

People's Participation

(A Rights-Based NGO Working for Marginalized Communities in West Bengal)

In Collaboration With:

- ✧ Mompapa Foundation
- ✧ Kali Shankar Foundation

‘The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata’

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Acknowledgement

This research study titled “The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal: A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata” was undertaken as a collaborative effort among ‘People’s Participation’, Mompapa Foundation’, and ‘Kali Shankar Foundation’.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the cycle rickshaw pullers of Kolkata—particularly from North Kolkata, Burrabazar, Gariahat, and Howrah—for their time, openness, and valuable insights, without which this study would not have been possible.

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This study aims to bring visibility and dignity to an often-overlooked workforce and serve as a foundation for inclusive urban policy-making.

The Research Team

July 2025

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the research study titled:

“The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal: A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata”

has been conducted ethically and independently by the research team under my supervision. The findings are based on primary fieldwork, interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of relevant secondary sources. All necessary care was taken to ensure the voluntary participation, confidentiality, and dignity of the respondents throughout the study.

This report is an original piece of work and has not been submitted to any other institution for academic or official purposes.

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Research Ethics Statement

This study titled:

“The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal: A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata”

was conducted with full adherence to ethical research principles. The research team ensured that:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews and discussions. The purpose of the study, the use of collected data, and participants' rights were clearly explained in simple, local language.
- Participation was voluntary, and respondents were given the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any pressure or consequence.
- All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. No personal identifiers (such as names or addresses) have been published or disclosed in the report.
- The interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-intrusive manner. Respondents were not subjected to any physical, psychological, or emotional harm.
- Data collected during the fieldwork has been used exclusively for academic and research purposes and stored securely.
- No inducement, payment, or coercion was involved in obtaining responses.

The study complies with standard social research ethics and was carried out with sensitivity to the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the respondent group.

Lead Researcher:

Mr. Dipankar Mitra

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Date: July 2025

Abbreviations and Glossary

Term / Acronym	Full Form / Meaning
ULBs	Urban Local Bodies – City-level government authorities (e.g., Municipal Corporations) responsible for civic and infrastructure services
ILO	International Labour Organization – A United Nations agency promoting decent work globally
FGD	Focus Group Discussion – A qualitative data collection method involving group interviews
E-Shram	A national portal launched by the Government of India to register unorganized workers for social security and welfare benefits
PMKVY	Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana – A skill development program by the Government of India for youth and informal workers
Rickshaw Zone	A designated area in the city where cycle rickshaws are allowed to operate freely without restrictions
Microcredit	Small loans provided to low-income individuals or informal workers for livelihood purposes
Cycle Rickshaw	A human-powered, three-wheeled vehicle used for carrying passengers or goods over short distances
Seasonal Migrants	Workers who temporarily relocate from rural areas to cities for part of the year for employment
Informal Economy	The part of the economy that is not taxed, regulated, or monitored by the government, often involving unregistered workers

✿ **Title: “The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal: A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata”**

Abstract

Cycle rickshaws, commonly referred to as pedal rickshaws, represent a unique intersection of urban mobility, informal labor, and livelihood resilience in cities like Kolkata, West Bengal. Despite the rapid pace of urban modernization and the proliferation of motorized transport systems, cycle rickshaws continue to play an essential role in last-mile connectivity, especially in densely populated, congested neighborhoods with narrow lanes. Their presence is not just a matter of transportation convenience but a deeply embedded socio-economic phenomenon involving thousands of migrant laborers, mostly from rural districts of West Bengal and neighboring Bihar.

This research paper investigates the socio-economic role of cycle rickshaws in Kolkata, with an emphasis on the lived experiences of the rickshaw pullers themselves. It is rooted in fieldwork involving interviews, observation, and interaction with 60 rickshaw pullers operating in areas such as Burrabazar, Gariahat, Howrah, and North Kolkata. Through this qualitative and quantitative data, the paper presents a comprehensive understanding of the demographic profile, income structure, daily challenges, and aspirations of these informal workers.

The findings reveal that the majority of rickshaw pullers are seasonal or semi-permanent migrants, aged between 30 and 60, who travel to Kolkata in search of livelihoods unavailable in their native villages. Most of them are landless or marginal farmers who are forced to supplement agricultural income by taking up physically demanding urban labor. These men typically live in substandard conditions—often sleeping in their rickshaws or makeshift shelters—with limited access to clean water, sanitation, or healthcare. Many suffer from chronic ailments such as back pain, joint problems, and respiratory issues due to long working hours, exposure to pollution, and lack of medical support.

Economically, rickshaw pulling provides a modest but vital income. The average daily earning ranges between ₹300 to ₹600, depending on the season, area of operation, and demand. However, many do not own their rickshaws; instead, they rent them at a daily cost, reducing their take-home pay. The occupation is highly insecure, lacks social protection, and is often stigmatized as low-status labor. Despite these hardships, rickshaw pullers contribute significantly to urban life—transporting school children, elderly passengers, small traders, and goods across areas where autos or cars cannot operate.

