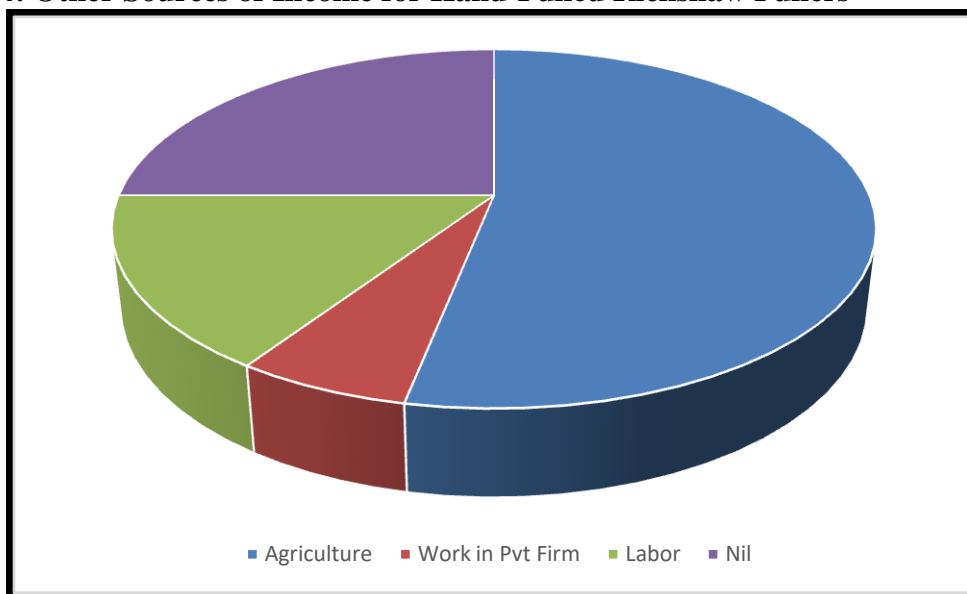


Other source of income

As most of these rickshaw pullers are migrant workers, they have their agricultural land in their home villages. These people work as rickshaw pullers in Kolkata and send money to their home. The study reveals that, about 50 percent of the respondents have their other source of income in their villages, where they earn livelihood from agricultural field. Remaining 15 percent rickshaw pullers work as casual labours in different sectors in and around Kolkata, some (6percent) work in factories and other private firms, while the rest 24 percent purely depend on the hand-pulled rickshaws. These 24 percent are uneducated and unskilled aged persons mainly, who do not have the possibility to engage in any other activities for their livelihood.

The rickshaw-pullers are poor because they more than 4 members in their family, while only one or two earning members in each family. In some cases, the rickshaw puller have to support his whole family with 6 members. Though majority of pullers have their agricultural land in the village, but due to very low capital investment and low production, the whole family face poor situation.

Diagram 4: Other Sources of Income for Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers



However, the following table reveals the basic socio-economic features of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata.

Table 2: Basic Socio-Economic Features of Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata

| Indicator | Status |
|--|---|
| Age- structure | Mainly older people of more than 60 years age, very few young generation people |
| Education | Low literacy, most of the pullers are illiterate while few are continuing their education |
| Housing type | Mainly pavement dwellings and slum areas |
| Skill level | Mainly unskilled |
| Income | Unstable and very low income |
| Reasons for a smaller number of passengers | Passengers prefer auto rickshaw or e-rickshaw for a speedy movement |
| Other Source of Income | About half have agriculture field in villages, some work as casual labor and some have no other income source |
| Healthcare | Inadequate |
| Social Status | Very low, marginalized |
| Acceptance of new generation | Not accepted by young people due to unstable and low income |
| Current Trend | Declining trend, facing extinction |

Reasons for socio-economic marginalization of hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata

Rickshaw pulling provides livelihood to many people, though earnings are meager and irregular, which is also often dependent on daily demand. As this is human-powered local transport, thus weather condition is highly important to run this type of transport efficiently. It is very difficult for the person, who are pulling the rickshaw during days of heavy rains and high heat. In Kolkata, during the British period, this type of transport was treated as a the most convenient for the-then middle-class Bengali people, but with the development of urban society in the 21st century, this type of transport has become back-dated. During the age of high-speed metro-rail as a means of commuting, this low-speed rickshaws face neglect and the pullers suffer from lack of

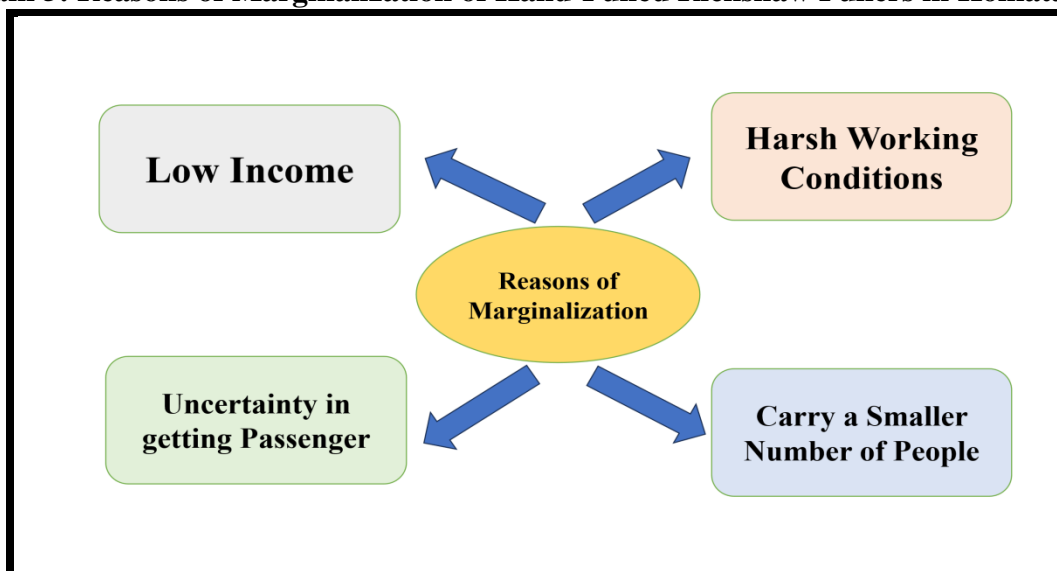
work. Under such challenging situation, they are facing social neglect and financially poor condition highlighting socio-economic disparities.

The government declaration about rickshaws that, these cause traffic congestion in modern high-speed society and also constitute an exploitative use of human labor and “not in alignment with the image of a modern society” (Samanta & Roy, 2013). But, those people who are the pullers of hand-pulled rickshaws are still depend on this type of work due to lack of any alternate option for their livelihood. Kolkata is a city of many activities and developments. It is the first city in India to construct a metro rail and also the only city, with many licensed hand-pulled rickshaws (called *tana rickshaw* in Bengali) as a mode of public transport. Calcutta (present Kolkata) was the capital of British India, which played a highly significant role in the development of public transportation inside the city.

The type of labour used to operate the hand-pulled rickshaws are also play significant role in making this type of transport a marginalized one. It is interesting to note that, pulling a rickshaw does not require skill and only it requires hard physical labour. Thus, mainly unemployed and unskilled labors find this type of work helpful for them. The migrant labors, who came from villages of surrounding states to Kolkata started this type of work in this city during the British period. They do not undergo any training or require a driver’s license to operate. Most rickshaw pullers do not even know the names of the roads, nor do they understand the various traffic symbols. This is because they are mostly illiterate and speak their own language instead of the local Bengali. Most of the rickshaw pullers rent the rickshaw from owners, who own *khatahs* (rickshaw garages). This arrangement evolved because many rickshaw pullers are either too poor or seasonal migrants, plying the rickshaws only for a few months when their agricultural fields in their villages remain fallow.

The combination of economic insecurity and occupational uncertainty- are two important reasons of the hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, which force these people towards marginalization. If we further analyze their situation, four interconnected problems can be come out.

Diagram 5: Reasons of Marginalization of Hand-Pulled Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata



As the rate per ride is very low till today, thus most hand-pulled rickshaw pullers earn very little on a daily basis, but they have to give a certain amount to the rickshaw owner daily or monthly basis. This force these pullers to live in a very tough situation. Combined effect of low speed, weather conditions, competition from auto-rickshaws, e-rickshaws and app-based transport create a situation that, majority of passengers prefer to take other mode of transport than hand-pulled rickshaws. This uncertainty in passenger also makes it hard for the rickshaw pullers to cover basic needs, repay debts, or send money to families in villages. As it is human-driven transport, thus the job demands extreme physical labour to pull the rickshaw along with the passengers by their hand often in intense heat, heavy rain, or during floods. Other mode of transport (even a e-rickshaw or an auto rickshaw) can carry 4-6 people at once, but a hand-pulled rickshaw can only carry one or at most two.

To keep pace with the high rate of urbanization, high-speed modern transport system, modernization, progress and globalization, hand-pulled rickshaws are lagging far behind due to its low speed, unsophisticated nature of pulling and poor financial condition of pullers. Inhuman working conditions, health risks, limited access to social security or welfare programs and declining demand due to modern transport options are other reasons for marginalization of this once cultural icon of the city. This contrasting picture in socio-cultural dimension of Kolkata's cityscape raises many questions about urban inequality, social disparity, economic drawbacks and the need for inclusive policies to ensure dignified livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

In the age of globalization and high-speed transport, the rickshaw is currently undervalued and under-utilized means of transport. The socio-economic condition of hand-pulled rickshaw pullers in Kolkata is a complex issue combining physical exploitation, **economic instability and social neglect**. These rickshaw-pullers represent an extinct chapter of Kolkata's tradition, however, their existence reveals the gaps in urban socio-economic policy and strategy including inclusive development, equality in society and social justice. There is an urgent need for **alternative livelihood support** to ensure their basic rights and well-being. According to Samanta and Roy (2013), the important reason for increasing the number of rickshaws in many Asian cities is the increasing local demand for movement. But besides this, the other reasons are also there that, the increasing migration rate of uneducated and unskilled rural people to cities and urban rural market. For these people, rickshaw pulling is the easiest option for initiating a livelihood in cities. Rural unemployment is, therefore, one of the reasons for the flourishing rickshaw profession in the cities of India (Samanta & Roy, 2013).

However, over the years, the number of hand-pulled rickshaws is likely to decrease significantly as younger educated generations are finding this profession as low-paying but physical labor-intensive occupation. On the contrary, the aged pullers are still work and the speed has become slow resulting in decreasing its demand among local residents. As this is a mode of livelihood for poor people, where dependency ratio is about 4-6. Thus, with abolition of this occupation, many families may face problems. Thus, government should reframe the urban transport related policies. Future schemes may incorporate **skill development programs** and **financial aid** to these rickshaw pullers for alternative livelihoods.

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