The persistence of pedal rickshaws amidst urban transformation is also a subject of inquiry in this study. While many Indian cities have aggressively promoted motorized transport or e-rickshaws, Kolkata has retained its pedal rickshaw culture to a large extent, especially in older parts of the city. This endurance points to both a policy gap and a socio-cultural adaptation—

wherein the informal sector continues to fill mobility and employment voids unaddressed by formal systems.

Moreover, this study identifies several critical areas of intervention. These include the need for policy recognition of rickshaw pullers as urban service providers, provision of health camps and insurance, financial literacy training, microcredit facilities for rickshaw ownership, and eventually pathways to alternative livelihoods for aging workers. Currently, there is little to no institutional support from municipalities or state welfare schemes, which keeps this workforce invisible and vulnerable.

In conclusion, pedal rickshaws are far more than just a nostalgic remnant of a bygone era; they are a living testimony to the adaptability, endurance, and socio-economic struggles of a large section of the urban poor. By understanding and acknowledging their role in the urban economy, this study calls for inclusive planning that integrates informal labor into broader frameworks of urban development and social justice. The cycle rickshaw pullers of Kolkata are not merely drivers of a traditional vehicle—they are, in essence, peddling the wheels of urban resilience.

1. Introduction

Cycle rickshaws, or pedal rickshaws, are a distinctive and time-tested mode of transport in India's urban landscape. These three-wheeled, human-powered vehicles are particularly suited for short-distance travel through congested, narrow lanes that are often inaccessible to motorized transport. While major Indian cities are experiencing a rapid transition toward high-speed, motorized, and app-based mobility systems, the humble cycle rickshaw continues to serve as a crucial element in the urban transportation matrix—especially for low-income commuters and in densely populated localities.

In cities like Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, cycle rickshaws are not merely a mode of transportation but a lifeline for many, both as a means of livelihood and as a critical service for last-mile connectivity. These rickshaws ferry schoolchildren, elderly citizens, market-goers, and goods across areas where auto-rickshaws, taxis, or buses cannot navigate effectively. As such, they play a silent but indispensable role in maintaining the flow of urban life. Yet, paradoxically, the people behind the handlebars—the rickshaw pullers—often remain on the periphery of public attention, policy support, and economic security.

This paper seeks to explore the socio-economic dimensions of cycle rickshaw operations in urban West Bengal, focusing specifically on Kolkata. The emphasis is on understanding the background, working conditions, aspirations, and challenges of the rickshaw pullers who operate these vehicles. Predominantly, these men are migrants from rural areas of West Bengal and neighboring states such as Bihar, drawn to the city by a lack of employment opportunities in agriculture or other rural sectors. The occupation of rickshaw pulling, though physically strenuous and socially undervalued, offers a viable source of daily income in a city where formal employment is scarce for low-skilled workers.

Kolkata presents a particularly compelling case for this study. The city, once known for its trams and hand-pulled rickshaws, has witnessed waves of urban modernization, infrastructure development, and a growing fleet of motorized transport. Despite this, pedal rickshaws have not disappeared. They continue to be an enduring presence in neighborhoods such as North Kolkata, Burrabazar, Howrah, and areas surrounding major railway stations and markets. Their continued relevance can be attributed to multiple factors—affordability for commuters, zero carbon emissions, ability to maneuver in tight spaces, and low entry barriers for migrants seeking work.

Moreover, the persistence of pedal rickshaws raises questions about the inclusivity of urban development policies. While municipal bodies invest heavily in smart city infrastructure, e-vehicles, and metro expansion, there is often limited recognition or support for non-motorized, informal transport workers. In fact, in some urban areas, there have been calls to remove rickshaws from main roads under the pretext of modernity or traffic efficiency, which further marginalizes those who rely on this livelihood. There is an urgent need to assess whether development policies are inadvertently pushing informal workers out of the cityscape without offering them viable alternatives.

From a sustainability perspective, cycle rickshaws offer a non-polluting, low-carbon alternative in a world grappling with climate change and rising urban air pollution. They are cost-effective, do not rely on fossil fuels, and can contribute to greener urban transport systems. Their potential to be integrated into city planning as an environmentally friendly mode of transport remains underutilized.

This paper adopts a field-based, mixed-methods approach to examine the real-life stories of cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata. Through interviews, observations, and analysis of secondary data, the study aims to provide a human-centered understanding of this informal occupation. It also seeks to evaluate how policy, infrastructure, and social perceptions shape the experiences of these workers.

Ultimately, this research attempts to answer an important question: In a rapidly modernizing urban landscape, is there still space for the pedal rickshaw—not just as a vehicle on the road, but as a means of livelihood, dignity, and social relevance for the people who operate them?

2. Objectives of the Study

1. **To analyze the socio-economic profile of cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata**, including their age, education level, migration history, family background, place of origin, and reasons for entering the occupation, with the aim of understanding the push and pull factors influencing their urban livelihood choices.
2. **To assess the financial sustainability of rickshaw pulling as an occupation**, by examining income patterns, seasonal fluctuations in earnings, cost of renting or owning rickshaws, daily work hours, and expenditure on basic needs such as food, housing, health, and remittances.

3. **To identify and document the major occupational and urban challenges faced by rickshaw pullers**, including physical health issues arising from prolonged manual labor, lack of access to healthcare, absence of legal protection or worker rights, restrictions on movement in urban zones, police harassment, and the social stigma attached to the occupation.
4. **To evaluate the extent of institutional support and access to public welfare schemes**, such as health insurance, identity documents, affordable housing, sanitation, or financial inclusion, and to determine the level of awareness and utilization of government schemes among the rickshaw-pulling community.
5. **To critically examine policy gaps in urban planning and transportation frameworks** that either ignore or undermine the role of non-motorized transport like cycle rickshaws, and to analyze whether these workers are considered stakeholders in current urban development narratives.
6. **To recommend practical and rights-based policy interventions** that could improve the living and working conditions of cycle rickshaw pullers—such as welfare board registration, health and social security provisions, access to microfinance for rickshaw ownership, and their integration into sustainable and inclusive urban mobility planning.

3. Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative tools to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic realities of cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata.

1. Study Area

The study was conducted in key urban zones of Kolkata where cycle rickshaws are still widely used and visible. The selected locations include:

- **North Kolkata (Shyambazar, Sovabazar, Maniktala)** – known for its dense population and traditional neighborhoods.
- **Burrabazar** – a major wholesale market area with high rickshaw traffic for goods and passenger movement.
- **Gariahat and Ballygunge** – mixed residential-commercial areas with significant use of rickshaws for short-distance trips.
- **Howrah Station Area** – a high-traffic transit points where migrant rickshaw pullers often operate.

These sites were chosen to reflect the diversity of working conditions, clientele, and urban pressures faced by rickshaw pullers in different types of neighborhoods (residential, commercial, and transit-oriented).

2. **Sample Size and Sampling Method**

A total of **60 cycle rickshaw pullers** were selected through **purposive random sampling** across the four identified study zones. The sample was drawn to ensure:

- Representation from both rickshaw owners and renters
- Inclusion of seasonal migrants and semi-permanent urban dwellers
- A range of age groups and working hours

3. **Tools and Techniques for Data Collection**

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with all 60 participants using a flexible interview guide covering demographics, income, working conditions, migration history, health status, access to government schemes, and daily challenges.
- **Direct Observation:** Researcher-led observational visits were carried out to understand rickshaw operation patterns, resting spaces, interaction with passengers, and exposure to urban environmental conditions.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two FGDs (each with 6–8 participants) were held in North Kolkata and Burrabazar to explore collective perspectives on policy gaps, solidarity among rickshaw pullers, and perceived changes over time in the occupation.
- **Secondary Data Review:** Reports, municipal transport policies, urban development plans, and previous academic studies were reviewed to contextualize the findings within broader socio-political and economic narratives.

4. **Data Type and Analysis**

- **Quantitative Data:** Collected on earnings, hours worked, years in occupation, rental fees, and number of trips per day. This data was analyzed using basic descriptive statistics (averages, ranges, percentages) to derive economic patterns.
- **Qualitative Data:** Interview and FGD transcripts were thematically analyzed to identify recurring challenges, aspirations, and narratives related to migration, dignity of labor, health, and exclusion from policy frameworks.

5. Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and verbal consent was obtained before interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection and reporting process.

4. Profile of Rickshaw Pullers

Understanding the demographic and socio-economic background of the rickshaw pullers is critical to analyzing the vulnerabilities and challenges they face in their occupation. Based on field data collected from 60 participants across four major urban zones in Kolkata, the following profile has been constructed:

1. Place of Origin

The majority of the cycle rickshaw pullers are migrant laborers originating from **rural districts of West Bengal and Bihar**. The most commonly reported districts in West Bengal include:

- **Murshidabad**
- **Malda**
- **Birbhum**
- **Purulia**

From Bihar, significant representation was noted from:

- **Samastipur**
- **Gaya**
- **Madhubani**

These districts are generally characterized by high levels of rural poverty, seasonal agricultural employment, and limited access to formal job markets. The migration to Kolkata is primarily driven by economic distress and lack of local livelihood opportunities.

2. Age Distribution

The age of rickshaw pullers ranges between 30 and 60 years, with the majority concentrated in the 40–55 years bracket. Very few younger men (under 30) are found in

this occupation, indicating that rickshaw pulling is not generally considered a viable livelihood by the younger generation due to its physical strain and social stigma.

3. Educational Attainment

Educational levels among the respondents are extremely low, reflecting broader patterns of educational exclusion in their home regions:

- 80% are either completely illiterate or have studied only up to Class III.
- The remaining 20% have completed some level of primary or middle school education but lacked access to secondary schooling.

This low level of formal education severely limits their access to formal or semi-formal employment sectors, pushing them into informal, low-skill urban labor markets like rickshaw pulling.

4. Migration and Residency Status

Most of the rickshaw pullers are seasonal migrants, who live and work in Kolkata for 8 to 10 months each year, especially during the non-agricultural seasons. They typically return to their native villages during harvesting periods, religious festivals, or family emergencies. A smaller group (approximately 15–20%) have been living semi-permanently in the city for more than 10 years, either alone or in shared rented accommodations. These individuals tend to have slightly more established work routines and local social networks, though they still live in precarious housing conditions.

5. Family and Dependents

While many rickshaw pullers live alone in Kolkata, they typically have families residing in their native villages, including spouses, children, and sometimes elderly parents. A significant portion of their income is sent home as monthly remittances to support education, healthcare, and subsistence for dependents.

6. Rickshaw Ownership Pattern

Only about 20% of the respondents own their rickshaws, usually after years of saving or through second-hand purchases. The remaining 80% rent their rickshaws from local owners or informal cooperatives at a daily rate ranging from ₹50 to ₹100, which directly reduces their net daily earnings.

This profile establishes a clear picture of the socio-economic background of cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata and provides important context for analyzing their challenges, coping strategies, and policy needs. The findings underline the importance of viewing rickshaw pulling not as a personal failure or marginal occupation, but as a survival strategy employed by rural labor migrants navigating urban informal economies.

5. Nature of Work and Income

Cycle rickshaw pulling is a physically intensive and time-demanding occupation that constitutes a primary or sole source of income for thousands of rural migrants operating in Kolkata. Based on direct interviews and field observations, the following work and income-related patterns were observed among the 60 rickshaw pullers surveyed:

1. Daily Working Hours

Rickshaw pullers typically work between 10 to 12 hours per day, often beginning early in the morning around 6:00 AM and continuing until 6:00 to 8:00 PM, with intermittent breaks for meals and rest. During peak hours—such as morning school or office rush and evening market closures—they work continuously to maximize passenger flow and earnings. The long duration is largely driven by the need to cover the cost of rickshaw rental (for non-owners) and ensure sufficient income to support daily expenses and remittances.

2. Trips per Day and Nature of Services

On average, each rickshaw puller completes 15 to 25 short-distance trips per day. The volume varies depending on location, day of the week, season, and local events. The trips primarily consist of:

- Passenger transport (schoolchildren, elderly, women with market goods)
- Small cargo delivery (vegetables, groceries, garments in market areas like Burrabazar)
- Occasional waiting-based trips, where the rickshaw puller waits for customers outside schools, hospitals, or railway stations

Each trip typically lasts between 5 to 20 minutes, covering distances of 1 to 3 kilometers. The high frequency of short trips makes the job repetitive and physically exhausting.

3. Daily Earnings and Income Variability

The reported average daily gross income ranges between ₹300 and ₹600. However, this amount is highly variable based on several factors:

- Weather conditions: Earnings drop significantly during heavy rains or extreme heat, when fewer passengers commute and physical exertion increases.
- Local demand: Rickshaw pullers operating in high-footfall areas like markets or transport hubs earn more than those in residential zones.
- Time of year: Festival periods, school vacations, or public holidays affect passenger volume.
- Night shifts: Some pullers work till late evening (post 9 PM) to increase earnings but face safety risks.

After deducting expenses—especially rickshaw rent and food—the net daily income for most pullers averages ₹200 to ₹450, a sum often shared with family back home through remittances.

4. Rickshaw Ownership and Rental Dynamics

Only 20% of the interviewed rickshaw pullers own their vehicles, typically having saved over several years or having bought second-hand rickshaws through informal credit. These individuals have greater control over their work schedules and retain the entire daily income.

The remaining 80% depend on daily rentals, paying between ₹50 to ₹100 per day to local rickshaw owners or garage operators. Some pay an advance monthly rent. This fixed cost must be earned before any surplus income is realized. In case of illness, injury, or low work availability, the rental cost becomes a financial burden, as there is no income security.

5. Absence of Formal Wage and Benefits

Cycle rickshaw pulling is a self-employed, unregulated and informal occupation, offering no fixed wages, no holidays, no sick leave, and no retirement benefits. Income is entirely dependent on daily physical labor and fluctuating passenger demand. There is also no mechanism to regulate fares, often leaving rickshaw pullers vulnerable to fare disputes with passengers.

This analysis illustrates the precarious nature of rickshaw pulling as a livelihood. Despite the physically taxing work and long hours, income levels remain modest, with no institutional support. The combination of high physical output, low income, and lack of job security highlights the need for policy attention, particularly in urban welfare schemes, health insurance, and microcredit support for vehicle ownership.

6. Challenges Faced by Cycle Rickshaw Pullers

The occupation of cycle rickshaw pulling in Kolkata, while providing a source of livelihood for many rural migrants, is fraught with numerous socio-economic, health, and infrastructural challenges. These issues, identified through interviews and field observations, not only impact the quality of life of the workers but also threaten the sustainability of their livelihood. The major challenges are outlined below:

1. Occupational Health Hazards

The nature of rickshaw pulling—manual, repetitive, and long hours—places a severe physical toll on the workers:

- Chronic musculoskeletal pain is reported by over 70% of participants, especially in the back, knees, shoulders, and wrists due to continuous pedaling and poor posture.

- Respiratory issues, such as wheezing, persistent coughing, and chest tightness, are common due to prolonged exposure to urban air pollution, especially in traffic-heavy areas like Burrabazar and Howrah.
- Heat exhaustion and dehydration are frequent in the summer months (March–June), especially among pullers who work without access to shade or clean drinking water during long shifts.
- Lack of regular medical checkups and zero health insurance coverage worsens these problems, with most rickshaw pullers resorting to over-the-counter medicine or local unlicensed practitioners.

2. Exclusion from Urban Transport and Planning Policies

Despite their essential service, cycle rickshaw pullers are largely excluded from formal urban transport frameworks:

- There is no formal registration or licensing system for rickshaw pullers in many parts of the city, which leads to harassment by municipal officials or police and denies them legal protection.
- Traffic restrictions and area-specific bans on rickshaws in certain commercial or main road zones—intended to reduce congestion—have led to a shrinking operational space for pullers, particularly during festivals or civic events.
- Unlike auto-rickshaws or e-rickshaws, there are no designated lanes, stands, or fare regulations for pedal rickshaws, forcing pullers to negotiate fares arbitrarily and compete for limited passenger flow.

3. Social Stigma and Occupational Marginalization

Cycle rickshaw pulling is widely perceived as a **low-status, undignified occupation** within both urban and rural contexts:

- Many pullers shared that they hide their work identity when returning to their villages, due to the shame associated with physical labor in public spaces.
- Some are addressed with derogatory terms, and their occupation is often associated with poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness.
- This stigma limits their social mobility and discourages younger generations from entering the profession, even if they lack other livelihood options.

4. Poor Living Conditions and Lack of Shelter

A significant portion of rickshaw pullers live in makeshift shelters, under flyovers, or inside their rickshaws, particularly those who are seasonal migrants and cannot afford rented accommodation.

- Overcrowding, lack of privacy, and exposure to weather extremes are common living conditions.
- Access to basic sanitation facilities such as toilets and bathing areas is severely limited. Many depend on public toilets, which are either insufficient, unhygienic, or charge a fee for each use.
- The absence of a permanent address also hinders their ability to access identity documents like voter cards, ration cards, or health scheme enrollment.

5. Economic Vulnerability and Lack of Institutional Support

- There is no formal union or welfare board to represent the interests of cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata.
- Most are unaware of or excluded from government welfare schemes such as health insurance (Ayushman Bharat), social security pensions, or labor welfare funds.
- In times of illness, accidents, or during city lockdowns (e.g., COVID-19), many pullers reported zero income, food insecurity, and no relief from authorities or NGOs.

These challenges paint a stark picture of an occupation that is essential to the city's daily functioning yet remains unrecognized and unsupported. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions from municipal authorities, social organizations, and urban planners to ensure that these workers are not left behind in the city's development process.

7. Importance and Urban Role of Cycle Rickshaws in Kolkata

Despite their declining visibility in some parts of urban India due to rapid motorization, cycle rickshaws continue to play a vital role in Kolkata's transport ecosystem, especially in older and densely populated neighborhoods. Their significance extends beyond mobility, encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Key aspects of their importance are outlined below:

1. **Environmentally Sustainable and Zero-Emission Transport**

As a non-motorized mode of transport, cycle rickshaws operate without consuming fossil fuels or emitting greenhouse gases. In a city like Kolkata, where air pollution from vehicular traffic is a growing concern, these rickshaws serve as a climate-friendly alternative for short-distance travel. Their use supports urban environmental goals such as:

- Reducing carbon emissions
- Lowering urban noise levels
- Promoting non-polluting, slow mobility in sensitive zones such as heritage areas, school zones, and marketplaces

Encouraging their continued operation could be aligned with sustainable urban mobility plans and India's commitments under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC).

2. **Critical for Last-Mile Connectivity**

Cycle rickshaws are indispensable for last-mile transport, especially in areas not serviced efficiently by buses, autos, or app-based ride services:

- They bridge the gap between major transit hubs (like metro stations, railway stations, and bus stands) and the final destination of commuters.
- In narrow lanes, congested bazaars, and residential colonies—particularly in areas like North Kolkata, Burrabazar, and Howrah—they are often the only accessible mode of transport.
- They cater to those who need door-to-door service, particularly in informal settlements and slum areas where roads are too narrow for larger vehicles.

3. **Support for Vulnerable and Marginalized Commuters**

Cycle rickshaws offer a low-speed, safe, and accessible transport option for:

- Elderly persons, who may face difficulty climbing onto buses or autos
- Women with children, especially for market or school trips
- Schoolchildren, especially in areas where institutional transport is unavailable
- People with temporary injuries or limited mobility

Their availability ensures **inclusivity in urban mobility**, making the city more accessible to all segments of society regardless of age, physical ability, or financial means.

4. **Employment and Livelihood in the Informal Economy**

Beyond their transport function, cycle rickshaws are a vital source of livelihood for thousands of urban poor, especially migrant workers with limited education or job skills. Their continued presence:

- Provides self-employment opportunities with minimal capital investment (especially for those who own their rickshaws)
- Helps stabilize income flows for seasonal migrants from rural West Bengal and Bihar
- Supports subsistence livelihoods without requiring formal job registration, making it accessible for the unbanked and undocumented population

In this sense, cycle rickshaws function as a social safety net in urban areas where other forms of employment are either unavailable or too competitive.

5. **Resilience During Crises and Mobility Gaps**

During times of transport disruption—such as public transport strikes, natural disasters, or pandemics—cycle rickshaws have continued to operate and serve as a reliable mode of local transport. Their small size, independence from fuel, and flexible routes allow them to navigate flooded roads, closed markets, or cordoned-off areas.

6. **Cultural and Historical Identity of Kolkata**

Cycle rickshaws, like hand-pulled rickshaws, are part of Kolkata's cultural identity. They are prominently visible in heritage neighborhoods and often featured in documentaries and literature that depict the city's unique character. Retaining them in modern cityscapes offers both cultural continuity and a symbol of inclusive urban planning.

In conclusion, the urban role of cycle rickshaws in Kolkata is multifaceted. They are not only a means of transport but also a green, inclusive, culturally significant, and livelihood-supporting system that fills a crucial gap left by formal urban planning. Recognizing and integrating them into policy frameworks could enhance both mobility and social equity in the city.

8. **Government and NGO Interventions**

Despite their crucial role in urban mobility and livelihood generation, cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata continue to remain excluded from most formal support systems, both governmental and

non-governmental. This section examines the current state of institutional engagement and highlights opportunities for targeted intervention based on successful models from other cities.

1. **Lack of Institutional Support in Kolkata**

At present, no dedicated welfare scheme exists at the state or municipal level in Kolkata that specifically addresses the needs of cycle rickshaw pullers. They are not recognized under the urban informal labor welfare programs, and there is:

- No registration mechanism or identity system for rickshaw pullers
- No provision for subsidized housing, insurance, or pension benefits
- Minimal engagement from local municipal bodies regarding their inclusion in transport planning or disaster relief

This absence of formal recognition results in exclusion from essential services such as public health schemes (e.g., Ayushman Bharat), social security programs (e.g., E-Shram), or urban employment initiatives.

2. **Scope for NGO and Municipal Interventions**

There exists significant untapped potential for NGOs, civil society organizations, and urban local bodies to provide structured support to cycle rickshaw pullers. Possible interventions include:

- **Formation of Rickshaw Welfare Boards:** A dedicated body under the municipal corporation could facilitate rickshaw registration, issue ID cards, and act as a grievance redressal forum.
- **Access to Health and Safety Services:** NGOs, in collaboration with municipal health departments, can organize free health check-up camps, distribute safety gear (masks, reflective jackets), and provide basic first aid kits.
- **Financial Inclusion and Microcredit:** Partnering with local banks or microfinance institutions, NGOs can facilitate bank account opening, savings programs, and credit access for rickshaw ownership or vehicle repair.
- **Skill Development and Livelihood Diversification:** Training programs could be offered for those nearing retirement age or facing health issues, allowing them to transition into less strenuous roles such as repair work, vending, or community-based jobs.

- **Shelter and Sanitation Facilities:** Temporary or semi-permanent night shelters with toilets and bathing facilities can be created in high-rickshaw-use areas, especially for seasonal migrants.

3. **Best Practices from Other Indian Cities**

Some Indian cities have demonstrated promising models of inclusion and support for rickshaw pullers:

- **Delhi:** Under the Delhi Rickshaw Policy, cycle rickshaws were registered and regulated through a licensing system. Pilot programs by NGOs also provided health insurance cards, uniforms, and training in customer service and traffic rules.
- **Lucknow:** The “Rickshaw Bank” initiative, supported by NGOs and microfinance agencies, offered low-interest loans to rickshaw pullers to help them purchase their own vehicles, reducing their dependency on daily rentals.
- **Varanasi:** NGOs and transport planners worked together to create rickshaw zones, along with fare regulation mechanisms and resting areas, making the occupation more organized and less exploitative.

These models show that with modest investment and local cooperation, rickshaw pullers can be gradually integrated into the formal urban economy, enhancing their dignity, earnings, and overall quality of life.

4. **Need for a Policy Framework in Kolkata**

Given the continued relevance of cycle rickshaws in the city, there is an urgent need to develop a localized policy framework that:

- Recognizes rickshaw pullers as essential informal service providers
- Ensures their inclusion in city mobility plans and welfare schemes
- Provides funding and operational support to NGOs working with this community

Such a framework should be developed through participatory planning, with direct input from rickshaw pullers and their informal unions, to ensure relevance and sustainability.

In summary, while current government and NGO support structures for cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata are minimal, the potential for meaningful intervention is substantial. Learning from

other Indian cities and adapting those strategies to the local context can lead to inclusive urban planning that upholds the dignity and well-being of this marginalized workforce.

9. Conclusion

Cycle rickshaws continue to serve as a vital component of Kolkata's urban transport system, particularly in older, congested neighborhoods where motorized vehicles cannot easily operate. They offer a low-cost, environmentally sustainable, and accessible mode of transport for a wide range of urban residents—especially the elderly, schoolchildren, women, and low-income commuters seeking short-distance travel. Their contribution to last-mile connectivity, reduced emissions, and inclusive urban mobility remains largely undervalued in the current discourse of city planning and transport modernization.

Equally important is the role that cycle rickshaws play in sustaining livelihoods for thousands of rural migrants, many of whom lack formal education and come from economically distressed districts of West Bengal and Bihar. For these workers, rickshaw pulling is not merely a job—it is a means of survival and social security in the absence of viable alternatives. However, their work remains informal, physically taxing, and vulnerable to exploitation, with no structured policy framework or social protection mechanism in place.

This study has highlighted the precarious conditions faced by rickshaw pullers in terms of health risks, inadequate shelter, lack of access to healthcare, social stigma, and exclusion from municipal planning. Despite their visible presence in the streets of Kolkata, they are invisible in policy, with no dedicated welfare schemes, licensing systems, or transport integration measures that recognize or support their role.

Given this context, there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift in how city governments and urban planners approach non-motorized transport and informal labor. Cycle rickshaws should not be seen as an outdated or obstructive form of urban mobility, but rather as a green, people-centered, and culturally rooted solution that aligns with sustainable development and inclusive growth goals. To this end, the following priorities must be addressed:

- Recognition and registration of rickshaw pullers through municipal welfare boards
- Inclusion in social protection schemes, including health insurance, accident coverage, and pension plans
- Improvement in working and living conditions, such as access to rest shelters, sanitation, and basic healthcare

- Integration into urban transport plans, including the designation of cycle rickshaw zones, fare regulation, and infrastructure support
- Collaboration with NGOs and community-based organizations to facilitate skill training, financial literacy, and alternative livelihood opportunities

In conclusion, supporting cycle rickshaw pullers is not only a matter of transport management but also an issue of urban justice, labor dignity, and equitable development. As Kolkata continues to modernize, a truly inclusive city must ensure that no group—especially those who keep it moving silently and sustainably—is left behind.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that cycle rickshaw pullers in Kolkata operate under vulnerable and unregulated conditions, despite playing a vital role in urban transport and livelihood generation. To improve their working and living conditions and integrate them into inclusive city planning, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. Formal Recognition and Registration of Rickshaw Pullers

- Municipal bodies (e.g., Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Howrah Municipal Corporation) should initiate a comprehensive registration and ID issuance program for cycle rickshaw pullers.
- Registered workers should be recognized under the urban informal labor sector, enabling access to welfare schemes and protection from eviction or harassment.
- A digital or physical rickshaw puller card should include identity proof, operational zones, and emergency contact details.

2. Creation of Designated Rickshaw Zones and Parking Bays

- Urban planning authorities should demarcate dedicated rickshaw movement corridors and parking stands, particularly near railway stations, metro exits, markets, hospitals, and schools.
- City transport maps should integrate cycle rickshaws into last-mile connectivity plans, ensuring smooth coordination with formal modes of transport.

- Prohibit arbitrary bans on rickshaws by creating a zonal permit system that balances traffic flow with the right to livelihood.

3. Health Insurance and Preventive Healthcare Access

- Enroll all registered rickshaw pullers under government-funded health schemes such as *Ayushman Bharat* or *Swasthya Sathi* (in West Bengal).
- Conduct periodic free health check-up camps in collaboration with municipal health departments and NGOs, focusing on musculoskeletal issues, respiratory health, and hydration management.
- Create mobile health units or wellness kiosks at key rickshaw puller congregation points.

4. Facilitating Microcredit for Rickshaw Ownership

- Collaborate with banks, cooperative societies, and microfinance institutions to offer low-interest, collateral-free loans for rickshaw purchase or upgrade.
- Introduce subsidized ownership schemes for long-term pullers to reduce dependence on daily rental systems, thereby improving net income.
- Provide financial literacy training to help pullers manage earnings, savings, and loan repayments effectively.

5. Skill Development and Alternative Livelihood Options

- Develop skill upgradation programs for rickshaw pullers, especially those above 50 years of age, to transition into lighter or less physically demanding jobs such as rickshaw maintenance, delivery services, street vending, or informal caregiving.
- Partner with government schemes like PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana) to implement vocational training modules tailored to their background and skill level.
- Encourage NGOs to run livelihood counseling and placement support services for aging or injured rickshaw pullers.

6. Social Security and Worker Welfare Boards

- Establish a Rickshaw Puller Welfare Board at the state or municipal level to address grievances, disburse benefits, and represent workers in policy forums.
- Provide access to pension schemes such as the National Pension System (NPS) for informal workers.
- Ensure linkages to housing schemes, ration cards, and identity documentation services to support their broader social inclusion.

Implementing these recommendations requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving municipal authorities, urban transport planners, labor departments, NGOs, and financial institutions. With structured intervention, cycle rickshaw pullers can be transitioned from an invisible, unsupported workforce to an empowered and dignified contributor to Kolkata's sustainable urban future.

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Interview Schedule

Title of Study: *The Socio-Economic Role of Pedal Rickshaws in Urban West Bengal: A Study of Cycle Rickshaw Pullers in Kolkata*

Location: Kolkata (North Kolkata, Burrabazar, Gariahat, Howrah)

Interview Date: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Interviewee Name (Optional): _____

Approximate Age: _____

Place of Origin (District & State): _____

☆ Section A: Demographic and Personal Profile

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Home District and State:
4. Marital Status:
 - ☐ Single
 - ☐ Married
 - ☐ Widowed
 - ☐ Separated
5. Educational Qualification:
 - ☐ Illiterate
 - ☐ Up to Primary
 - ☐ Up to Secondary
 - ☐ Higher
6. Languages Spoken:
7. Migration Pattern:
 - How long have you been working in Kolkata?
 - Do you return to your village regularly? (If yes, how often?)
 - Duration of stay per year in Kolkata: _____ months

☆ **Section B: Occupational Details**

8. How long have you been working as a rickshaw puller?
9. Do you own the rickshaw or rent it?
 - ☐ Own
 - ☐ Rent (Daily rental cost: ₹_____)
10. Average number of hours you work per day:
11. Average number of trips you make daily:
12. Types of passengers/goods you usually carry:
13. Daily income (approx.): ₹_____
14. Are there days when you earn nothing? If yes, how frequently?
15. Do you face fare-related conflicts with passengers?
16. Do you work in the evening or night hours? Why/why not?

☆ **Section C: Health, Shelter, and Welfare**

17. Do you suffer from body pain, breathing problems, or fatigue regularly?
18. Have you ever received any medical treatment while in Kolkata?
 - If yes, where? (e.g., Government hospital / Private clinic / Local pharmacy)
19. Do you have access to clean drinking water and food while working?
20. Where do you sleep or live in Kolkata?
 - ☐ In rickshaw
 - ☐ On footpath
 - ☐ Rented room
 - ☐ Labour shelter
21. Do you use public toilets or bathing facilities? Are they sufficient and clean?
22. Are you enrolled in any government scheme (ration card, health card, E-Shram, etc.)?
23. Have you ever received any support from NGOs or the municipal corporation?

☆ **Section D: Social Identity and Challenges**

24. How do people treat you in public spaces? Do you face any stigma?
25. What are the main difficulties you face in your work?
26. Have you ever been harassed by police or local authorities?
27. Do you belong to any union or group of rickshaw pullers?
28. What do you do when you fall sick or cannot work?
29. What changes or support do you wish for from the government or NGOs?

☆ **Section E: Aspirations and Future Plans**

30. Do you plan to continue this work in the future? Why or why not?
31. What work would you like to do if you get an alternative opportunity or training?
32. Would you be interested in joining a scheme for rickshaw ownership, health benefits, or housing if available?

Remarks (by interviewer):

Signature of Interviewer: